

ABC TELEVISION – AN EX-INSIDERS VIEW

SUMMARY.

The removal of local television production from BAPH States will not only mean that what the viewer sees is Sydney Centric, it will also deny the casual staff the very training they need, local production houses will lose a valuable resource and above all the viewing public will not see what they have come to expect and appreciate – their own state programs and identities.

A ratings winner is to reflect the life and times of the viewing public, showing what is going on in their own community, plus what is happening elsewhere. At present, we do not see the local material. Australia is a diverse land and what happens in one location is not what happens somewhere else. The local public want to see the local product, not only a Sydney view of it.

A far better idea is to re-instate the local production teams, maintain the O.B facilities, provide the autonomy that was removed several years ago, and remove some of the crudity that passes for humour. Plus, limit the amount of repeats that we regularly see.

Like all organisations, the ABC has become Sydney-based administrator heavy. Some of those wages would help fund local production.

When it comes to ideas on how to go about something, it is a good idea to ask the locals. They have knowledge about the local scene that any head office can only dream about.

Also, sometimes the spit and polish put on by a fully (over) staffed Sydney Production Unit is not warranted, especially when locals can cover more and do more for less.

The same is said of major film production houses from overseas compared to Australian outfits

1. MY OWN CAREER.

I started in the ABC in 1967, working as a junior operator (“Technician’s Assistant”) in the Studio Control Room and Studio, rotating through all functions, in a training process. The Studio handled both ‘live’ programs and those in production for later transmission.

Later, I had several different functions dealing with the actual transmission of programs, but then returned to the program making area – Studio and Outside Broadcasts. The ABC went through a re-organisation, with the ‘techs’ working on program making then becoming “Operators”. Over several years I passed some exams, both written and practical, and progressed up through the ranks.

When I retired, it was as a Senior Technical Producer, with a supervisory responsibility on a shift basis, covering both the Studio and Outside Broadcasts.

2. CHANGES

In the sixties, staff required for a State News Bulletin numbered in the thirties. The “News” field cameras changed from film to video-tape in the seventies. Since then I saw the miniaturisation of equipment several times over, the introduction of colour, stereo sound, the use of broadband technology and then satellites to link studio centres. Studio staff (non-journalists) required for a live news bulletin went from around 17 down to 11 with some functions being performed by remote control robotics. Only two Operators were required, plus three Production personnel, in the actual Control Room.

(Just after I left, the scenario was altered again with the field cameras using memory chips, the editing being done by the journalists and just one staffer required in the Control Room. In the actual Studio the Presenter is now alone compared to once having another six people around them.

3. CENTRALISATION OF CONTROL

When I started, the programs, a mixture of local production and material sourced by Head Office in Sydney, were all presented for transmission using firstly film and later videotape, in each BAPH State (Brisbane, Adelaide, Perth & Hobart), and also in Victoria. Therefore, each of the States could adjust their own schedules to incorporate any local productions deemed as suitable.

These would be of various public events or happenings. There were various Light Entertainment segments or full programs. The ABC had an “Education” unit in various forms in each State, making Schools’ Programs. Current Affairs ran on three, and later four, nights per week. Local sport (“Sportsview”) on Saturday afternoons was a regular job. “Devine Service” on Sunday mornings was rotated around all the States. There were regular local gardening programs. The production teams were busy.

Then, responsibility for scheduling was centred in Sydney with certain timeslots allocated for local use by each State. Saturday afternoon sport was then only during the Aussie Rules season. There were a couple of 1/2 hour slots on weekday evenings available for other local material. The production of “Schools” programs was confined to Adelaide.

“Devine Service” continued but on a less frequent basis. Local Current Affairs was down to one night per week. Overall staff numbers had reduced markedly, with a big proportion of remaining crew members being put on short hours, often multi-skilling. There were a few casuals for peak loads, but they were also often on short hours when they worked at all. Gone were the set construction team and the scenery painter, the engineering workshop, the designers, the staging hands, the technical draftsmen and the full-time Outside Broadcast team.

Eventually, this local production and transmission was limited to a couple of hours of sport and one half-hour of current affairs, per week. Any other production had to be for National airing, had to be pre-commissioned and go through an audition and pilot process. Local Production Units were fighting for their existence every few months. Crew members were often mostly casuals, being picked up from a local pool. While in Sydney and Melbourne these pools were sizeable, in the other States those casuals relied on ABC work to string things together. Things for them were pretty tight. Individual States still had the physical job of switching the local product in and out of the main feed to their local transmitters.

Still more recently, the coverage of local sport has stopped altogether, apart from News coverage. The use of casuals for most functions on any production is now the norm. Even the News and Current Affairs are limited in what goes to air (no on-air camera movement, no adjusting for the presenter shifting in their seat, no live studio interviews, no correction of camera colour settings and no adjustment of lighting settings). The presenter is alone in the Studio. News from each State first goes to Sydney, to then be put back in the feed that goes out to each State. The morale of the remaining staff is at rock-bottom. But the News Room journalists have learnt to do a lot more and have sole-use of the Studio. The News field cameramen now work as one-person crews.

Lastly, the local production unit found itself without a future. Most of the crews engaged on the News side of things are casuals, with no other employ.

For many years, Head Office had been known around the various State operations as “The Sydney Broadcasting Company”. This has come to be the absolute truth.

4. WHAT IS NOTICEABLE on the Program Output

The standard of local production has fallen to levels that were not tolerated just a few years ago, to the point that the staff involved then would have been brought to account.

Audio levels are not consistent and often there are poor mixes of speech and background effects or music; tonal quality suffers with a lot of muffled speech; lighting is very flat and lacks fine adjustments for hair-style, facial features and clothing; camera settings are set and left resulting artificial skin colouring; sub-titling of names is often in the wrong place or left out altogether.

There is no longer any polish to the product.

5. WHAT THE VIEWER/LISTENER CANNOT SEE/HEAR

There is a general run-down in the state-of-repair of the vehicles and equipment. Should they be actually required or put on the market, where there are no takers anyway, the capital value will be seriously diminished. Its suitability for quality production will be in question.

Frequent use and through that, regular maintenance is required to keep it all at a suitable standard.

Even the buildings are suffering through lack of use.

However, sub-letting to other organisations brings its own problems of security and the cost of providing separate infrastructure.

6. WHAT IS IT THAT IS ALREADY MISSING?

What is not covered now, that once was:

- a. Local sport – “soccer”, local rugby, cricket, archery, boxing, cycling, lawn and indoor bowls, athletics, swimming, diving, local Aussie Rules, motor racing, rowing, darts, horse racing, snooker, tennis, squash, badminton, sailing etc.
- b. Local events: Agricultural Shows, beauty contests, Sailing Regattas, Military Displays, Cup Days, and the Opening of State Parliament. Local public debates under various guises were fairly frequent.
- c. Musical entertainments: In-studio productions, visiting shows and theatre specials, stage shows. Symphony Concerts were a regular feature in each State.
- d. Local drama, both as on-stage and on-site productions.
- d. Local gardening.

In short, the Public does not get to see very much of what goes on in their own State. Those either house-bound or hospitalised, now have to rely on the News “forty seconds” item with its eight second grabs, or read the paper a day later.

7. WHAT WILL NOT BE DONE IN THE FUTURE, should the Production Units Be Closed:
(Quite apart from that product which is being considered at present).

One thing that was possible, given that each State had its own Production Unit plus an Outside Broadcast Van and the crew to man it, but will no-longer be so, is the coverage of any large-scale News event.

Multi-camera coverage of any news-worthy event live-to-air will involve an Outside B’cast Van. It is accompanied by an equipment tender, sometimes also a power generator truck, plus smaller microwave link vehicles and crew transport vehicles. Sometimes there is also the need for a lighting truck, make-up, wardrobe, catering facility and V.I.P. areas. Prior to the actual event there may be a need to erect scaffolding and lay cables and other equipment. This can take several days, especially if the lighting plot is a complicated one, or the technical requirements are extensive.

News cameras can only function for so long before running out of power. “Live-Crosses” only use one camera at a time. Large-scale lighting is a job for some-one trained in the art, usually as part of an O.B. Unit. The management, planning and key operational functions can only be done by permanent staff, who get regular work to maintain their skills and who also rely on there being a production unit.

Specifically, these will go:-

State Funerals: proper TV coverage takes a couple of days planning and preparation to put together. Such events are often part pre-planned by officialdom and put in the filing cabinet. But it still all has to be brought up-to-date and modified according to the Family's wishes. Only then can the TV crew start to plan their side of it and implement it all.

If a 'van has to be transported, crew assembled and transported, accommodated and "suited-up", as well as do the technical planning (it is a specialist function), then the Funeral will be over before the team is half ready.

ANZAC DAY Marches and Services.

Given that ANZAC DAY is a Nation-wide event, the live coverage of a local March/Service by any more than one or at the most two cameras in each state is an impossibility.

Those that I was involved in used up to eight cameras in eleven positions spread out over a couple of kilometres, an O.B. crew of twenty plus a production team of six, took a couple of days to put together and took a few days spread over several months to plan. Pre-production took four people some days of research of archive material, shooting local "colour" and editing.

Cultural events will go the same way. Live programs will disappear from the local scene.

Royal Tours will no longer be able to be covered live in the B.A.P.H. States, as coverage will also be required in Sydney and Melbourne.

8. TRAINING OF TELEVISION AND RADIO STAFF

In the seventies, the ABC developed its own training schemes for crew, production personnel and technical staff. These schemes ran in each State. But little by little, with staff cutbacks, the need for these has diminished somewhat. However the ABC does not now provide any in-house training in the States, relying on staff to undertake external training usually at Colleges etc. But when they come to the job, they lack the practical experience. Also, the College courses only run for a year or two, whereas it takes several years to fully understand the system, plus equipment and to get the skill levels up.

There is not currently enough work to provide the on-going skills training, and by using casuals as opposed to full time staff, there is no guarantee that those staff will be available when needed. In fact, the casuals rely on the ABC to provide the core of their work, as limited as it is. Many have had to take up other lines of work, or go largely onto the dole.

ABC Radio is a shadow of its former self when it comes to staff numbers. Radio National and ABC FM are no longer part of the B.A.P.H. scene. Also, technology has meant that various roles have been abolished or combined. But come a special event, there is not the physical man-power to organise things. Consequently the output is curtailed to the resources available.

9. A FACILITY FOR OTHERS

It has been the practice to hire the Studio and Outside Broadcast facilities to other organisations:

'A bare studio, sometimes with lighting and an operator;
A fully staffed studio with all facilities;
A television link system from a "remote" location;
A fully staffed, or part staffed O.B. Van;
A generator truck with operator;
A stand-alone item of television equipment;
Anything from a single TV lamp fixture, through to a full rig.'

Without a Production Unit, there is no need to maintain an O.B. Van and staff. There are already no specific Studio Staff. Therefore, all of the above hiring possibilities disappear too. The local production houses and theatres that are lucky enough to stay functioning, and visiting crews (both Australian and from overseas) will lose out on a source of equipment and experienced staff.

10. COSTINGS

It has often been shown that BAPH States can produce a quality program for less than the same program if done in Sydney. Lower site rental fees, shorter transport distances, and a few other lower costs all contribute to tip the scales. Where BAPH States suffer is not currently having enough work to keep the establishment busy. This down-time is seized upon by the Sydney decision makers, but their ilk caused the problem in the first place.

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