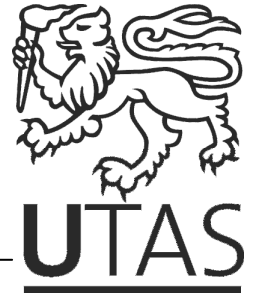


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Committee Secretary
Senate Standing Committees on Environment and Communications
PO Box 6100, Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600, Australia

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

Dear Secretary

Please accept this submission to the Senate Inquiry into the ABC on the matter of regional diversity. I am grateful for the opportunity to make some comment on this matter – not only is the matter an important one, but it also connects directly with my professional and academic interests and expertise. Although I am trained as a philosopher, much of my work is interdisciplinary, and centres on issues of place and identity (see for instance my *Place and Experience*, Cambridge University Press, 1999), including the impact of new information, media, and communications technologies. I would note that I have restricted my remarks to ABC television. Although some of my comments are as relevant to radio as to television, the situation in regard to ABC radio is different in a number of important respects.

Let me first summarize the main points in my submission:

1. *Regional identity and diversity* – Regional diversity is an essential element in Australia's national identity at the same time as regional identity is also central to the lives of most Australians. Addressing regional diversity and identity is a key task for the media and telecommunications industries – something recognized in Europe and the UK, even as it seems to be ignored in Australia.
2. *Regional content and regional production* – A commitment to reflecting and representing regional diversity does not appear to be evident in current ABC production and programming. As a result, the ABC is not only failing regional Australia, but it is also failing itself – in part because the regions themselves provide important resources for the generation of innovative Australian content, just as they ought also to be seen as also key elements in the ABC's own identity and 'brand'.
3. *Production and content in a Tasmanian context* – compared to mainland Australia, Tasmania is another country. Its distinctive geography and heritage not only gives it a very different identity from other parts of Australia, but also means that the island state ought to be seen as a particularly valuable source of regional content and production.

1. Regional Identity and Diversity

Identity, including national identity, is always based in the regional and the local, at the same time as regional identity and difference is essential to the formation of national identity. In contemporary societies, the media and communications industries play a crucial role in reinforcing and maintaining regional identity, just as they also contribute to the formation and maintenance of regional communities, and in so doing contribute to identity and community at the national level.

In a world in which the media and information industries are increasingly driven by a need for differentiated content, regional diversity has a key role to play in both supporting new and innovative production, and in providing sources of distinctive content. Support for regions through support of regionally based production and content also has an important flow-on effect in terms of enhancing existing resources, expertise, and infrastructure within those regions.

It has to be said that one of the shortcomings of much federal policy over the last twenty to thirty years has actually been an increasing focus on the mainland metropolitan centres of the east and south east. This has been in spite of a body of evidence that suggests that many of the policy difficulties that Australia faces are actually difficulties whose resolution actually depends upon greater engagement at regional and local levels (recognition of this point has partly lain behind so-called 'new regionalism'). The situation in regard to the ABC can thus be seen as a special instance of a more general tendency and a more general problem – a problem that will eventually need to be addressed at a whole of government level, but which could, in the ABC's case, be taken up in a quite direct and circumscribed fashion.

In contrast to the contemporary situation in Australia, the importance of regional identity, and its recognition, is widely acknowledged in Europe where there has been a clear push to shift away from the centralizing tendency that has characterized much of the development of the European Community – and this shift that is also evident in discussion of the media and telecommunications industries (see for instance, Esteve Sands, *Statistical, Ecosystems, and Competitiveness Analysis of the Media and Content Industries: European Television in the New Media Landscape*, Seville: Technical Report of the Joint European Research Commission, 2012 - <http://is.jrc.ec.europa.eu/pages/ISG/documents/TVReportwithnewcoverrevpfmb.pdf>).

Significantly, the European position is one that sees decentralization and regionalism, in general, as part of a move to improved policy outcomes across the board – in terms of generation, implementation, and acceptance. At this broader level, decentralization and regional involvement can be seen as essential to the effective functioning of any federal system, as they are also essential to any system of genuinely democratic governance.

2. Regional Content and Regional Production

Whatever the stated commitment of the ABC to reflecting and representing regional diversity in Australia, that commitment is simply not evident in actual ABC production and programming. Regional content seems to be restricted to episodes of programmes such as *Australian Story*, while regional production seems almost non-existent, and, when it does occur, is restricted to shows that make little or no use of the regional content that is associated with the regional location of the

production (something notable in the case of *Auction Room* – a production that also seems to have been designed to fail). What is needed is a commitment to *both* regional production *and* regional content (the two ought to be regarded as mutually supporting of one another).

The ABC stands in stark contrast to the BBC, which has not only moved to more decentralized production in its regions, but which also draws heavily on regional content and locations. In spite of some of its recently publicized difficulties, the BBC is nevertheless an excellent example of how a genuinely regional focus allows for the utilization of regional identity and diversity to become a source of distinctive content that is itself a positive media resource. Thus, here in Australia, we are constantly fed BBC programming that relies heavily on BBC regional production and regional content, at the same time as we largely ignore the resources we have in our own regions for developing distinctive content.

It is worth noting that although the BBC uses the definitions of regional production as set out by *Ofcom* (the independent regulator and competition authority for the UK communications industries) which focus on production rather than content, the fact that those definitions specifically encompass a range of production components, including production company, production budget, and production talent, makes it more likely that regional productions will feature some form of regional content whether through locations, stories, or on-screen actors and presenters (see *Ofcom*, Regional production and regional programme definitions, online at http://stakeholders.ofcom.org.uk/broadcasting/guidance/programme-guidance/reg_prod/).

The centralization of ABC production in just two of Australia's capital cities will undoubtedly have an effect on the capacity of the ABC to reflect and recognize regional diversity. In general terms, the reason for this is a simple one that itself reflects the primacy of place in the determination of identity and action: we orient ourselves, both personally and organizationally, to that with which we are most directly and proximately engaged.

To suppose that producers and executives based in Sydney or Melbourne will be able adequately to recognize and reflect what goes on in Perth, Adelaide, Brisbane, Darwin, or Hobart is to expect a capacity for the individuals who take on those roles to be able to expand their horizons in a way that simply cannot be relied upon, and that we know generally does not occur.

We are indeed products of the places – the regions and locales – in which we live and act, and this is just as true for this in Sydney and Melbourne as for those in Hobart, Perth, or Darwin. If we genuinely wish to maintain a capacity for the national broadcaster to reflect and recognize regional diversity and identity then we have no choice but to ensure that it maintains a strong regional presence, and that can only be done by maintaining regional production facilities that is also oriented to regional content.

The connection between regional production and regional content is vital – as I noted briefly in my comments above, strong regional production relies on strong regional content and strong regional content relies on strong regional production. Indeed, I would argue that *one of the factors underpinning the shift towards increased centralization of production facilities in Australia has been precisely the tendency for regional production to operate without any strong commitment to regional content*. Regional production facilities have thus been operating in ways that neglect a key source of regional production strength – the result is that they have tended to produce content that could just

as easily have been produced elsewhere, and in that circumstance, centralization of production seems an obvious and inevitable outcome.

Once again, the importance of maintaining regional production that also draws upon regional content is a lesson that can be learnt from overseas, and especially UK and European, experiences. In the past, increased centralization has been accompanied, not only by an impoverishment in the capacity to encompass regional diversity in terms of production, but also by a weakening in the ability for regional identities to find a national or international voice, as well as by a reduction in the ability properly to draw upon the wealth of regional resources. If we have not been ready to appreciate this lesson in the Australian context that may be because we have ourselves been insufficiently attentive to the nature and importance of our own regional identity and diversity, and have often tended to ignore the resources that regional diversity offers.

3. Production and Content in a Tasmanian Context

Finally, I want to make some comments about the Tasmanian situation in particular. Compared to the Australian mainland, Tasmania is indeed *another country*. It has a strong sense of its own distinctive sense of place that derives from its character as an island, as well as from its unique natural and cultural heritage. Undoubtedly this sense of place, and the strong sense of identity that goes with it, is one of the reasons there has been such a response to the threatened loss of ABC production facilities, but it also connects directly with the enormous potential that the island offers as a source of production content.

Tasmania's distinctive history, the wealth of creative activity it supports, the variety, beauty, and grandeur of its landscape, the scientific interest to be found in its own flora and fauna, as well as its role as the gateway to Antarctica and the Southern Ocean, all contribute to making the state a potentially rich location for the generation of innovative and distinction content – much, I would argue, as has been the case in New Zealand over recent years. Moreover, since Tasmania also has a particularly high concentration of academic, artistic and cultural expertise and capacity, so it offers a very strong pool of creative talent. In these respects, it has to be viewed as a significant source of strength in relation to *both* content *and* production.

Tasmania's weakness is in the technical infrastructure needed to support activities such as television and film production, and this is one reason why the retention of production capacity in Hobart is so important, although it also suggests that the way such production capacity is developed and deployed probably needs significant redirection. Of course, being able to redirect it in the right way is likely to require a familiarity with and responsiveness to the Tasmanian situation itself – something that is much less realizable from the removed perspectives of Sydney or Melbourne.

I would be very happy to speak to this submission in person, and to provide any additional information should that be required. Thank you, once again, for the opportunity to make some comment on this matter.

Yours sincerely

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