

# Submission to the Senate Enquiry on ABC Program Cuts.

David Hudspeth. (A personal view)

ABC TV is doing more with the same resources in an environment where costs are rising and needs to produce more content more cheaply. It is looking for opportunities to cut costs and gain extra funding by entering into co-productions with state screen bodies and independent producers.

The ABC is clearly under pressure to produce more content across more digital channels and online platforms as it strives to stay relevant in a fast changing environment. The broadcast industry in Australia is on the cusp of major changes in the delivery of programming as the Internet progressively takes over as the platform for delivering content. Audiences will be able to download or stream whatever they want from anywhere in the world. There will be even greater need for a public broadcaster who can package and deliver relevant and credible content, which serves the interests of the Australian people including those in the regional areas and reflects the truth and complexity of our cultures. The ABC is also reported to be seeking to attract a younger audience. The ABC has made a greater commitment to Australian drama and started a 24-hour News Channel. Something has to give.

What seems in no doubt is the commitment of Kim Dalton, the Head of ABC Television to undermine and dismantle ABC internal production facilities in favour of producing programs in the independent sector. This makes the ABC more of a commissioning broadcaster rather than a producer of content maintaining significant production facilities. Mr Dalton has reportedly urged staff to leave the ABC if they want to pitch program ideas. I guess he wants the freedom to commission programs without having to worry about maximizing utilization of internal production facilities. Sadly this out-sourcing may lead to a loss of skills within the ABC and waste of the ABC's current facilities.

The danger is the Tasmanian Community will be left without any ongoing locally produced programs from ABC TV apart from News and 7.30 Report-Tasmania.

The ABC in Tasmania has a long history of producing popular and successful Series such as **Gardening Australia** (now produced in Melbourne) and **Collectors**, which has recently ceased production. The production unit in Hobart produced some 30 episodes of the high rating 'Collectors' each year. "Collectors" has been replaced with a short run series on auctions, which is great, but there is uncertainty about ongoing commitment to the unit. Shows come and go but maintaining ongoing production in the smaller states is important.

Tasmanian freelancers, who are employed to staff anything above base load requirements at the ABC, are already feeling this reduction. In a small market like Tasmania ongoing production is important, not only to ABC staff but also to many freelancers who rely on the ABC as a source of regular work and who move between the ABC and the independent sector. Ongoing production allows young people to get work experience and work opportunities. The Independent sector in Tasmania is small but growing and having ongoing production is vital to building skills and providing enough

work to keep the skilled people in the state. It is not like Sydney or Melbourne where there is a large pool of experienced freelancers and enough work to sustain that pool. Many of the freelancers in Tasmania do at least some work for the ABC.

In the Sunday Tasmanian 4/9/2011 Karena Slaninka, Director of Screen Tasmania, was quoted as saying “ *Our big thing is trying to increase production activity in Tasmania -It’s one of the key focus areas of the strategic Plan” (Through the Lens to 2016). “only in that way can we build sustainable businesses and offer job opportunities to people.”*

There are great independent producers in Tasmania such as Roar Films who have produced quality content for the ABC. The ABC has been free to commission independent production in Tasmania but so far has commissioned relatively little.

One of the things the production of ABC programs such as ‘Collectors’ has offered the Tasmanian community is ongoing employment for Tasmanians in the industry. The independent production sector in Tasmania is slowly growing but it will not be assisted by a diminution of internal ABC production in the state.

The ABC in Tasmania reaches out and assists low budget independent filmmakers with equipment and expertise. There is a close relationship between Rosny College and the ABC providing work experience and employment opportunities for people entering the industry. The ABC in Tasmania clearly seeks to be part of the Community and its close connection to the community is one of its strengths.

The steady outsourcing of internal programs undermines the operational model of the ABC’s own Resources Division. In a small branch it becomes harder to maintain the skills base of an already very multi-skilled and flexible workforce to man Outside Broadcasts such as, local football coverage, ANZAC Day coverage, Q & A and State Election Coverage and meet other program commitments. As production is diminished it may get to a stage where the expertise does not exist to meet these larger commitments. At present it is unclear if the ABC has a long-term commitment to maintain or update any Outside Broadcast production capability or indeed any TV production capability beyond News and Current Affairs. Will it be possible to do these more complex programs in the future? What extra costs would be involved in hiring facilities and expertise? What will happen to current resources?

One of the strengths of internal production in the smaller production centres like Hobart has been the cross-fertilization which comes from staff building up experience on a wide variety of productions and circulating these experiences between News and Current Affairs and other programs. In the long run News and Current Affairs is likely to lose out on the benefits of higher skill level and experience as local production is cut back. The sharing of pool equipment and technical expertise also benefits News programs.

The ABC TV coverage of Arts in Tasmania has been minimal. Most comes from the weekly Local 7.30 Report. Apart from a Documentary on the opening of MONA, the now axed Arts Nation struggled to find the budget to do much in Tasmania. By and large the TV coverage of Arts in Tasmania leaves much to be desired.

What opportunities exist to better serve regional audiences and communities and tell regional stories? New Media platforms will offer many opportunities to produce regional screen content for local audiences. These would benefit from the input from skilled TV Production Staff. Maybe a sort of on demand “ABC / View *Tasmania*” bringing together a wide variety of Tasmanian stories and Arts and cultural events from local ABC TV and independent local producers. I believe there are untapped opportunities for synergies between Local ABC Radio, Television and Online which should be explored. Mr Dalton may find he has thrown the baby out with the bath water by dismantling local production capability.

ABC staff have been reassured by Mark Scott there is a commitment to a mix of internal and external production and yet every announcement seems to bring the further dismantling of internal production capability. Underfunding of internal production undermines its ability to compete. Staff who have served the ABC loyally for many years feel they are being dealt with somewhat dishonestly and not in accord with the stated ABC values of integrity, respect, collegiality and innovation. If the intention is to dismantle internal production completely most would just prefer to know their job prospects so they have time to reorganize their lives.

In 2007 ABC Managing Director Mark Scott welcomed the extension of the Regional Programme initiative from the Federal Government which funded Collectors, Talking Heads and the Cook and the Chef by saying.....

“It is recognition that these regional and local initiatives are an essential part of the ABC's role, particularly in regional Australia,” (ABC Press Release.)

I would ask the senate enquiry to carefully examine the detrimental impact ongoing outsourcing will have on Tasmanian Production and the Tasmanian Community.