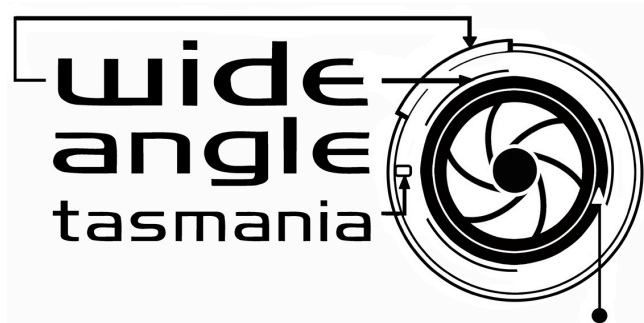


Submission prepared by

## WIDE ANGLE TASMANIA



### **The Australian Broadcasting Corporation's commitment to reflecting and representing regional diversity**

To be referred to:

Senate Standing Committees on Environment and  
Communications

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Prepared by:

Wide Angle Tasmania (WAT)

Space 123, Salamanca Arts Centre,

77 Salamanca Place

Hobart TAS 7000

(03) 6223 8344

[info@wideangle.org.au](mailto:info@wideangle.org.au)

[www.wideangle.org.au](http://www.wideangle.org.au)

Authorised by:

Sharon Connolly

Secretary and Public Officer, Board of Wide Angle Tasmania

Dear Committee Members,

Wide Angle Tasmania (WAT) welcomes the opportunity to address issues relevant to your inquiry into the Australian Broadcasting Corporation's commitment to reflecting and representing regional diversity.

Established in 2005, Wide Angle Tasmania is the state's screen development organisation. Principally funded by Screen Australia and Screen Tasmania, it is a not-for-profit organisation that nurtures local talent by providing advice, training, access to film production equipment and production initiatives. WAT also offers Tasmanian audiences a diverse programme of screenings.

Wide Angle Tasmania's vision is a vibrant, diverse and renewable Tasmanian screen culture. It works toward achievement of this vision by encouraging, developing and supporting emerging screen practitioners in Tasmania.

WAT is very concerned about the effect that recently mooted cuts to the ABC's Tasmanian TV Production unit will have on:

1. Representation of the state and aspects of its life and culture, to audiences across Australia as well as in Tasmania.
2. Tasmanian screen production capacity both inside and outside the ABC.
3. WAT's own capacity to develop emerging screen practitioners in Tasmania

WAT takes the view that it is not only the centralisation of ABC in house TV production in Sydney and Melbourne, but also increased outsourcing of TV production in recent years that has led to a diminution of opportunities to present regional perspectives and concerns on ABC TV.

The terms of reference are addressed individually below. As a *screen* resource organisation principally concerned with training, WAT's comments are made in the context of the screen sector and do not extend to issues that may be related to radio.

***(a) the commitment by the ABC to reflecting and representing regional diversity in Australia***

The ABC's Charter does not specifically mention "regional diversity." Rather it refers (at sec 6(1)(a)(i) of the Australian Broadcasting Corporation Act 1983) to its responsibility to provide:

*programs that contribute to a sense of national identity and inform and entertain, and reflect the cultural diversity of, the Australian community*

Tasmanian culture (which is of course not a monoculture, but one that contains communities in diverse locations, from diverse backgrounds and with diverse interests) is represented on ABC TV mostly through local news and current affairs offerings. Whilst these efforts are to be applauded, opportunities for Tasmanian concerns, stories and perspectives to be presented in non-news and current affairs programs have dwindled. The reasons for this diminution are discussed below in our response to the second term of reference.

The effects are difficult to measure. Anecdotal evidence suggests that many Tasmanians have become increasingly alienated from a national broadcaster that appears to have little regard for the culture of their home state, or for Tasmanians' views, concerns and televisual needs.

This is not surprising given the disconnect between ABC decision makers and audiences. Those in Tasmania – like all Australians outside major metropolitan centres – are not considered a significant market by Oztam. Instead they form part of an undifferentiated “regions” category for the daily ratings surveys. In today's difficult and increasingly fragmented broadcasting environment, when commercial and public broadcasters alike measure the success of programming decisions largely on the basis of audience numbers in Sydney, Melbourne, Brisbane, Perth and Adelaide, all Australians living outside the major metropolitan markets have cause to feel they are regarded as second class viewers.

This is especially unfortunate at a time when the National Broadband Network offers the possibility of at last overcoming the “tyranny of distance,” when Tasmanian audiences and screen practitioners alike might be brought closer to ABC TV decision makers in Sydney.

In not adequately representing or considering the needs of Tasmania and its citizens, the national broadcaster is failing to fulfill its obligation to contribute to a sense of national identity that is inclusive of Australians living outside the major metropolitan areas. Moreover it is denying mainland Australians' exposure to perspectives offered by their fellow Australians in the nation's smallest state.

***(b). the impact that the increased centralisation of television production in Sydney and Melbourne has had on the ABC's ability to reflect national identity and diversity***

WAT is of the view that the centralisation of television production in Sydney – and to a lesser extent in Melbourne – has had a dramatic effect on the ABC's ability to reflect national identity and diversity. However it is not simply a matter of ABC in house production being centralised in Sydney and Melbourne. Perhaps more significant is the ABC's policy of increasingly outsourcing production to independent production companies. This has reduced in-house production opportunities, replacing ABC made and funded programs with productions made by independent producers. These are far less likely to be produced by program-makers in regional Australia than by those in Sydney and Melbourne.

The ABC is usually a minority financier of such programs; often the larger part of their budgets is contributed by state and federal film agencies and mechanisms such as the taxpayer funded offset. There is reason to regard outsourcing as little more than an exercise in cost-shifting, forcing Australian Government screen agencies and mechanisms to pay the greater part of ABC TV production costs, once solely borne by the Corporation.

The production companies making programs for ABC TV, and the financial resources and infrastructure that support their production activity are largely located in Sydney and Melbourne, as are the ABC decision makers who commission independent production for ABC TV schedules.

As more ABC TV production has been outsourced to the independent production sector, opportunities for Tasmanians to contribute to and to view local programming on ABC TV have reduced. In 2012 only one factual series, *Auctions*, was produced in house by ABC Tasmania and only a couple of hours of independent productions were commissioned from

Tasmanian based producers.

- i. Increased outsourcing of TV production to the independent screen production sector offers few opportunities in regions where the sector remains relatively undeveloped. Tasmania does not yet have a developed screen industry. Its state funding agency, Screen Tasmania, was only established in 1999. A couple of small production companies struggle to survive and remain largely dependent on subsidy. Thus a decision to axe the ABC's small Hobart based TV production unit has a disproportionately large effect on local screen production capacity, which will in turn limit the extent to which local companies can be commissioned to produce programs for ABC TV. The screen sector everywhere in Australia – and especially in the regions – is a fragile ecology. Destroying one “species” will inevitably damage those who are left.
- ii. Increased outsourcing of TV production has meant that the ABC, rather than completely funding the programs it presents, has become a minority financier, with State and Federal Government agencies and mechanisms often providing the balance of production funds required. This discriminates against smaller states and regions in which state or territory funding agencies have limited resources. Where the South Australian Film Corporation and ScreenWest received \$7,446,000 and \$7,728,000 respectively from their state governments in the 2010-2011 year, Screen Tasmania's income from government was around \$1,250,000.
- iii. Regional Australia has little access to the infrastructure required for production of some kinds of television. Drama for instance usually requires studios, large crews, and access to equipment and facilities that may not exist outside the ABC in many smaller cities. (Ironically, the ABC having urged construction of the Goodwood studio at Tasmanian state government expense little more than 6 years ago, is now proposing to disband the unit that has been by far the biggest user of the facility.)
- iv. The Australian Film Television and Radio School no longer has a Hobart presence. There is limited TAFE sector training in screen production. Wide Angle Tasmania is a screen resource organization struggling to provide training opportunities to emerging screen practitioners with a mere fraction of the grants provided to like organizations in other states. The ABC is therefore an important contributor in this area, providing professional development opportunities to its own employees, who in turn often contribute their skills to assisting emerging screen practitioners in the broader community. Centralisation of ABC TV production in Sydney and Melbourne seriously impacts upon efforts to develop a screen production sector in Tasmania that might contribute to reflecting national identity and diversity not only on ABC TV but on the plethora of other channels and platforms available to viewers in the digital age.

**(c) any related matters**

Tasmania, like many regional areas in Australia, has considerable assets. It is home to the much acclaimed MONA, and to many cultural festivals and events. It has diverse other attractions, from the beauty and comparatively unspoilt nature of its natural environment to

the historical interest of its built heritage. It has considerable strengths in scientific and Antarctic research, in literature and food production. And it has a remarkably vibrant and growing creative community. Parts of the state are among the first in the nation to be connected to the NBN. These are assets that a national cultural organization like the ABC might well exploit. There are opportunities here for unique R&D work in documentary, drama and educational content for a transmedia world. Yet the ABC has proposed disbanding an established production unit, built with public investments made over many years. This would seem not only a failure to protect the Corporation's assets but also a failure of vision. What's needed now is a plan to bring sectors, interests, advantages and opportunities together to enhance the Corporation's capacity to fulfil its obligation to provide *"programs that contribute to a sense of national identity and inform and entertain, and reflect the cultural diversity of, the Australian community."*

Authorised:

Sharon Connolly  
Secretary and Public Officer, Wide Angle Tasmania