



ABC Friends NSW & ACT

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15 January 2015

Committee Secretary
Senate Standing Committees on Environment and Communications
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Submission to: The Inquiry into the Australian Broadcasting
Corporation Amendment (Local Content) Bill 2014
Environment and Communications Legislation Committee

From: ABC Friends NSW & ACT

ABC Friends

ABC Friends is the major community organisation representing the public's interest in its independent national public broadcaster. It is a politically independent organisation whose aim is the maintenance of the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) as a healthy, independent and comprehensive national public broadcaster. This submission is from ABC Friends NSW & ACT (also known as Friends of the ABC [NSW] Inc.).

Our Submission

1. Notwithstanding the centralisation of ABC to Sydney NSW, ABCF NSW supports strongly carriage of local/regional news and other programs by the ABC and a strong physical presence of inhouse production facilities in other States. These facilities must be adequately funded.
2. The concept that outsourcing is a cheaper means of production for the ABC has never been subject to close scrutiny. It seems to be taken as read that outsourcing is cheaper option when there is an extant literature which shows that this is not always the case. An independent critical review of outsourcing with regard to the production sector is required in order to demonstrate unequivocally that this a more efficient and effective mechanism and that there are no untoward consequences with regard to the ABC meeting its charter, quality of production, and bias or interference . Such a review should not be limited to a narrow financial analysis but must be more wide-ranging in its reach to include matters such as government cross-subsidisation to the private production sector, development of regional

capacity for reporting and production, and protection and ownership of intellectual property. There is capacity in the Australian community to provide such independent analysis.

3. The current management of the ABC appears to be ‘gold-plating’ various digital capacities preliminary to sell-off to the private sector in order to have the ABC ‘pay its way’. Once sold the ABC will be forced to buy back these services from the private sector and will be at the mercy of the sector because it no longer has capacity inhouse for production. The ABC could be shut out of the market for purchase of product in these circumstances much as has happened to its capacity to purchase product from the BBC. It is not that the ABC is uncompetitive, it is that the private sector offers a much larger price to make sure that the ABC does not have programs available to it in order to impact its place in the community. We have profound concern that the loss of regional ABC capacity will lead to a dumbing-down of regional capacity for reporting and production.

4. Many of the current changes to the ABC and its programing which have prompted the proposed amendments to the ABC Charter have been prompted by the Lewis ‘efficiency’ review of the ABC/SBS. This hastily-written, seriously-deficient document, which goes well beyond its remit, has never been subject to an independent review process. It is recommended that the Lewis review be subject to independent review commissioned by the Senate Estimates Committee. ABCF NSW would be happy to spell out the terms of reference for such a review including the need for an Amicus Curiae with regard to certain management assumptions which underpin the Lewis document.

5. ABCF NSW insists that there be a proper review of funding by the ABC so that it is able to meet its Charter requirements. We are already aware of examples where regional ABC facilities are badly underfunded and centralisation of facilities will not solve this problem. Local feet on the ground with appropriate means of production are essential to the ABC meeting its Charter requirements.

6. Without an adequate regional ABC presence the quality of local news suffers a lack of critical independence. We know that a local ABC news presence keeps other sources on their toes with regard to appropriate investigation and reporting although recent cuts to the ABC are impairing significantly that capacity. A healthy democracy is dependent on an independent media.

Overall ABCF NSW supports the concept of support for a strong local presence of the ABC throughout Australia.

Mal Hewitt
President – ABC Friends NSW & ACT