Friends raises concerns with ABC Chairman

Friends of the ABC recently met with Maurice Newman (ABC Chairman) and Mark Scott (Managing Director) on their visit to Melbourne for an ABC Board meeting.

Friends of the ABC were keen to learn about the Board’s vision for the ABC, to provide FABC perspectives on current and future policies, and to bring to the Board’s attention community concern about the ABC’s increasingly commercial direction.

FABC presented to Mr Newman a petition to the ABC Board of 10,425 signatories. The petition, titled ‘Keep our ABC Creative and Commercial-free’, objected to the growing trend towards commercialisation of the ABC – the interminable on-air promotions, the increasing focus on program ratings, and commercial activities that compromise the ABC’s integrity.

Its signatories called for the ABC’s focus to be restored to being a producer and broadcaster of quality, independent content, and asked the ABC Board to publicly confirm that: there will be no advertising on any ABC network or website; the ABC’s on-air promotion will be limited so that it does not annoy audiences; the ABC will not engage in business arrangements that may damage its integrity or influence its content, including the placement of ABC content on commercial websites or alongside commercial advertising; the ABC’s production core will be rebuilt to ensure it develops a range of high quality programs, and is no longer so dependent on outsourced production; and the ABC’s services, including access to past programs, are accessible to all Australians without fee.

Friends will look to provide a report on the outcome of its meeting and the petition after the ABC Board has had the opportunity to consider the matter.

Hurdles to a new ABC Board appointment system

The Labor Government’s admirable bill for a new merit-based system of appointments to the ABC Board and to restore the staff-elected director position had not progressed to being voted on in the Senate, and lapsed when a federal election was called this year. It has now been reintroduced in a parliament with a different political composition.

When the Bill was introduced before the last election, the Coalition sought to weaken its intended prohibition on the appointment of former politicians and their senior staff to the governing boards of the ABC and SBS, so they would instead be ineligible only for 18 months after leaving office. It also moved amendments to remove the Bill’s provisions to restore the staff-elected director position to the ABC Board. When the Coalition’s amendments were lost, it voted against the Bill.

All politicians should support the country’s national broadcaster and uphold its independence. Friends is hopeful that recent public comments of Malcolm Turnbull, the Coalition’s new communications spokesperson, in support of the ABC’s extension into online and digital platforms, indicate an improvement in the Coalition’s attitude to the ABC. Friends has written to Mr Turnbull to request the Coalition reconsider the amendments it moved on the first occasion the Bill was introduced.

If the Coalition continues to oppose the legislation, its carriage will depend on the Greens, and independent members of parliament from whom FABC is also seeking support. Friends is requesting that all politicians support the Coalition’s proposal that the ABC Board has the opportunity to consider the matter.

Keep our ABC creative and commercial-free

Clockwise from top left: Mark Scott (ABC Managing Director), Maurice Newman AC (ABC Chairman), and FABC (Vic) - Gael Barrett (Vice-President), Glenys Stradijot (Campaign Manager) and David Risstrom (President).

Maurice Newman AC, ABC Chairman (right) greets David Risstrom, FABC President.

Kerry O’Brien leaves The 7.30 Report

Known and feared for his sharp intellect and probing questions

Election debates belong with the ABC

Public interest being undermined by business interests

ABC Jazz digital radio

The new centre for jazz music and what it could become.

Do we need the ABC?

Economist Christopher Joyce discusses our vital need for reliable information.

A most important matter

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An economist’s perspective on public broadcasting

Do we need the ABC? By Christopher Joye

Economists like to think that there are two essential things that we need to live: food and shelter. Today I am going to argue that there is a third, often overlooked, sine qua non for life: reliable information.

In today’s sophisticated world modern societies have determined they need to connect their citizens daily, to empower them to make the best possible decisions, to enable an objective appraisal of the performance of government, and to foster democracy. I am talking about free, readily accessible and credible information.

Consider the role of the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) and its equivalents around the world, such as FedStats in the US or the National Bureau of Statistics in China. The information they collect is freely available to everyone and forms the basis of all our decision-making. It enables governments and businesses to form policies; and people to audit the performance of democratically-elected governments.

This information is a fundamental part of a healthy society which needs to be available to everyone cost free, something the private sector would find difficult to do. This is an example of what economists call a ‘public good’ which is something that when consumed by one person does not reduce its availability to another.

In economics, the ‘public good problem’ arises when we cannot be certain that private markets will produce the desired quantities of these services. And so we pay taxes and elect governments to ensure that we have hospitals, sewerage and many other services. There are, of course, grey areas where the private sector chooses to offer us additional services for a higher price e.g. private schools, toll-roads.

One service that western democracies have decided must be freely available is regularly transmitted and (notionally) unbiased news and current affairs. Thus most countries have established a ‘public broadcasting service’ (PBS). In the UK they have the BBC, Radio New Zealand, and the US a decentralised network of stations called the PBS.

In each nation the PBS is freely accessible to members of society via the main mediums: originally it was radio, then TV and now the internet. While private markets have always supplemented this core news with a great deal of other money-making ‘content’, policy makers have universally concluded that the state must produce, and protect the integrity of, a minimum level of objective information. In Australia, this manifests most strikingly in the form of the ABS and the ABC.

No matter how technologies change or what commercial and political pressures arise all Australians know that government will offer them access to dependable current affairs information via the ABC.

The value and viability of the ABC in turn hinges on its ability to rapidly propagate bias-free information throughout the community. Private content providers, such as The Australian and The Australian Financial Review (AFR), tend to have quite explicit economic, political and policy agendas that advance the interests of their readers and/or proprietors.

The private media manufacture content that they either make available through (relatively) free-to-air channels like TV, radio or the internet, funded by advertising revenues, or by subscription.

There are sound reasons why no mainstream private media organisation in Australia produces free content that remotely resembles the ABC’s 7.30 Report and Lateline or Four Corners, Q&A, and Media Watch. In short, these shows do not offer adequate commercial returns.

Instead Channel 7 and Channel 9 enthral millions of viewers with Today Tonight and A Current Affair, which are money-making mass-market programs. Here it is also useful to remember that Sky News, which is a late addition to the current affairs game, is a closed, subscriber-only network that is forcibly bundled together with other costly services. Despite claims to the contrary, Sky News could never substitute for a PBS.

Whatever news and analysis is yielded by the private media is always subject to the editorial and commercial influence of their owners who may change over time. As is his right, Alan Jones at 2GB projects a forcefully conservative line, as does the Editor-in-Chief of The Australian.

But the mere fact that The Australian has long waged a campaign to promote conservative economic and political interests demonstrates that it is incapable of fulfilling the functions of the ABC.

The most successful private media content is normally found not in news or current affairs, but in areas where consumers are willing to part with hard cash: entertainment. Think of movies, mini-series, sports, and hobby shows.

It is probably now clear that these thoughts are motivated as a response to criticisms from industry and academics that the ABC is “crowding out” private activity and, at the limit, should be abolished altogether.

As one example, the highly regarded bipartisan academic, Professor Stephen King of Monash University, recently claimed in the AFR that “traditional newspaper owners have a legitimate gripe” with the ABC and BBC vigorously cross-promoting their internet, audio and video news, and maintained that “this competition is clearly unfair”. He argued that taxpayer funding of the ABC and BBC gives them an unreasonable advantage in experimenting with technology platforms that in turn make it “difficult for the private news providers to compete”.

The crux of Professor King’s argument is that the internet, awash with freely available news (until it is placed behind paywalls), has eviscerated the need for a national PBS. He has called on the Government to revisit eviscerated the need for a national PBS. He has called on the Government to revisit the role of the ABC, and suggested that it might be time to “pull the plug”. Professor King best encapsulates his position with the rhetorical question, “Should taxpayers be funding the ABC to compete against private...
providers who both want to and can do everything that the ABC can do?"
I would submit that his analysis is flawed.
First, the ABC has been in the news and current affairs business, which is its public mandate, for nearly 80 years. The real question is whether traditional media can make money by supplying the same thing.
The empirical evidence locally and overseas indicates that media companies have a higher probability of generating profits by concentrating on non-commodity areas, such as entertainment, or by specialising in high-value-added content that consumers and/or advertisers are willing to pay for.
Second, it is wrong to allege that “private providers...want to and can do everything that the ABC can do”. Most private media charge for their content, have explicit commercial and/or political biases, and cannot guarantee what information they will supply or its frequency. They produce only for profit.
Third, the national PBS has a responsibility to the community to make its news and analysis available to them via every conventional medium. The ABC already offers a 24-hour textual internet news service. Its extension of this to 24-hour free-to-air digital TV at no incremental cost to taxpayers is just smart management.
Fourth, it seems odd to argue that a PBS has a comparative advantage in technology innovation over private companies. Most media technology these days is developed by third-parties, not content providers.
Fifth, and significantly, the real threat faced by traditional media companies has nothing to do with the long established PBS but has been crystallised by the internet.
In this respect, the sector most adversely affected has been newspapers. Cable, TV and radio companies continue to thrive whereas newspapers have, in effect, lost their grip on two oligopolies.
The first was the highly lucrative employment, real estate and auto classifieds. As these crucial revenue streams migrated to new online competitors, traditional newspapers have been devastated.
The second oligopoly was conveniently accessed (and mobile) morning news. Yet now most of us get the same free information as soon as we switch on our ubiquitous computing devices.
The ‘old news’ being produced by the print media’s teams of journalists was not being funded by the price of the paper but by the classified revenues.
If these business models are to endure, they must adapt. Consumers don’t value news sufficiently to cover the costs of the existing infrastructure. This means that these expenses must be cut or removed altogether. And traditional media will have to shift away from commodity news and manufacture deeper and more differentiated content that people will pay for.
Most of the missiles directed at the ABC amount to little more than the straw-men erected by incumbents that have witnessed their once highly profitable industry structures irreversibly change for the worse. The ABC’s challenge is to maniacally commit to never contaminating its primary product – credible and reliable information about the society in which we live – with any form of bias, or the perception of such.

What the ABC could do with more money

ABC Jazz digital radio

ABC Jazz is one of three exciting digital music services launched by the ABC in 2009 and made available on digital radio in the mainland State capital cities, on digital TV as an audio-only service and online. The others are ABC Dig Music (which features a range of distinctive Australian music) and ABC Country.

ABC Jazz features releases from the best local and international jazz musicians, and original jazz performances. ABC Classic FM’s Jazztrack and Jazz Up Late are also broadcast on ABC Jazz.
The ABC Jazz website has become a centre for jazz news and information about performances. It has audio on demand features so audiences can listen to exclusive ABC recordings, as well as interviews and feature albums.
Nevertheless, if ABC Jazz had more staff, FABC member and jazz enthusiast Elspeth McCracken-Hewson believes it could be so much better. She mentions more presented programs, more exclusive recordings of Australian musicians, more special feature programs and interviews.
Elspeth suggested to ABC Jazz that audiences would appreciate more live recordings from Bennetts Lane and other jazz clubs.

She informed the ABC of her concern that music played too often without a presenter degenerates into musac, and suggested ABC Jazz have more programs with presenters by incorporating jazz programs from radio stations around the world, similar to the way that ABC News Radio 1026 incorporates news programs from abroad.
Elspeth believes it is unrealistic to expect listeners to “keep rushing to a computer to check the ‘Just Played’ list for every item”, and suggested to ABC Jazz that a weekly program be published online and preferably in The Age Green Guide, so that audiences can plan when to listen.
In its reply, the ABC explained: new automated digital production and playout technology has provided the ABC with a means of delivering its digital radio stations in new ways without the higher costs associated with traditional analogue radio stations. Setting up radio stations with fully-produced and presented programs, even ones that are aggregated from a variety of sources, is expensive and currently beyond the ABC’s resources.
So ABC Jazz and the other ABC digital radio stations will remain as they are, unless ABC resources are expanded and any increase in funding is not targeted solely to television and online, as it was in the Labor Government’s first budget to deal with ABC funding.

Listen to ABC Jazz on your computer right now at www.abcjazz.net.au

Plans are underway for the future extension of ABC digital radio services to other capital cities and regional areas.
Election debates belong with the ABC

The community’s interest is not well served by commercial broadcasters that want to take over the ABC’s role of conducting major political debates.

Commercial television once regarded interviews with politicians as bad for ratings. Now, some outlets compete against the ABC to conduct key election debates – presumably an effort to gain recognition as serious news providers, in order to grow the long-term audiences that they seek to increase profits.

Competition between media outlets that vie to conduct the leaders’ election debates results in the political parties setting the terms of the debate, selecting who will conduct the interview and the form it will take.

The result: the 2010 televised leaders’ election debate was unenlightening. A town-hall style public forum that was organised by a pay-tv company at the height of the election campaign was of dubious integrity, and only its paid subscribers were able to directly view the event on television.

The ABC, as the national public broadcaster, is the appropriate body to conduct major election debates. It has the impartiality. Its skilled news and current affairs journalists are adept in the pursuit of answers from politicians to important questions and are experienced adjudicators of public debates.

Importantly, the ABC also has the trust of the Australian public and reaches all Australians with free-to-air and online services.

Control of the format and conduct of election debates must be returned solely to the ABC if they are to provide voters with serious scrutiny of party policies and the performance of leaders.