

SUBMISSION TO “YOUR ABC”

My background is varied, with professional experience in rural journalism, secondary education and law.

For the majority of my adult working life I have lived and worked either on the urban fringe or for much longer in regional areas, mostly in NSW. Therefore I do not write from the perspective of inner metropolitan residents, with all the facilities available to such people.

Instead, I represent the numerically fewer, scattered and sometimes isolated parts of the Australian population; those with less access to all manner of goods and services readily to be found in large cities. I thus also represent a less ethnically and culturally diverse proportion of the Australian population.

In our not-only-metropolitan world, I submit that the ABC in all its various parts has been of vital importance in these regions, and has indeed been a vehicle which sought to fulfil its Charter by seeking to inform and educate as well as entertain, and to do this with quality and integrity. It was to be an independent, national and commercial-free broadcaster.

Until very recently, non-metropolitan regions had very little choice in what forms of media they could access. Certainly, this situation is changing now, with wider telecommunications possible. But hitherto, wherever I drove or lived, access to the ABC was the day-to-day reality, whether it be local ABC radio, television or any of the major metropolitan radio stations relayed throughout the country.

This has resulted in a continuity of faithful ABC listeners and watchers, as evidenced by the organisation “Friends of the ABC”, the nation-wide response to “Macca” or Fran Kelly on ABC Breakfast, The Country Hour, and so forth.

I have family living in the United States, which I have visited many times. There is no comparable institution or service in that entire country, which so commands the loyalty and affection of the citizenry.

In the light of present directions and further proposals to increase programming in the areas of sport, entertainment and pop culture, I submit our Australian achievement which was built up over time by dedicated ABC personnel is presently being eroded if not actually abandoned.

The following factors seem relevant to my argument.

1. The dumbing-down factor.
2. The would-be appeal to younger audiences.
3. Commercialisation

An existential oxymoron has taken form in our society.

On the one hand, we are told this is the most educated generation we have ever had, with presumably all the ability that such a phrase implies. On the other hand, we live in the age of soundbites, so-called popularisation of any discussion and an acceptance of Tweets and Social Media [sic] postings as the only real possibility of communication, necessarily instant and necessarily passé tomorrow.

The result for the ABC listener/watcher has been to experience a rapid dumbing down of many programs of previous proven quality, with some notable and heroic exceptions. A few examples out of many possible ones may suffice:

The changes in Catalyst on ABC TV; the replacement of many of the former top quality informed discussion programs in the 8.30am week days time slot on Radio National; and the black hole that much weekend evening broadcasting has degenerated into.

Presumably these changes are designed with the hope of attracting younger viewers and listeners, in the opinion of the ABC policy makers. I believe this to be a most patronising viewpoint.

It might come as a surprise to these policy makers that

- a] younger does not necessarily mean only short attention spans
- b] younger does not necessarily imply lack of interest in anything other than kiddie fun and pop entertainment
- c] younger is not necessarily at home listening to RN on weekend evenings
- d] younger and middle and older-aged people may all detest incessant commercial advertising that has grown to become equally as annoying as anything on commercial radio and television stations.

The ABC already broadcasts for specific groups – ie Triple J for a younger cohort, constant sports broadcasts and local radio as well as FM Music and RN. Radio particularly often plays an important part in the lives of many types of people, such as the elderly, the isolated, and single people. It is portable and therefore more accessible. It can sometimes be the only means of communication left in natural disasters.

Furthermore formal education per se does not necessarily equate with intelligence or interests. Both educated people and people with little formal education have listened to and watched ABC programs all over this country. I thank the ABC that I can still listen to The World Today with Eleanor Hall, or Late Night Live with Phillip Adams, but I bemoan the loss of the likes of John Cargher's Singers of Renown in place of The Night Air and its equivalents.

ABC broadcasters and programmers have given to this vast country a stock of talent and achievements in modern broadcasting unrivalled perhaps anywhere in the world. The ABC has helped build modern Australia over decades as a well-informed and intelligent country. Devoted and grateful listeners and watchers like me hope that what they see happening to this public institution is not the beginning of the utter dissipation of such a legacy by imprudent and improvident heirs and beneficiaries.

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