

Inquiry into recent ABC programming decisions

In the interests of clarity and full disclosure, I will pre-empt my comments by stating I am presently employed by the ABC where I have been working as a lighting cameraman for the past 18 years.

I am as passionate about supporting the Public Broadcaster and its Charter today as I was on my first day of ABC employment. I believe more strongly today the ABC's role and place in the community and society at large is threatened, its standing as the industry standard in so many areas is being eroded and the Corporation's profile is being marginalised.

a. the implications of this decision on the ABC's ability to create, produce and own its television content, particularly in the capital cities of Brisbane, Adelaide, Perth and Hobart;

The implications for both the Corporation and industry of outsourcing production and reducing capacity in Tasmania are dire. Unlike metropolitan markets, the influence of the ABC's presence on the Tasmanian industry are both as a market leader and paternal.

As a market leader, our production, diversity, quality and budgets are local industry standards. The amount of work and the quality of that work for the budget assigned to productions are well known to be of the highest standard and considered by many to give good value for money. On the rare event that a camera operator or sound recordist position in the Field Operation Department becomes available, the interest the position attracts is broad and deep. The Tasmanian ABC is considered The Place to work in Tasmania for the variety of assignments, quality of production, support for technicians and conditions of employment the position attracts. Fifteen years ago, when Martin Bryant committed murder at Port Arthur, it was not the international or mainland crews who won acclaim for their coverage, it was the local ABC News room and crews who won the Logie. For the past seven years, the award winning Collectors program has been produced locally and, until recently, the successful and enduring program Gardening Australia was created and produced in Hobart. The commitment, drive and support for these programs from the people working on them is not something a producer can simply buy in the market place.

The interdependence between the Tasmanian ABC and technicians working in the freelance market is mutually beneficial and long standing. It is my understanding from conversations with many of the freelance technicians that if the ABC were to reduce local, in-house production and/or cut the coverage of local sport, their positions here in the Tasmanian market would become unviable and they would simply leave the state.

The knock on effects of reduced in house production include:

- The loss of freelance technicians available to the ABC and the greater Tasmanian industry. For some operators, their participation in working with the ABC accounts for as much as 30% of their annual income. If there is a reduction in freelance requirements, and operators chose to move interstate, they would have to compete with others in an already established market. If they chose to stay in Tasmania, some would

continue but with reduced career and employment opportunities in an already challenging, small market while others will leave the industry all together.

- The loss of the ABC as a partner in numerous training courses in media studies in Hobart. There are very few opportunities for students to have a real “hands on” involvement in television and radio production. ABC Hobart has worked closely with several local colleges and the University of Tasmania to provide their media studies students with real work experience outcomes which have had positive results for the students, industry and the ABC. The loss of coverage of local sport alone will have a huge impact on this involvement.
- The continued downward pressure on Tasmanian local identity and exposure of local issues in the media. At the moment, Tasmania is nationally recognised in programs such as The Collectors, Gardening Australia and Catalyst. Recently, Q&A did a successful live broadcast from Hobart’s Wrest Point Casino using an ABC crew. With the reduction in program production would come the inevitable reduction in staff. Tasmania’s involvement with these programs using reduced numbers of local crews would become very difficult and the use of mainland crews flying in adds another cost to already thin budgets, often leading to any Tasmanian representation in productions being the first casualty of cost cutting.
- The loss of inhouse experience for the production style required for long form productions. If the board continues to out source productions then later decides to reinstate a degree of in house production, many of the skills needed to produce a quintessentially ABC Australian production have been lost. An example of the loss of a production template already exists. The 7.30 Report was, before its present incarnation, a locally produced, daily, half hour Current Affairs program. Because of the reduction of people, skill sets and resources that occurred in the transition to the present national program produced in Sydney, it now takes ABC Hobart all week to do the Friday night edition of the program. If the decision was made to reinstate five local daily programs per week, Tasmania would not have the inhouse resources and I doubt we would find enough people with appropriate skills to fill the required positions within the state.

(b) the implications of this decision on Australian film and television production in general and potential impact on quality and diversity of programs;

Considering the present trend, it seems most of our productions going out of the Corporation are going to production entities who are also engaged in producing material for the commercial networks. I am concerned at the homogenizing of the Australian television industry and the loss of the ABC’s distinctive character. With the flood of cheap imported American programming, the ABC’s charter is all the more important:

AUSTRALIAN BROADCASTING CORPORATION ACT 1983 - SECT 6 Charter of the Corporation

(1)The functions of the Corporation are:

(a) to provide within Australia innovative and comprehensive broadcasting services of a high standard as part of the Australian broadcasting system consisting of national, commercial and community sectors and, without limiting the generality of the foregoing, to provide:

(i) broadcasting programs that contribute to a sense of national identity and inform and entertain, and reflect the cultural diversity of, the Australian community; and

(ii) broadcasting programs of an educational nature;

(b) to encourage and promote the musical, dramatic and other performing arts in Australia.

I believe we, the Corporation and those who work within it, are required to produce television, radio and internet content that is intrinsically Australian and reflect Australian values and ideals. Further, the program makers should have control over the content and style of our programs and not have to barter and negotiate with external production entities who will bring their own predisposed ideas and leanings to programs including a profit motive.

The public, who fund the National Broadcaster, have expectations that their investment is being used to not only entertain, give diversity to programming, educate and enrich our national culture, but these things are ongoing, perpetuating and their ownership is in the public's hands, available for future use and not being sold off to a limited few to enrich their end of year balance sheets.

At a micro level, I am daily reminded of the commercial industry's 'race to the bottom' as I see programming, content, staffing, standards and resources constantly reduced in a bid to drive particular networks in one direction or the other. In a push that is rapidly accelerating, I see very similar trends in the direction the ABC is traveling with, I presume, very similar outcomes.

If we are to become enmeshed with commercialization of the ABC, we endanger our well earned high standing in the community as the Public Broadcaster with a long history of successfully broadcasting programming that has been a mix of in house, bought in and co-produced material. That same long history is punctuated with decisions from previous successive boards that underwrote the Charter while still promoting a vigorous and successful inhouse production ethos which produced some of Australia's landmark productions.

Considering the ABC staff's proud history of production, embracing change and ability to reinvent itself, I am concerned the Board's new direction may be counter productive to a long and successful future that mirrors that of the past.

(f) the future potential implications of these cuts on ABC television's capacity to broadcast state league football and rugby;

I will keep my comments on section (f) to Tasmania only as I am not sufficiently aware of any other state's situation to speak with authority.

Tasmania has two outside broadcast vans. Of the two, the ABC's is the most capable and comprehensive. The other van is owned by a commercial network is has very limited capability.

Historically, every three or four years the Tasmanian ABC Outside Broadcast Department is asked to justify why it requires its own outside broadcast van.

Part of the reasoning as to why we have an OB van on the island is due to the commitment to a winter season of sport. Over the past few years, this has included state and national football, hockey, basketball and netball. Other commitments include the studio content of the successful The Collectors program and the ANZAC day march and service.

Recently, there has been an announcement by management that next year's coverage of local sport is under review. Should it be decided by management the Corporation will not be covering sport:

- it will be very difficult to justify keeping the van on the island. Unlike metropolitan areas, we have no comparable OB vans to hire in for an occasion and would, if the production is to go ahead, have to bring one into the state. Without a doubt this extra cost would result in far less OB programming from the ABC whenever an OB van is required.
- Without the van, there would be no requirement for an estimated 6 technicians and their positions would be made redundant. That would put Tasmania below what is locally thought to be a 'critical mass' and impact on our economies of scale which would have ripple effects onto associated departments. Fewer technicians means less capacity, means less output, means a smaller slice of the national production pie.
- With the van off the island and the winter week-end coverage stopped, the immediate impact on the freelance market would mean a reduction in work and subsequent reduction in the numbers of technicians on the market. This would also be reflected in our capacity to operate, less output, again a smaller slice of pie.
- A smaller ABC presence in Tasmania would lead to reduction in our engagement with the local colleges and University and their media studies course, a reduced number and effectiveness of the remaining courses.
- Less production in Tasmania results in a lower Tasmanian profile on the national stage. With fewer productions happening in the state and those that do now attracting a larger slice of the budget, anything of Tasmania's desires to be seen as a good location to shoot in with well controlled budget elements will be lost. Possible employment and career opportunities will be severely reduced and anyone looking for a career in the industry will almost be assured of having to leave the state in order to advance any career possibilities.

For Tasmania, the outcomes of losing the OB van and reduction of in house production nationally are interchangeable. Either would relegate Tasmania to a vastly reduced branch with correspondingly reduced capacity to produce broadcast material, interact with the community, support the ABC's Charter and, in a state with such a small population, the resultant reduction in wages in the economy would be felt.

Interestingly, all of these outcomes are very likely yet management has yet to publically make the case as to how co-productions and outsourcing is going to be of any real benefit to the Corporation now and into the foreseeable future.

With thanks,
Phil Long