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Committee Secretary
Senate Standing Committee on Environment and Communications
Parliament House
Canberra ACT

Date: January 25, 2013

Dear Members of the Committee

RE: The Australian Broadcasting Corporation's commitment to reflecting and representing regional diversity

We are writing on behalf of the Film and Television Association of the Northern Territory (FATANT), an association for screen producers living and working in the Territory.

Unlike its interstate counterparts, ABC Northern Territory has never had a dedicated television production unit producing programs for a national audience. Television production in the Territory has always consisted primarily of news and current affairs, sports and irregular segments produced locally to feed into national programs.

Therefore, given the already limited level of production in the NT, we are greatly concerned about further signs the ABC is centralising production to Melbourne and Sydney at a time we would like to see regional production increased.

Additionally, as a series of internally-produced ABC programs have been decommissioned in recent years, there has been a noticeable drop in the opportunities for local screen producers to contribute by making whole segments or freelance with ABC crew.

Furthermore, we see a parallel centralisation in the ABC's outsourcing of television program production, where the growing legion of "super indie" production companies from Melbourne and Sydney are winning the bulk of ABC commissions.

FATANT believes the ABC is obliged to support regional content production through its charter to reflect cultural diversity and contribute to a sense of national identity. Therefore, we call for the ABC to better support local storytelling by boosting internal production in the Northern Territory as well as supporting new ventures that give local emerging and professional screen producers greater opportunities to produce content for ABC platforms.

Segments for programs

As discussed, there has always been limited ABC television production in the Northern Territory. There are no regular television programs that represent the Territory to local or national audiences. Rather, ABC NT primarily assists in developing various segments for national programs on an "as needs" basis.

A full-time Development Officer and Television Producer was employed at the Darwin studios for almost a decade until the position was vacated and eventually made redundant in 2011.

The producer was responsible for researching, writing, directing and producing segments for various ABC programs such as *Gardening Australia*, *Sunday Arts* and *Art Nation*, *Collectors*, *Can We Help*, *Catalyst* etc.

In the earlier years, the producer was able to boost television production and generate segments for various programs, thereby involving local ABC staff as well as freelancers. However, as the ABC began decommissioning a number of its national programs, production gradually decreased.

The producer, Albert Koomen, transferred to Melbourne in mid 2011 and the position was not filled. The role was made redundant in December 2011.

The loss of the position has resulted in less regional stories being told by locals. Now, on the rare occasion stories are told about the Northern Territory for ABC national programs, visiting program makers flying from interstate generally bring their own camera crews and supplement these with local ABC staff, and occasionally stringers.

The double loss of the local ABC producer and the loss of national programs has also had a flow on effect outside the ABC. It has decreased opportunities for members of the local screen industry to freelance for the range of programs and to extend their networks and experience. It has also reduced avenues for local independent producers to pitch to produce segments themselves.

News and Current Affairs

News and Current Affairs has had a stronger track record in the Territory. The Darwin newsroom is staffed similar to other capital cities in terms of resources and staff, and it regularly employs freelancers on an ad hoc basis, particularly for the longer format current affairs programs such as *730 Report*, *Lateline*, *Landline* etc and for general news in the Alice Springs bureau.

However, Territory news production has had its ebbs and flows. In addition to nightly news bulletins, a state-based current affairs program called "Territory Tracks" was produced and aired once a week in the early 1980s. When the show was axed it was replaced by "The National", which ran for about two years with two Territory-based journalists contributing stories of national interest.

In the late 1980s, the ABC introduced a local weekday *730 Report* in all states and territories. Territory journalists working on the program at that time say it was a period where there were great local stories told every night as well as a high level of analysis of local politics and social issues, business and economics. Importantly, the program generated jobs and training within the ABC, and also employed externally as well, helping to buoy the Territory's small but lively industry.

In 1997, *730 Report* went national from Monday to Friday and a state-based program *Stateline* was introduced on a Friday night. This significantly dropped internal production and

the staff required to put a local program to air. The model remains today, except *Stateline* has now been rebadged under the *730* banner.

There was another purple patch in news television production when the Australia Television news service was broadcast out of Darwin from 1993 - 2000. This period has been described by many in the industry as the “heyday” for news production in the Territory – with dedicated studio crew, editors and sound and camera operators employed to produce several daily news bulletins for Asia Pacific regions in the PALARPA satellite footprint.

Our members report that while there is still occasional work in ABC news and current affairs television production, they have noticed a gradual decline. FATANT is further disheartened that the fulltime *730 Reporter* position held by Murray McLaughlin for many years, and temporarily filled by Sara Everingham when he moved to take over as NT News Director two years ago, remains unfilled.

FATANT believes that dedicated reporters and producers help to generate stories. The loss of a local television producer and a local television current affairs reporter producing stories for national programs has reduced the number of stories being told about this important part of Australia, and the flow-on effect has been a reduction in the work of production staff including camera and sound operators and editors.

Sport production

The provision of a recorder van to ABC Northern Territory in 1972 started a long tradition of Outside Broadcasts (OBs) of sport.

In those days it was primarily sports production had 30 2-hours time slots, but this has now reduced to about 20 slots over a year. In addition, a variety of sports used to be covered including football, rugby league and basketball, but now ABC Sport is essentially limited to covering the Northern Territory Football League (NTFL). We also get SANFL coverage as well.

The drop in coverage has had other impacts as well. Sporting OBs have traditionally relied on casual staff, thereby providing regular work to freelance operators. OBs have also been a pathway for people interested in camera and sound recording to launch their careers. A decline in the number of OBs has slashed regular work for some, and reduced opportunities for keen apprentices to enter the industry.

Other live coverage

Other live coverage in the Territory is limited to elections, special events and the occasional live program such as Q and A. The last two years has been somewhat unusual, with live coverage of the visit of the US President Barack Obama and the 70th anniversary of the bombing of Darwin.

Independent production

The ABC has clearly begun moving away from internal production toward a model of internal and external television production. Increasingly, funds for television programs are being spent commissioning external producers and production companies.

For screen producers, including members of FATANT, the move has brought positive benefits by opening access to more funding opportunities for documentaries and drama series.

Some recent examples include ABC support for local filmmakers Steven McGregor and Danielle Maclean's documentary *Croker Island Exodus* and their contributions to the successful *Redfern Now*, produced by Sydney-based Blackfella Films.

But there is also a concerning centralisation the ABC's external funding recipients, where the lion's share of the pool of funds is awarded to the "super indies" based in Sydney and Melbourne.

In addition, it is concerning that at a time when the Territory's screen industry is maturing and could significantly benefit from a boost in support, that outsiders are still telling its stories.

For example, the upcoming ABC four-part series *Kakadu* – which tells the story of a year in Kakadu National Park – is being produced by a Queensland-based company. While the series is broadly supported and the production provided a much-appreciated boost to the Territory's industry, it is not Territory born and bred.

FATANT wants more Territory stories to be told by people who live and work here. It's important that a Territory perspective is brought to the national broadcaster, and that local filmmakers have the same opportunities to work in the creative industry and contribute to national conversation as their east coast counterparts.

Technology and new platforms

FATANT recognises that some changes in ABC television production, particularly in the reduction of staff and resources, have occurred as a result of broader technological change rather than specific ABC policy. We also see the many benefits that have come through the ways the ABC has embraced new technology and how it delivers and receives content.

We acknowledge the growth of online content through the ABC website and iView has made local content available across multi-platforms and given productions greater exposure to different audiences for longer periods of time.

We also applaud innovations by the ABC to engage regional communities and attract local content through initiatives such as ABC Open.

The provision of community workshops and training alongside broadcast and online space for contributors to ABC Open is a positive "sign of the digital times". Such initiatives have the potential to engage the citizen journalist or inspire the next up and coming filmmaker.

Close the gap

FATANT welcomes stories being told at a community level through ABC Open, but it must also be recognised that it's essentially a forum for the budding amateur. ABC Open contributors essentially produce content with their own resources and time. They are not paid for their work.

At the other end of the spectrum, where the ABC is paying independent producers a fee for their work, sits a growing number of "super indies" concentrated in Sydney and Melbourne.

They are companies with the staff, experience, contacts and networks that smaller remote companies find difficult to beat - and they're the ones attracting the majority of the ABC's commissions.

There is a clear gap – and it is within this gap that the majority of the Territory's screen industry resides, an industry that both contributes to and relies upon ABC television production.

FATANT would like to see the ABC demonstrate a commitment to reflect and represent regional diversity by engaging more with local screen producers and providing more opportunities for regional contribution.

Further, FATANT supports calls for the ABC to introduce a quota for regionally-produced television.

The greatest irony is that the ABC's contraction of regional production is happening as the national broadcaster expands its platforms, as more and more digital channels come online and as media converges at an increasingly rapid rate. Never has there been a greater demand for content.

FATANT acknowledges that the ABC has long-demonstrated a broad commitment to local content and it has done so with an ever-shrinking budget, but it is fast losing ground in the regions.

We not only call on the ABC to invest more in regional television production but we call on the Federal Government and politicians to recognise the need to boost investment in regional screen industries and the national broadcaster so it can meet its charter obligations to represent the interests of the *entire* nation.

Thank you for the opportunity to contribute to this inquiry.

Emma Masters, Executive Officer

Andrew Hyde, President