

ARTSPEAK

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Committee Secretary
Senate Standing Committees on Environment and Communications
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Parliament House
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9th September 2011

Dear Sir/Madam

We, the undersigned members of ArtsPeak (the confederation of peak national arts organisations) write in response to the call for submissions by the Senate Standing Committees on Environment and Communications. We understand that the matter being investigated is “the decision by the television management of the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) to significantly cut the number and amount of ABC-produced programs, jobs (including through forced redundancies) and the potential affect on resources, as announced on 2 August 2011”.

Our submission is focused on the matter of arts programming and arts news reporting. While we acknowledge that it is the ABC’s prerogative to make decisions about the most efficient and effective use of its resources, we think there are problems in certain areas. In particular we wish to register our long-standing concern over the failure of the ABC to integrate arts reporting as part of national current affairs coverage across all platforms. Though the ABC does provide stand-alone artform specific programs, the paucity of arts coverage in the news demonstrates its failure to properly and effectively recognise that the arts are part of the everyday life experience and interest of the majority of Australians.

At this point, we are particularly concerned at the announcement by the ABC that it will be axing ‘Art Nation’, the only arts news round-up on television. We understand that this is to be closely followed by the discontinuation of ‘Artworks’ as indicated in the forward programming of Radio National. In taking these actions, the ABC leaves no overall arts news or magazine program on the national broadcaster, with the exception of the occasional arts event report located almost at the very end of the 7.00pm TV News on ABC 1. Without providing any regular daily and weekly arts news coverage, in taking this decision the ABC is effectively banishing the arts from its national current affairs coverage. This is not just a case of updating or reformatting arts programs that have reached their use-by date; it creates a vacuum.

While we acknowledge that there are a number of excellent artform specific programs which profile what is being produced in those mediums, there have been very few news programs about key contemporary arts issues and events overall. Many of us working in the arts are completely baffled and deeply concerned as to why the ABC is making so little commitment to the arts as part of the national daily news conversation and diminishing its overall Australian arts content at a time when interest in the arts in Australia has never been higher.

From a report commissioned by the Australia Council for the Arts in 2010, 'More Than Bums On Seats: Australian participation in the arts', the research showed that attitudes towards the arts are increasingly positive. It found that 9 in 10 Australians participate in the arts and the same proportion think arts should be an important part of the education of every Australian. This research provides the most comprehensive recent picture of the way Australians are involved with the arts. It covers both creative participation and attendance in all major artforms including visual arts and crafts, music, theatre, dance, reading, writing and music. It also shows that the arts are becoming more inclusive. Most Australians perceive the individual, social and community benefits of the arts, and agree they make life more meaningful. Visual arts and craft was found to be the most popular participatory creative activity with 22% of adults doing some form of visual arts and craft creative work and almost 50% either attending or participating in visual arts/craft, or both. However, despite its particular suitability for television, there is only sporadic visual arts programming on this platform which could then flow through to the on-line environment.

The ABC's Charter states that the functions of the Corporation are to provide within Australia, innovative and comprehensive broadcasting services of a high standard, programs that contribute to a sense of national identity, and that inform, entertain and reflect the cultural diversity of the Australian community. It also has an obligation to broadcast programs of an educational nature and to transmit to countries outside Australia, programs of news, current affairs, entertainment and cultural enrichment. In addition it has a duty to (at the very least) encourage and promote the musical, dramatic and other performing arts in Australia. It continues that the responsibility of the Corporation as the provider of an independent national broadcasting service is to achieve a balance between broadcasting programs of wide appeal and specialized programs.

Australia as a signatory to the UNESCO International Convention for the Protection and Promotion of the Diversity of Cultural Expressions has a responsibility to foster production of local and diverse cultural content. It is of particular concern that high quality Australian content by and about Australians that is representative of the best we have to offer, should be produced and broadcast by the ABC. Instead, programming to meet the local content rules in relation to broadcast media has been compromised and the rules poorly enforced, both for local consumption and for sale overseas. Even if only for purposes of local and international cultural diplomacy, investment in high quality Australian content would seem to be judicious. Especially in the global digital environment, it is essential that the public broadcaster should produce and disseminate Australian cultural content.

The argument has been made by the ABC's Television Director, Kim Dalton that the cost of this kind of program is too high, and the particular programs earmarked to be cut are losing audience. While we agree it is important to evaluate the success of programs, the loss of popularity of any program becomes a self fulfilling prophecy if resources allocated are inadequate to achieve quality and the timeslot is obscure.

We understand that the ABC has a commitment to a balanced model of in-house and outsourced productions. This does not seem to be being followed through. With the proposal to cut the ABC's very experienced specialist Arts Unit down to the nub, the ability of the ABC to exercise expert judgement to guide arts production in-house or commissioning from outside, must be seen to be severely compromised. Highly respected ABC journalist Quentin Dempster was quoted in The Age, (August 4th 2011) as saying that, "through a long and deliberate board and management policy

to dismantle and de-skill internal television production....the ABC, without public discussion, has allowed its skills base and creative culture to be eroded”.

We are particularly perplexed at these decisions being taken ahead of the outcomes of the independent Convergence Review in March 2012, established by the Australian Government to examine the policy and regulatory frameworks that apply to the converged media and communications landscape in Australia. It is expected that after extensive consultation, the Review will deliver recommendations which take account of the rapid improvements in communications and media technologies which have changed the way consumers use and access television, radio, the internet and telecommunications services. It recognises that a thorough analysis of the existing policy framework is required. The ABC's Managing Director, Mark Scott has referred to the Convergence Review as the appropriate mechanism for assessing how to move forward in answer to calls for an inquiry into the ABC's outsourcing of contracts over the past five years, including examination of the copyright and transmission obligations and the commercial producer's associated business plans, co-funding and co-production arrangements, and to achieve full transparency about comparisons of the pros and cons between in-house production and outsourcing.

We strongly recommend that the ABC should freeze its current level of staffing and decisions about outsourcing of arts programs pending the outcomes of the Convergence Review.

We understand that it is a concern of the Arts Minister, Simon Crean that people living in the regions be able to appreciate, produce and experience the arts in all their diversity. In this regard, the loss of contribution of content by regional ABC networks could result in the reduction of regionally produced material being integrated into ABC arts programming. The interest of regional communities in the arts is particularly lively and we are concerned that these people may lose their voice and representation.

The Arts Minister also has initiated discussions across Government about how the arts can contribute to every part of government policy and programming. If the arts are to be truly understood to be integral to the life of every Australian, we recommend that intelligent arts reporting be threaded through ABC news bulletins.

We note the Managing Director, Mark Scott's response in the SMH of September 7th, to the widespread concerns across the creative community at the ABC's coverage of the arts. It is instructive that his response contains no actual commitment to particular new programs to replace those being discontinued and the present general gaps in arts programming. It is difficult to imagine the ABC removing programs in say sports or current affairs without specific replacements being announced. The managing director's declarations of new commitments are without definition. Neither are staff numbers identified. Mark Scott's response leaves unaddressed the new situation that there will not be a major current arts news program anywhere in the ABC's weekly television or radio schedule.

We identify that the ABC is in danger of losing its sense of cultural purpose by operating in increasing isolation from the creative community.

We therefore recommend that there should be a strong commitment by the ABC to invest the necessary resources to provide high quality programs which integrate:

i) news and magazine reporting and critique which is reflective of the country's cultural zeitgeist;

- ii) arts programming that may not attract competitive ratings but is of great interest to particular interest groups; and
- iii) programs which educate people about Australia's diverse cultural expression and identity.

In addition we recommend a change to the Australian Broadcasting Corporation Act 1983 – Section 6 to expand clause 1(c) of the Charter of the Corporation which specifies the functions of the Corporation “to encourage and promote the musical, dramatic and other performing arts...” by adding “and the visual arts, craft and design, media arts and literature including Indigenous arts, reflecting cultural diversity in Australia.”

To be able to elaborate on our views, we request that members of ArtsPeak be invited to address the Committee on Environment and Communications in person at its early convenience.

Yours sincerely

Tamara Winikoff,
Executive Director, National Association for the Visual Arts (NAVA)

Also on behalf of ArtsPeak members:

- Robyn Ayres, Executive Director, Arts Law Centre of Australia
- Nicole Beyer, Director, Theatre Network Victoria
- Julie Dyson, AM, National Director, Australian Dance Council - Ausdance Inc.
- Jacqueline Grenfell, Executive Director, Arts Industry Council Victoria
- Norm Horton and Sarah Moynihan - Feral Arts Corp Ltd
- Kate Larsen, CEO, Arts Access Australia
- Jim Lawson, Executive Director, Young People and the Arts Australia
- Richard Letts, Executive Director, Music Council of Australia, Past President, International Music Council
- Angelo Loukakis, Executive Director, Australian Society of Authors
- Magdalena Moreno, CEO, Kultour – Diversity in the Arts
- Elizabeth Tregenza, General Manager, Ananguku Arts and Culture Aboriginal Corporation
- Catrina Vignando, General Manager, Craft Australia