

SENATE INQUIRY INTO RECENT ABC PROGRAMMING DECISIONS

Submission from Mr Tony Wright, December Media

I refer to the Senate Inquiry into the decision by the television management of the Australian Broadcasting Corporation to cut some ABC-produced programs and jobs, as announced by Kim Dalton on 2nd August 2011.

The Inquiry is, amongst other things, looking into **“the implications of this decision on Australian film and television production in general and potential impact on quality and diversity of programs”** - item (b) of the Terms of Reference.

As the owner of a Melbourne-based independent television production company which has for some fifteen years been a regular supplier of quality factual and drama programs to the ABC among other broadcasters, I feel very strongly that views from the independent sector should be heard - specifically, on the core issues relating to ABC commissioning and the realities of how the broadcaster works with independent producers.

As such, I would make the following points:

- **Commissioning programming from the independent sector does not threaten the ABC's creative independence or integrity.** The ABC maintains editorial control over every program it commissions and is integrally involved, through its commissioning editors, at every stage from commissioning onwards. It can thus ensure that editorial content is appropriate to its needs, its audiences and the demands of its charter. In fact, as a minority stakeholder in most of the programs it commissions many argue that it has a disproportionate editorial voice.
- **From some of the debate going on it is clear that some believe only in-house ABC staff have the talent, ability and editorial integrity to make quality programs – and that only ABC employees have the right to a voice on the national broadcaster - is clearly nonsense.** Many of the ABC's most popular – and indeed commercially successful programs – have been made by independent producers. *Enough Rope, Rake, The Gruen Transfer, Angry Boys* – all “quintessentially ABC” – were made by independent companies: they are among the ABC's most-watched programs and some of the best-selling on DVD. This is not to mention the drama, documentaries and children's programming that emanate almost entirely from the labours of the independent producers.
- **There seems to be a widely-held misconception that independent producers are driven by purely commercial aims and that this in some way compromises the quality of the programs they make.** Programs commissioned by the ABC routinely contribute 20% - 40% of the budget as a license fee. This is after the producer routinely spends months – sometimes years – developing new programs, the costs of which are borne largely by the independent producers themselves. Once the ABC commissions a project, the producer is then tasked to find the rest of the production budget. This involves overseas travel, years of developing

contacts which lead to co-production and co-financing arrangements, and complex financial and legal arrangements - including raising funds through state and federal agencies. These are tasks that the ABC is not geared to. For every dollar the ABC spends on commissioning, it benefits from many more dollars in production finance, the costs associated with securing that finance and the costs associated with the development of the project. This also leverages the ABC's minority budget contribution to a full production budget over which it maintains, what some partners often consider to be, a disproportionate editorial control. In short, the ABC forms a small part of a complex commercial arrangement that benefits the ABC massively and the producer to some degree. It is often said that producing for the ABC is more of a 'lifestyle decision' than a sound commercial strategy. I would have to agree.

- **Out-sourcing commissions to independently-owned production companies will mean increased competition resulting in better quality programmes with more resonance for audiences.** Independent producers represent a diversity of Australian voices and perspectives which should be represented on the nation's public broadcaster. By engaging with independents in regions across Australia, the ABC has long opened itself up to a larger pool of talent and ideas from which to draw - which in turn continues to translate into more diverse and representative programs for its viewers. It is a sound creative and commercial strategy for the ABC and its limited dollars.
- **The ABC should maintain in-house production facilities and staff where appropriate to its core function.** But maintaining internal facilities year-round for coverage of events that do not occur all year round - eg certain regional sports events - is clearly a waste of resources that could be more efficiently channelled into programming. The seasonal coverage could be more effectively covered by regional contractors.
- **Employment levels within the industry will not be adversely affected** - on the contrary, independent programs typically create a multiplier effect and employ hundreds of talented freelance technicians, artists and other production personnel, thereby preserving a vibrant screen production industry in Australia.
- To sum up, a commissioning model is the most efficient approach for the ABC going forward. It leverages the taxpayer's dollar to attract funding from other sources, thereby maximising the amount of independent Australian programming that can be made and shown on the public broadcaster channels - and the quality and diversity of that programming. Tapping into the independent sector not only encourages healthy creative competition but also ensures a diversity of voices and viewpoints are reflected on screen, as befits the remit of a public broadcaster.



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Finally, a quick word on (c) in the Terms of Reference – **“the implications of these cuts on content ownership and intellectual property (IP)”**.

In all of its commissioning practices, the ABC gains little or no IP. It only secures a license to screen programs for a specific number of repeats over a specific period of time. As a broadcaster, it has little need of IP. Its need is the cost-effective supply of quality programming for its channels. IP and ownership is not what is sought by national broadcasters in other countries and there is no reason to seek it here in Australia.

As indicated throughout this submission, commissioning significant content externally has never meant loss of editorial or quality control on the part of the ABC. On the contrary, it ensures that the ABC upholds its reputation for quality, innovation, diversity and as a public service.

As an independent producer, I am wholly in favour of the ABC’s recent decision to achieve what has long been the best path for it in terms of fulfilling its broadcasting remit.

I would be happy to supply any further information the Inquiry might find useful

Tony Wright, Managing Director, December Media

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