

6th September 2011

Committee Secretary
Senate Standing Committees on Environment and Communications
PO Box 6100
Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600
Australia

To Whom It May Concern,

Re: Inquiry into recent ABC programming decisions.

In the very year that the Australian Government is seriously asking Australian's to talk about the benefits of Culture, in the form of its watershed "National Cultural Policy" paper, it strikes me as absurd and culturally moribund that we have the Board and Management at our National Broadcaster the ABC, swinging its bat at its own in-house Television Arts Unit by decommissioning all in-house Television Arts production.

Instead of leading the discussion and the promotion of Arts content on our television screens, they would seem to be hell bent on destroying the well respected 55 years of In-house Arts creation by those talented producers, researchers, interviewers, camerapersons et al that comprise a woefully underfunded and over stretched ABC Television Arts Unit.

Furthermore, the very principal of the Australian Government providing funding to the ABC [\$929.9 million last triennial funding] is so that it can do the work that other television stations cannot and will not undertake due to their commercial imperatives. The *raison d'être* for the National Broadcaster is and I quote from the ABCs own Annual Report of 2009-2010

"The idea of public broadcasting arose soon after broadcasting itself commenced, based on an acknowledgement that civic and cultural needs—informing, educating and entertaining—might not always be commercially possible or profitable. To fill that gap, policy makers of the day established public broadcasting services to deliver a unique combination of public benefits—universality, diversity, quality, independence and localism—thereby meeting a range of important community needs."
Without the need to ensure financial profitability, public broadcasters are able to pursue high-quality, informative and challenging content that enriches society, adding to audiences' experience, tastes and understanding."

If the ABC is not prepared to support the Arts in a meaningful way, who will?

ABCs Director of Television, Kim Dalton, says his reason for decommissioning the ABC TV Arts Unit as he told Jon Faine on ABC local radio 774, "My intention is to be working with the best of Australia's creative talent,"..."Many of them work in the independent sector." What then does he imply by this, that those staff he has now axed were not the 'best of Australia's creative talent'?

"He says that part of the reason some shows are being axed is that the money the ABC gets for production is best spent in prime time." [Faine, para 5 & 6] Why then would the ABC not move the

Art Nation program to prime time and give it the proper funding and promotion it never enjoyed, why not give Art Nation every chance of winning a prime time audience?

What we have here is a cultural debate underpinned by the values of the ABC Board and Management who think that Australia's coverage of the Arts on Television is something the ABC no longer needs to create in-house. The ABC is arguably our largest Cultural Institution, now intent and seemingly comfortable in sending this message to all Australians, the ABC no longer values its own creative capacity, the ABC Arts Unit.

In sending this message it also sends other messages to the Australian public about the value of the Arts in our community, it would seem the ABC does not think the Arts is important for it to create. The influence that this message may carry across our communities is the wrong message to send, our National Broadcaster needs to be responsible in its duties and in my opinion their influence cannot be understated, as evidenced in the data collected in 2010 about the public's trust of the ABC, "Trust in media has dropped in all the types of media listed above since 15th March 2010 – except for ABC outlets, which have actually increased slightly." [Essential Media, July 2010]. ABC viewers trust what the ABC tells them.

Kim Dalton's Arts programming strategy is to now put Arts production out to the commercial sector, this style of commissioning has already existed in the form of Artscape 30 minute documentaries. However the Art Nation program being de-commissioned, is a weekly magazine style program that aims to keep all Australians - regional, city and fringe dwellers – updated and well informed about their country's artists. By its very nature this program is best created through a network of state based producers, with the experience and expertise to keep informed about the arts in their region, in fact the ABC would be the only broadcasting institution able to undertake such a function, they have or possibly had the reach and the resources to make this style of program.

If the current cut-backs in ABC TV Arts and the decommissioning of in-house production be allowed to continue, Mark Scott, Kim Dalton and the ABC Board will be guilty of the most significant act of cultural mismanagement the public broadcaster has suffered to date; forever changing what we once knew as Our ABC.

Sincerely,

Clare Cremin and Neil Hamilton.

References:

ABC Annual Report, 2009-2010,

www.abc.net.au/corp/annual_reports/.../ar2009_10_complete_report.pdf

Faine, J. Dalton, K. ABC Radio, 774 <http://www.abc.net.au/local/audio/2011/08/03/3284598.htm>

Essential Media Report, Trust in Media, July 25. <http://www.essentialmedia.com.au/?s=abc+trust>

Kim Dalton's five year plan to privatise ABC TV major productions



Darce Cassidy

In November 2006 Amanda Meade, writing in *The Australian* reported:

As ABC director of television Kim Dalton launched his first full year's schedule at a function in Sydney last night, the ABC executive was split over a radical plan to disband the corporation's television production teams and hand over financial rights and editorial control to the private sector.

The program making units at risk include indigenous, science, religion and crews and equipment for internal and external shows.

Meade went on to say that Dalton did not have the support of other ABC directors, which is possibly why it has taken nearly five years for Dalton to come close to wiping out ABC television's capacity for major internal productions.

While Dalton has moved slowly he did not make it a secret that he favoured the so-called Channel Four model, established by the Thatcher government in the U.K.

Channel Four initially established a strong reputation for innovation. Unlike the BBC, Channel Four is a publisher, but not a producer. It buys-in all of its content. The argument has been that the establishment of Channel Four in the UK led to more diversity and innovation, and that this model should be pursued both in the BBC and the ABC.

Georgina Born, in her detailed anthropological study of the BBC, which included several years of fieldwork inside the organisation, says there is limited truth in the assertion that outsourcing leads to greater creativity and innovation.

In the early days, she writes, many of the 'independent' production houses that made programs for Channel Four were hives of creativity, more like artists collectives than commercial organisations. Over time however, as the sector grew

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and profits grew, there were takeovers and mergers.

The external production houses became more like standard commercial operations, and they became increasingly risk averse.

A number of the most successful independents were bought up by larger, sometimes international cross-media groups. In return for financing, they no longer enjoyed the autonomy of dedicated creative organisations. They had become business subsidiaries.

But the high profile and the extraordinary riches accruing to the successful independents sent a signal to the rest of the independent sector: these could also be yours! Think international not national.

The sector was increasingly dominated by business logics, the inexorable drive to compete, and the search for higher productivity and profits

The example of Bazal Productions is instructive. Bazal was responsible for a number of the hit new leisure and hybrid leisure – game show formats, including Changing Rooms, Ground Force and Ready, Steady, Cook... In 1990 Bazal was acquired by Broadcast Communications, which later became Endemol UK, a company focused on aggressive international expansion.

In 2000 Endemol created the reality game show format Big Brother.... In the same year Endemol was itself bought up

by the Spanish-based Telefonica group, an international telecommunications and media giant. Endemol UK is Britain's largest 'independent' producer.

Born notes that just as the BBC was preaching downsizing and outsourcing, the commercial competition was discovering the benefits of vertical integration, mergers and acquisitions.

Astute industry observers, however, were not slow to note the irony that just as the BBC was disaggregating and discovering the joys of 'flexible specialisation', its commercial competitors were re-aggregating. By the mid nineties the ITV companies were engaging in mergers and buying steadily into production capacity. As the BBC struggled with the complex forces unleashed by the independent quota and the restructuring, the same commentators were stressing the manifold benefits of large, vertically integrated producer-broadcasters: lower transaction costs, reliability, regularity, trusting and cooperative relations between distributor and producers, economies of scale, the ownership of rights for exploitation across diversifying channels and the accumulation of a rights archive - increasingly central to the global media economy.

The Canadian historian and former BBC documentary film maker, Michael Ignatieff, made a similar point. Ignatieff wrote of the BBC in 1999:

Trying to do more with less inevitably means moving towards a Channel Four model, in which the BBC publishes rather than produces programs, thus reducing its fixed costs. But if it moves in this direction, it may lose whatever is left of the distinctively public service character of its output it is hard to see how it will continue to be the centre of Britain's public culture, and the chief source of its view of the world.

While a mixed production model (with major projects produced both internally and externally) has flexibility and potential for diversity, the ABC is in danger of crippling itself if it gives up the capacity for major production, and loses its rights in those productions.

Georgina Born's book is *Uncertain Vision: Birt, Dyke and the reinvention of the BBC*. (Vintage 2005)

Michael Ignatieff's paper is titled *Media Power and Responsibility: the role of the fourth estate in the 21st century* and was delivered to a conference organized by the 21st Century Foundation at Oxford University. 