



media, entertainment & arts alliance
the people who inform and entertain

Media, Entertainment & Arts Alliance

submission to the

**Senate Standing Committees on Environment
and Communications**

**Inquiry into recent ABC programming decisions
September 2011**

The Media, Entertainment & Arts Alliance

The Media, Entertainment & Arts Alliance (Alliance) is the industrial and professional organisation representing the people who work in Australia's media and entertainment industries. Its membership includes journalists, artists, photographers, performers, dancers, symphony orchestra musicians, freelance musicians and film, television and performing arts technicians.

The Media, Entertainment & Arts Alliance (the Alliance) welcomes the opportunity to make a submission to the Senate Committee for Environment and Communications with regards to its Inquiry into ABC programming decisions.

The Alliance addresses a number of issues raised by the recent announcement by ABC TV to cut the number and amount of ABC-produced programs and jobs including its impact upon the ABC's role as a national broadcaster; the mix of in-house and outsourced production; its significance as a screen industry training ground and funding into the future.

ABC as a national broadcaster

Under its charter ABC must broadcast:

"programs that contribute to a sense of national identity and inform and entertain, and reflect the cultural diversity of, the Australian community"

In fulfilling this obligation the ABC has long established TV production units in all State capitals including Sydney, Melbourne, Brisbane, Adelaide, Perth and Hobart. Given the concentration of the commercial and independent production industry in Sydney and Melbourne, the production of broadcast material by the ABC TV units in Brisbane, Adelaide, Perth and Hobart, have been particularly important in ensuring an industrial base in cities outside of these two cities, and supporting the development and production of broadcast material with perspectives and viewpoints created from across the country.

The broadcasting of local South Australian football competition is a case in point. Over 27 weeks per year, ABC Adelaide broadcasts 90 hours of Australian rules SANFL football. This is important for the local culture of South Australia but also contributes to the vibrancy and diversity of the nation. The production of programs such as *Can we help?*, *The Collectors* and *Talking Heads* all produced outside of either Sydney or Melbourne, worked to ensure that a genuinely national broadcaster delivered genuinely diverse local productions reflecting the multifaceted country we live in.

Without the ABC's continued commitment to regional television production – production that wouldn't or couldn't be supported in the commercial sector – regional audiences will lose access to locally relevant programming. This is because regional commercial broadcasters and the regional independent television production sector remains at levels far from the critical mass required to support local production industry.

Screen Australia's 2009/10 Drama Report clearly demonstrates that Queensland, South Australia, Western Australian and Tasmania lag behind NSW and South Australia both in terms of levels of total budgets for drama production companies. Queensland, South Australia, Western Australia and Tasmania/ACT/NT generated only 12-13 per cent of the national production slate in 2009/10.

It is therefore critical in an industrial sense and from a cultural perspective that the ABC continue to meet its charter obligations and ensure that production resources are geographically spread across Australia.

To this end the Alliance believes that the ABC must commit to sustaining the 2010 levels of internal production in Brisbane, Adelaide, Perth and Hobart. Further the Alliance believes that the Regional and Local Programming initiatives be continued through Government funding of the National Interest Initiatives program to support ongoing internal production in regions outside of Sydney and Melbourne.

In-house production and training

The Alliance supports the mixed model of in-house and outsourced production. However there must remain a critical mass of in-house production to ensure the benefits that in-house production brings to the ABC and the industry are not lost. These include:

- The creation of ABC-owned productions with concomitant benefits arising copyright ownership, program and footage sales, merchandising and other revenue generation opportunities;
- The building of a highly skilled and motivated creative workforce;
- Clear training and professional development pathways benefitting the organisation and the entire screen industry;
- Economies of scale that ensure lower production costs, maximising the use of limited funding;
- The development and creation of risk-taking, distinctive Australian productions that could not be supported if left solely up to the market.

With respect to training, the ABC has long been a vital and valuable training ground for journalists, performers and crew in the Australian screen industry. Entry level staff learn their craft as for example researchers, camera assistants, grips and gaffers, moving through the ranks with further professional development experience on in-house ABC productions.

The entire film and television industry has benefited from the training provided by the ABC. Locally and nationally, producers and on-camera talent have been trained within the ABC and then left to make and sell programs back to the ABC.

The film & TV industry benefits from ABC internal production in other ways as well. Many non-ABC professionals are employed to work on ABC internal productions. They included set designers & builders, graphic artists, costume designers, even puppet makers. Independent musicians have been used widely to score whole series, and actors from the various acting schools have received lots of work through the ABC productions of previous years. But cutting regional ABC television production

will mean a significant downturn for the industry in Brisbane, Adelaide, Perth and Hobart.

The Alliance recommends that the ABC maintain its traditional role as a hub of training and professional development, which provides clear career progressions for crew and production staff. Further the Alliance recommends that the ABC stem the flow of redundancies and retain creative and technical talent in-house.

Funding for the ABC

In 2009 the Australian Government provided an additional \$185 million to increase the levels of Australian content seen on the ABC. This included:

- \$67 million over three years for a dedicated Children's Channel, ABC3;
- \$70 million for local drama production, directed towards co-producing with the independent production sector drama across a range of genres;
- \$15 million for new regional broadband hubs.

The Alliance believes that the increase will not be sufficient to fulfill the ALP's pre-election pledge to provide sufficient funds to the ABC to allow it to broadcast the same levels of Australian drama as is required by regulations of the commercial free-to-air networks.

The ALP's 2007 arts policy also stated that the Government would 'amend the ABC charter to mandate minimum levels of Australian drama on the national broadcaster, reflecting similar obligations that apply to commercial networks'. This has not as yet taken place. The Labor Party's current position is that the additional \$185 million fulfills its 2007 Election Policy and is not moving to amend the ABC charter.

The Alliance notes that the additional funding provided to the ABC was tied to the specific programs above and was not available to use to support the ABC's extant functions. The ABC's base funding has been under considerable cost pressure from a variety of forces including a changing retail sector, the impact of convergence and the need to engage with the proliferation of distribution platforms. Importantly though base funding has significantly decreased in real terms

The Alliance supports holding the Government to fulfilling its promises to amend the ABC charter to mandate minimum levels of Australian drama and funding the organisation appropriately to meet these obligations.

The current Convergence Review has been implemented in part to examine ways to ensure the continued creation of Australian content in an environment where the effectiveness of Australian content regulation is undermined by the threat posed to commercial broadcasters by increased competition with internet protocol television. It is therefore a central concern of the review to develop a response to this impact that will

maintain an Australian presence in a media universe flooded by imported programming. It is already clear that the ABC will need to play a critical role in ensuring this Australian presence.

Finally, the Alliance supports the submission made by its Alliance South Australia Branch.