

The ABC is proposing reducing if not completely shutting down internal television production all States outside NSW and Victoria.

In West Australia and South Australia where the ABC is outsourcing television production it is doing so in co-productions using state government funds while leaving internal facilities idle. Effectively taxpayers in those states are underwriting the cost of continuing television production in their States while the ABC centralises most internal production into NSW and to a lesser extent Victoria.

According to The Australian on August 22 the South Australian state government is contributing a significant sum through the SAFC. Between the ABC, the SAFC and Screen Australia three sources of taxpayer funds are being accessed to pay for this production.

On August 8 The Australian reported Quentin Dempster saying:

“The latest cuts to internally produced programs will affect ABC production in Tasmania, South Australia, Victoria and Western Australia. With still no indication of new programs to replace those axed, ABC staff now wait for "the big white envelope": the elimination of creative opportunity, otherwise known as the sack. Money is always tight at the ABC. But management's claim that resources need to be redirected for prime-time offerings has exposed what insiders have known for many years to be the hidden agenda: to source all non-news content from commercial players. Over the past 15 years, commercial production companies have taken over all ABC drama and in the past five all documentary, natural history and most features programming.”

The ABC's Managing Director, Mark Scott was quoted in the Australian newspaper on August 31

“At the ABC, we want to reflect the nation to the nation,” Mr Scott said. “But it does not automatically follow that in order to do this, the ABC has to be the creator of that television everywhere.”

States where no additional state government funding is forthcoming have had their television production cut back. In Tasmania an ongoing, year round program, Collectors, has been replaced with a ten part show about Auctions.

According to other media reports the ABC's own internal reviews have supported internal production as cost effective. How is outsourcing going to cost taxpayers any less when it relies on state government money, our taxes anyway? The NSW state government has reduced its funding for screen production by 5 million, what happens when other states find the going tight and do the same?

From The Australian newspaper - September 08, 2011

But SPAA executive director Geoff Brown says \$5m funding for film and TV production in the state has not been renewed, leaving \$3.7m to support screen businesses and practitioners.

"That is going to have an impact on local production, especially television," he says.

Television is the "engine room" of the screen industry, he adds, and the loss of \$5m was equal to 30-40 hours of quality drama, such as the Underbelly crime series.

"The challenge for the [screen] industry is to convince the new government that we are not different from any other manufacturing industry in the country," Brown says.

"It's important for jobs and economic activity and we need to reinforce that to this government."

Is this a case of the ABC double or triple dipping on the public purse, or failing to secure adequate direct funding? By using their funds for ABC programs aren't those state government agencies denying private sector film makers?

The ABC's charter obligation towards the arts has traditionally extended further than just news stories or even programs like the axed Arts Nation. It has participated in the arts by producing television (screen) content in all states. The arts rely on activity; by consistently producing programs the ABC assists in building the arts community and industry as well as a creative outlet for that community. Centralising television production activity into NSW and Victoria will reduce the creative activity, profile and voices in all other states and territories.

By participating in the sector the ABC is engaging with audiences at the front line, reflecting but also contributing to our cultural identity. This is the case not only with arts programming but also with sport. The diversity of codes played across Australia reflects the diversity of the country, and is a vehicle for engaging with and reflecting communities that are perhaps not well served by the ABC.

In a submission to a 2006 Senate inquiry on Women in Sport the ABC's own submission stated:

"ABC Television is committed to the broadcast of sporting codes, events and activities that have a particular local or regional significance or characteristic, in particular state and territory-based competitions of major codes and / or have substantial levels of community participation but are not broadcast by other media organisations. The latter include national and international lawn bowls, national and international netball and women's basketball and hockey."

With the recent deaths of ABC newsmen Paul Lockyer, John Bean and Gary Ticehurst much was said about their ability to engage with people in rural and regional communities. Notwithstanding their fantastic individual achievements they also benefitted from the relationships built up by the ABC through engagement with rural and regional communities on many different levels, Radio stations, News, Sport, TV programs and online. Those relationships were built on trust gained through getting out there and doing it, not just producing television using the same companies as commercial channels in Sydney.

If the ABC is no longer in a position to continue with the current range of production and output including the recently launched News 24, ABC 2, 3 and many online sites, then perhaps it is time to consider the whole suite of programs, stations and channels across TV, Radio and online to determine what should be discontinued but do so openly, in consultation with the ABC's major stakeholders, the taxpaying audience; rather behind closed doors focussed only on ratings.

The true value of the ABC to Australians is not defined by simple ratings numbers or the cost of a program, but needs to take into account the broader cultural and social implications.

With commercial television looking more and more the same, why does the ABC seem to be going in the same direction, using the same companies to make programs for them?

Excerpts from the 2008 Senate review report into ABC and SBS:

“In an environment where quality video and audio can be delivered seamlessly via an internet-enabled device—in the home or on the move—an important differentiator between media organisations will be their content.”

“This consultation process extended the conversation on the future of the national broadcasters that began with the Australia 2020 Summit, held in Canberra in April 2008. Summit participants emphasised the role of the national broadcasters in promoting Australian culture and stories and in engaging with Australia’s creative sector, providing children’s programming and supporting an engaged and informed citizenry.”

“The importance of key programming genres for the national broadcasters:

—— Quality Australian programming that provides Australians with a shared sense of identity and that supports our arts and cultural sector.

—— Comprehensive programming of both general appeal and specialised or niche services, particularly for the ABC.”

“Over 700 submissions supported the ABC’s broader role in the provision of Australian programming that reflects our culture and identity.”

This current enquiry seems to revisiting similar territory.

Recently the press has reported cutbacks in production activity in commercial TV stations in Adelaide, Perth and Hobart. Why should the publicly funded ABC only produce internal programs in Sydney and Melbourne exacerbating the negative impact in those smaller centres and clearly contrary to the aims of the National Regional Program Initiative?