



Submission to Senate Inquiry into

Recent ABC programming decisions

Introduction

The Australian Academy of Science welcomes the opportunity to provide a submission to this inquiry.

The Academy has an enduring interest in science broadcasting. Its advocacy in the early 1960s helped convince the then commissioners of the ABC that communicating the impact of science on society and its contribution to the social and economic wellbeing of the Australian community was not only important but also provided informative and educational broadcast material.

It was accepted then that science broadcasting on both television and radio was a field demanding specialisation, and success of the early programs led to the creation of the Science Unit in 1967 – an initiative that has endured to this day, playing a fundamental role in communicating science to the public.

Our concerns

While acknowledging that the reporting of scientific news in ABC news bulletins is robust, the Academy is concerned over the steady decrease in production and air time for science programs over the past decade. This trend is evident most recently in the advised termination of *New Inventors*. Of concern to the science sector is that no new science or technology programs have been flagged as forthcoming.

The Academy considers that by terminating and not replacing programs and staff – for example *New Inventors*, which demonstrates the application of creative thinking, problem solving and the application of science and technology to the real world – the ABC appears to be acting counter to the objectives of the national broadcaster, and counter to the interests of a public in need of pertinent evidence and understanding; which publically funded contemporary Australian science is currently producing.

Some programs will of their very nature attract a small audience, but this is part of the ABC's distinctive role. Small audiences can be important. Australians are appreciative and proud of the ABC for its national service and

– unlike the commercial networks – its ability to cater to a large variety of viewers of different interests in support of the public good.

Of equal concern is the associated demise of training grounds and career paths for science journalists; the foundation of future science broadcasting quality.

The Academy has recognised the excellence and achievements of ABC science broadcasters, electing Robyn Williams in 1993 to the Fellowship of the Academy as the first and sole Fellow to work in the media. In 2004 Dr Norman Swan was awarded the Academy Medal in recognition of his outstanding contributions to science by means other than the conduct of scientific research. Last year this honour was conferred on Dr Peter Pockley, senior correspondent for *Australasian Science* magazine and Australia's pioneer science writer, broadcaster and commentator.

The accumulated suggestion in recent years is that science content is not of sufficient competitive standing to maintain the current level of diminished program and staffing levels. This comes at a time when the need for public understanding of the big issues – food security, community health, climate change, sustainable energy sources, medical advances and the growing list of endangered species and ecosystems – is actually increasing. Such suggestions are poorly formulated.

This ongoing erosion of science programming goes against the ideals of the Academy and, we would argue, the needs of the country, eg. sustainable development. Public understanding of general and Australian science is essential to inform social discourse and provide skills necessary for employment in a modern economy. There is little evidence to suggest that commercial media has sufficient incentive to broadcast according to this need.

Moreover, if there are less science programs on radio and television and fewer skilled journalists and producers to produce them, the current level of public awareness and understanding of science will fall further. This in turn will lead to lower scientific literacy which will certainly have negative consequences for workforce skills, prospects for productivity and innovation and our ability to conduct informed, evidence-based public debate.

Student disenchantment with science continues to be reflected in the declining numbers of students who select science subjects in senior secondary school where there continues to be a decrease in the percentage of students studying year 12 science subjects. The Program for International Student Assessment has examined the level of scientific literacy for fifteen year old students every three years for the past decade. The results indicate that while other countries have overtaken us, Australia has flat-lined. Our failure to keep pace with leading countries mirrors declining science programming and programming capacity within our national broadcaster. These two trends may not be directly related but in a society increasingly dependent upon science and technology, diminished ABC science content will hinder and not assist efforts to inform and educate Australia.

Conclusion

Under its Charter, one of the ABC's principal functions is 'to provide services that inform, educate and entertain all Australians'. Given the relevance of science to national educational needs, the continued erosion of the ABC's science programming and capacities needs to be not only halted, but also reversed. The Academy urges the Inquiry to consider the merits of strengthening and diversifying science programming to properly address its Charter over the next decade.