



Democracy
depends on
a strong ABC

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The ABC's role in building social cohesion is not accidental. It is structural, cultural, and democratic.

The fight for a bold independent ABC



Cassandra Parkinson, ABC Friends President

Fifty years ago the newly-elected Fraser government announced cuts to the ABC's funding, leading to the cancellation of news, current affairs and other programs. Threats to introduce advertising followed.

A small band of ABC supporters fought back, and ABC Friends was born.

Attempts to control the ABC are as old as the corporation itself. Even before the ABC's first broadcast in 1932, Sir Keith Murdoch, Australia's most powerful media baron, pressured the federal government to change the legislation that created the ABC and restrict its capacity to collect its own news.

In every decade of our 50 year history ABC Friends has resisted attempts to privatise the ABC, reduce its independence and cut its funding.

Those who want to sell off the ABC are rarely as brazen as the Liberal Party was in 2018 when it passed a resolution calling for the ABC's privatisation. Instead, they disguise their intentions by recommending that the ABC introduce advertising or be funded by subscriptions. Regardless of the words used, the objective is clear: to reduce the ABC's effectiveness and autonomy.

Attempts to interfere with the ABC's independence are typically based on unsubstantiated accusations of bias. Proponents want a weakened ABC, without the capacity to expose uncomfortable truths. But editorial independence is central to the ABC's existence, enshrined as a foundational principle in its charter.

Whenever the ABC bends to external pressure, public trust in it suffers. The issue goes beyond our public broadcasters. It is about allowing journalists to witness, record and report facts, about giving them space to report fearlessly and honestly.

If trust in the media weakens, trust in other institutions is also undermined. Democracy cannot function effectively if citizens are ignorant or misinformed. Autocrats deliberately break down trust in institutions. To increase control and create chaos, they spread disinformation and sow doubt about objective truth.

The ABC is a bedrock of our democracy. We trust it because it is free from political interference and commercial pressure.

The ABC broadcasts to all Australians, from small remote regions to major urban centres. It entertains and educates our kids. It produces quality Australian programs. It reflects Australian lives and creates opportunities for our voices to be heard.

It's easy to take the ABC for granted, but as Peter Greste says in this magazine the ABC is "part of this country's democratic infrastructure - quietly holding things together, until we forget why it mattered in the first place."

Let's not forget why the ABC matters. I thank those who helped build ABC Friends into a powerful fighting force, and look forward to continuing their legacy. ●

Cassandra Parkinson, President

The enduring value of the ABC



**The Hon Anthony Albanese MP,
Prime Minister**

Since its creation, the ABC has played a key role in our nation. Our national broadcaster shows us who we are. It shares our good times, and is a lifeline in our bad times.

It is a measure of the loyalty and affection the ABC commands around our nation that ABC Friends are marking this anniversary. ABC Friends are true friends, doing the vital work of campaigning and organising, doing the hard yards to keep the national broadcaster on the national agenda.

And that is truly where it belongs.

The ABC is part of who are as a people.

It adds to the strength and richness of our national identity by telling our stories, sharing our music, and providing a haven where original Australian screenplays can come to life.

At its best, what the ABC does is the stuff of national identity, bringing together the many strands that unite us as Australians.

And it is a truly national broadcaster, serving Australians in the regions and building our sense of connection as a nation.

Just as the ABC keeps regional Australia in touch with metropolitan areas and other parts of the country, it provides important insights from regional and remote Australia to those in the suburbs and inner cities.

The ABC shows us our country in all its diversity and shows us each other. There's nothing quite like sharing our stories to stop us becoming strangers to each other.

The ABC is a crucial part of our ongoing conversation with our regional neighbours, building a sense of community across the Pacific, a community in which it is essential that Australia plays a trusted and valued role.

At its best, what the ABC does is the stuff of national identity, bringing together the many strands that unite us as Australians.

And at its heart is the ABC's credibility and independence.

We live in an age where news and real stories are steadily giving way to opinion-based content that's more about generating clicks and pushing people's buttons than in revealing the truth. And it's relatively cheap to produce. Real journalism takes time, commitment and resources.

Amid the rising tide of social media and its ever growing whirlpools of misinformation, the ABC should be a beacon of trust.

This can never be taken for granted. Trust takes a long time to establish – and it takes energy to maintain.

It is important to note the ABC's crucial role in the health of our democracy.

A strong, fearless, properly resourced public broadcaster is something we should all value deeply.

The ABC must always be a public broadcaster, never a state broadcaster.

A government confident of its own ideas and principles should embrace independent questioning as crucial to our democracy. And that is the accountability that a strong, properly resourced public broadcaster brings.

That is why our Government is resolute in its commitment to protecting the independence of the ABC, providing it with not just adequate resources but along with it the stability that supports the efficient use of taxpayer funds and makes it possible to plan properly and confidently for the future.

This drove the Government's decision to move the ABC to 5-year funding terms, which commenced on 1 July 2023. The ABC will receive \$6.2 billion over the 5 years to 30 June 2028.

Last November, the Government announced it would provide \$50 million over three years from 2026-27 to the ABC to support the production of new Australian children's and drama content.

This funding complements the new Australian content obligation on streaming services, and in the process helps protect and strengthen our national and cultural identity in a steadily homogenising world.

The Government also provided the ABC with \$83.7 million in funding in the October 2022 Budget to provide greater capacity to deliver emergency broadcasting services – one of the most important roles the ABC plays, as well as increase investment in ABC Education, and enhance digital services.

Under the Indo-Pacific Broadcasting Strategy, the ABC has also received \$40.5 million over five years to expand FM radio transmission, content production, and media capacity-building in the Indo-Pacific region.

All of these steps are real and meaningful expressions of our commitment to the ABC.

The ABC does so much to add to the heart of a nation. It deserves a government that has its back. And in our Government, that is exactly what the ABC has. ●

The Hon Anthony Albanese MP, is the Prime Minister of Australia.

A government confident of its own ideas and principles should embrace independent questioning as crucial to our democracy.



National storytelling and social cohesion in a divided age



Larissa Behrendt

At moments of national stress or uncertainty, Australians instinctively turn to the ABC. Not just for news updates or emergency broadcasts, but for something deeper: a sense of who we are, what is happening around us, and how we understand ourselves in relation to one another.

That instinct matters. It tells us something important about the role the ABC plays in our democracy and in our social fabric.

Telling Australian stories

In an era of increasing polarisation, misinformation, and fractured public discourse, the Australian Broadcasting Corporation remains one of the few national institutions with the potential to tell Australia's stories in all their complexity, without reducing them to outrage, spectacle, or profit-driven simplification.

The ABC's role in building social cohesion is not accidental. It is structural, cultural, and democratic.

Social cohesion is not the absence of disagreement. A healthy democracy will always contain contest, debate, and dissent. But cohesion depends on something more fundamental: shared reference points, shared facts, and a shared sense that everyone belongs to the national story, even when we disagree about its direction.

Defunding, undermining, or politicising the ABC weakens more than a broadcaster. It weakens our capacity to speak to each other across difference.

The ABC provides that shared civic space.

As a national broadcaster, it has a mandate not simply to inform, but to reflect the diversity of Australia – geographically, culturally, politically, and socially. This is not an easy task, and it is not always comfortable. But it is essential. When people see their lives, histories, accents, communities, and concerns reflected on national platforms, they are less likely to feel alienated or invisible.

Belonging is not created by slogans; it is created by recognition.

Storytelling is central to this work.

Stories are how we make sense of the world. They move ideas from the abstract to the human. They build empathy where statistics cannot. And they help counter the corrosive “us and them” narratives that so easily take hold in times of fear or economic stress.

This is particularly important in a country like Australia, whose national story is still contested and incomplete. We are a multicultural nation built on long-standing First Nations cultures and shaped by colonisation, migration, and change. Our shared history contains pride and pain, achievement and injustice. A cohesive society does not pretend otherwise. It tells the truth – carefully, responsibly, and inclusively.

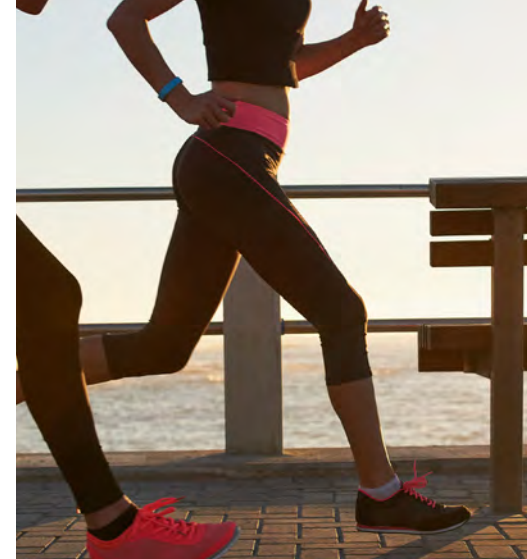
The ABC as truth-teller

The ABC has been one of the few institutions where there is space for that truth-telling. Through journalism, documentaries, drama, radio, and children's programming, it can help Australians understand not only events, but each other.

This role becomes even more critical as trust in institutions declines globally. Around the world, we are seeing democratic norms eroded by disinformation, attacks on independent media, and the deliberate undermining of shared facts. Australia is not immune to these trends. But one of our democratic strengths has been the continued existence of an independent national broadcaster with editorial integrity and public purpose at its core.

The ABC's independence matters because trust matters.

When citizens are forced into isolated media silos, each with their own ‘truths,’ democratic dialogue collapses. The ABC should provide a counterweight, a place where rigorous journalism, public accountability, and editorial standards still apply.



The ABC is also one of the few remaining institutions capable of speaking to the nation as a whole. In moments of crisis – bushfires, floods, pandemics – the ABC has not just reported events; it has connected communities, shared practical information, and reminded Australians that they are not facing challenges alone.

Importantly, the ABC's contribution to cohesion is not limited to news. Cultural programming, drama, comedy, and children's content all play a role in shaping how Australians see themselves and each other. These forms of storytelling create emotional literacy and shared cultural memory. They allow us to laugh at ourselves, to question power, and to imagine different futures.

For First Nations communities, multicultural communities, regional Australians, and people living outside major centres of power, the ABC has often been a key national platform prepared to invest in long-term, nuanced storytelling. This is not about tokenism; it is about complexity. Inclusion strengthens a society because it widens the circle of belonging.

The ABC is not a luxury

There is a persistent myth that public broadcasting is a luxury, or that cultural institutions are expendable in tight fiscal times. History tells us the opposite. When societies face pressure – economic, environmental, or political – it is precisely these institutions that hold the line against division.

Social cohesion cannot exist where people no longer trust the information environment they inhabit.

They are not ornamental; they are foundational.

Defunding, undermining, or politicising the ABC weakens more than a broadcaster. It weakens our capacity to speak to each other across difference.

It narrows the stories we tell. And it leaves a vacuum that is quickly filled by voices with less accountability and narrower interests.

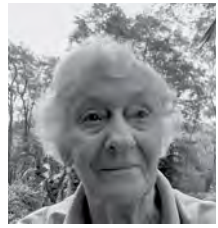
A cohesive Australia is not one where everyone agrees. It is one where disagreement occurs within a shared democratic framework, with respect for evidence, for humanity, and for the idea that our stories are interconnected.

The ABC helps make that possible. And in a divided age, that role has never been more important. ●

Larissa Behrendt, AO, is a Professor of Law and Director of Research and Academic Programs at the Jumbunna Institute for Indigenous Education and Research at the Sydney University of Technology and the inaugural Indigenous Research Chair.

She is the host of Speaking Out on ABC Radio. Her 2025 Boyer lecture, Justice, ideas, inclusion, can be viewed on the ABC's iView.

A co-founder remembers



Corin Fairburn Bass

The idea of forming an active Friends of the ABC was first discussed one afternoon in a living room in Turramurra, in 1976. The Fraser Government had recently announced its intention of reducing ABC funding, causing great alarm among ABC listeners.

The threat wasn't new, but many people felt it was serious enough this time for the public to organise ways of protecting the independence and funding of the national broadcaster. There were four of us on that particular afternoon: Walter Bass, a long-standing Bass family friend Hans Bandler and his wife Faith, and me.

The result of that discussion was the decision to organise a public meeting, to be held a few weeks later in Sydney's Anzac House. It was attended by enthusiastic supporters who filled the hall. Eventually a committee was formed, a president was chosen and plans were made for an ongoing newsletter. From this beginning there are today over 40 branches of ABC Friends around Australia.

Now, nearly 50 years later, when the Sydney Northern Suburbs Branch Chair introduces the meetings with an acknowledgement of the country on which we meet – Darramurragal, Gemmeragal and Darug – I often think back to the very beginning of the Friends, and how and why it began.

The 'why' was obvious. In order to fulfill its Charter obligations – briefly, to entertain, educate, maintain its independence, and reflect the unique cultural diversity of Australia – the ABC must have adequate funding.

The 'how' began as most such groups do: with committee meetings (volatile at times), plans, counterplans, proposals, and disagreements. But once it was established and the need more widely understood, the Friends' efforts to protect the ABC were at times massive, often tunnel-visioned, and always based on deep commitment.

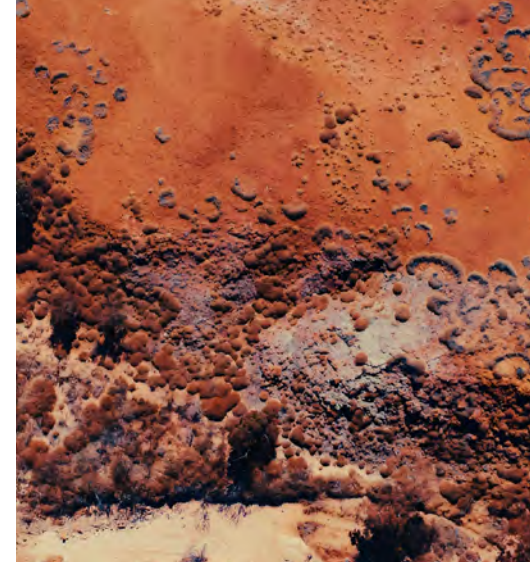
“When you’ve got something of worth, don’t ever let it go.”

In a world being torn apart, perhaps it's no coincidence that the ABC Friends came into being because the lives of three people in that first little group had been profoundly affected by the results of war, fear of cultural diversity, racial inequality, and intolerance of migrants.

Walter Bass (1931-2015) and Hans Bandler (1914-2009) had come to Australia in 1939 to escape the Nazi regime. Faith Bandler (1918-2015) was a highly influential leader in the fight for Indigenous rights.

All three had known racial discrimination and were passionate about the need to protect and support the ABC: the voice for all Australians, standing for freedom, independence, and democracy. ●

Corin Fairburn Bass was a founding member of ABC Friends NSW. She remains an active member and is currently a committee member of the Northern Suburbs of Sydney sub branch.



Defending the ABC



Jennifer Bowen

To mark the 50th anniversary of ABC Friends in 2026, an interactive website has been launched to show how the organisation has grown. Dr Jennifer Bowen, from ABC Friends Victoria, has been scouring the archives to discover the organisation's early history and impact.

No one asked ABC Friends to take on the role of protector of the broadcaster against threats to its funding and independence. But in 1976, following an announcement by the Fraser government of cuts to the ABC, two groups formed within weeks of each other with that as their declared purpose.

In Sydney, 'Friends of the ABC' was the inspiration of two couples, Walter and Corin Bass, and Faith and Hans Bandler. In Melbourne, 'Aunty's Nieces and Nephews' was founded by Meg Paul, later on the board of the State Library of Victoria.

All the inaugural members had experience in community activism and were quick to gather like-minded people around them. They mobilised supporters to write letters, sign petitions, don badges and lobby politicians; they organised public figures to speak in support of the ABC; they participated in government inquiries.

By 1977, Friends of the ABC had held public meetings in every state. A petition in Hobart asked the government 'to recognise that the ABC belonged to the people and not the Government of the day.'

They were motivated by the belief that a well-funded, independent public broadcaster was essential to Australia. That commitment launched a movement that is still growing after 50 years.

Before the federal election in 1977, the Queensland Friends urged supporters to raise the subject of the ABC with candidates. In 1980, the government set up a major review of the ABC to which the NSW, Victorian and WA groups made submissions. When the review committee recommended the ABC take commercial funding, the Friends placed a large advertisement in major newspapers putting the case against such a move. The government rejected a commercially funded ABC and gave the community voice as explanation.

From its beginnings, ABC Friends has defended the ABC as a service for all Australians, and it has continued its activism to this day.

50 years – that's something to celebrate. ●

Jennifer was a producer at the BBC and ABC, and a lecturer in media at Monash University. In 2026 she produced a digital history for ABC Friends' 50th birthday.

Trust: the bedrock of public broadcasting



Professor Julianne Schultz

The times suit public broadcasting to a degree unimaginable even two decades ago. If it were just about providing more information to an already overwhelmed public it may be tempting to think, enough already.

But public broadcasting has an explicit purpose that makes it different to the global corporations that have turned attention into the most extraordinarily lucrative business in human history. Those corporations work hard to protect their good name, but their cavalier attitude towards truthfulness, means the trust that the business models depend on is purely instrumental: will the systems work, the parcels arrive on time, the audience be maximised.

The veracity of the information they transmit, and use as bait to draw people in, is secondary. Attention, surveillance and making money are all that matters.

The trust that forms the bedrock of public broadcasting is very different.

It is about providing the information that enables citizens to participate in public life and have fuller private lives, to make judgements based on reliable information, to learn about their society and fellow citizens, to embrace creativity and innovation. To spot mis and disinformation.

In short, to make sense of an increasingly incomprehensible world.

The ABC was weakened by the process of a campaign that was at times ferocious and relentless – but still it ranks as the most trusted media organisation in Australia.

When the idea of public broadcasting was conjured a century ago, the information environment we know today was unimaginable. But even then there was an awareness that public broadcasters had a unique role, to level the playing field, to broaden the mix of information, to operate at the highest standards without fear or favour.

Over the years public broadcasting has evolved in response to changing technologies, professional aspirations and community expectations.

But the core rationale of an institution designed to enhance the experience of being a citizen, free from commercial and political pressures is more important than ever.

For decades the ABC was the most trusted institution in Australia.

It had a brand and a place at the heart of the nation that was the envy of its competitors. Over the past three decades as the once lucrative commercial media came under pressure, they not only shrunk, but worked hard to undermine faith in the public broadcasters. Encouraging distrust, amplifying political opposition, putting broadcasters, managers and boards on the defensive. This was self-interested, but it was effective.

The uniquely Australian economic and structural model of having competing public and private enterprises in most areas – banking, airlines, insurance, telecommunications, employment services – was undone during the era of privatisations. To the annoyance of those who wanted to see the public broadcasters go the way of other once trusted enterprises, public broadcasting hung on.

Its online news service, digital platforms and podcasts, continue to grow. Its online news reaches many more Australians every day than its competitors. As it should, it employs more journalists in more locations than any other media organisation. Scale, diversity and geographic range are essential and need to be funded sufficiently to be preserved.

Importantly the ABC has had to think harder and deeper about how to do this. How to maintain impartiality, to be fair, independent and reliable?

But also, be able to point out flaws and shortcomings, to nurture new talent and challenging ideas, and stand up to bullies.

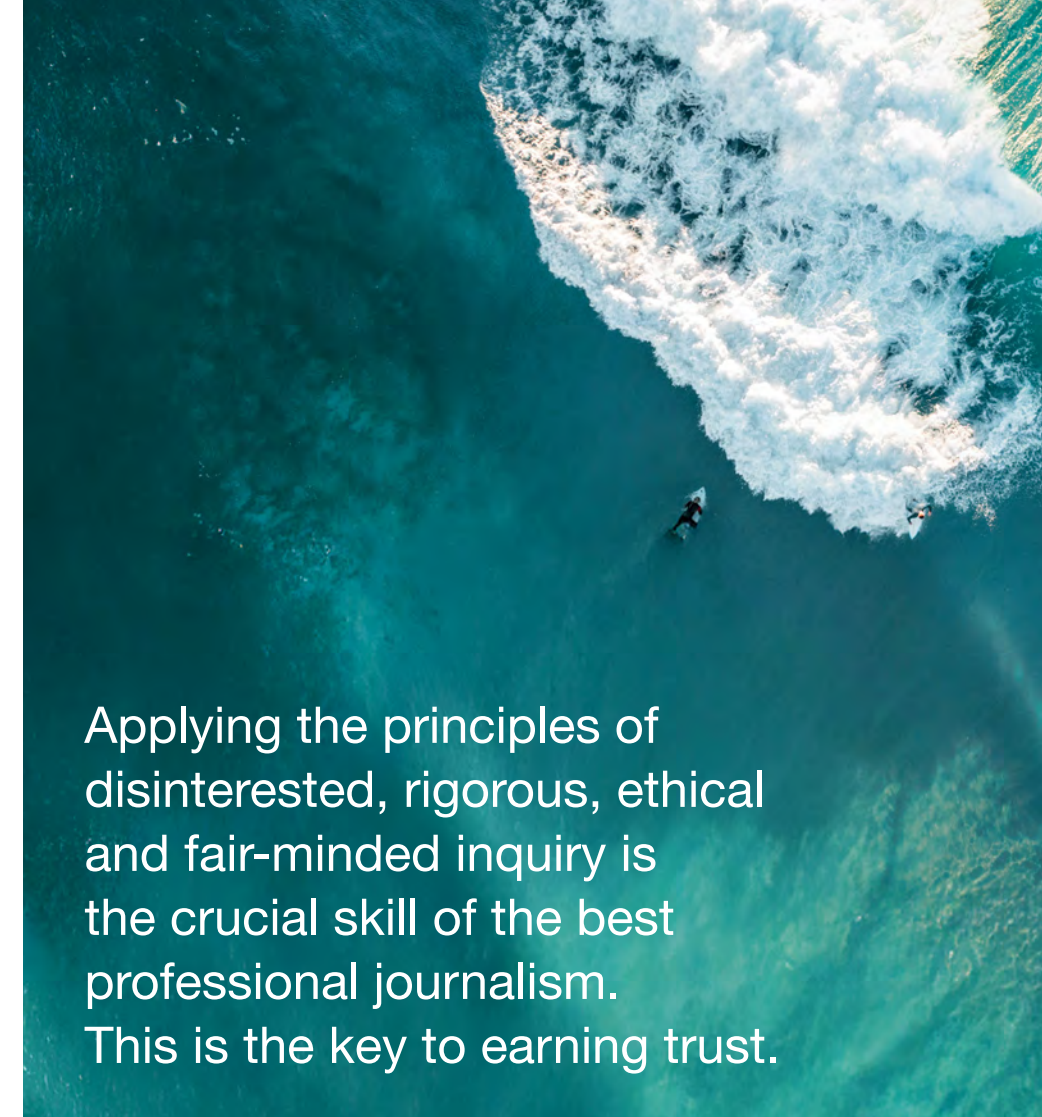
The editorial policies, which sometimes make program makers sigh, provide a thoughtful guide. Most importantly they make the crucial point, that is sometimes lost on critics, that objectivity is a method – a process – not an outcome.

Applying the principles of disinterested, rigorous, ethical and fair-minded inquiry is the crucial skill of the best professional journalism. This is the key to earning trust. It does not mean avoiding conclusions but drawing on the trust that has been earned to present them fully and fairly. It can make life uncomfortable.

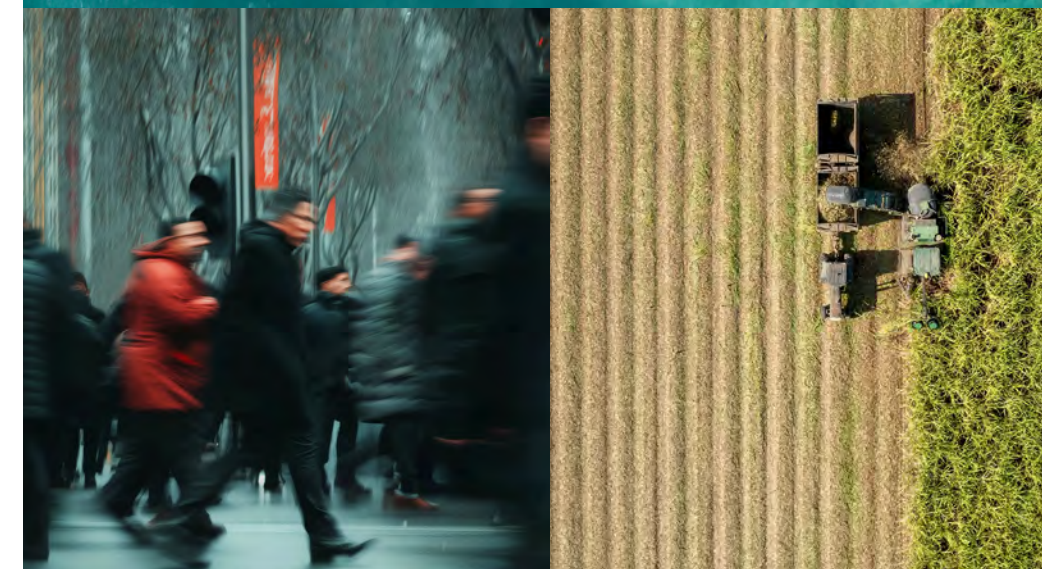
The complexity of the modern world lifts the stakes, and makes the place of a disinterested, commercially and politically independent public broadcaster more important than ever.

If the ABC continues to earn the trust of most Australians it will be well placed to provide the essential guide in an information world polluted by mis and disinformation, fake news and the overwhelming bombardment of attention-seeking noise. ●

Professor Emerita Julianne Schultz AM FAHA FRSN has held various positions at the ABC and served as a member of the board. She is the author of Reviving the Fourth Estate and The Idea of Australia. She writes a fortnightly column for The Guardian.



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The Python defence of the ABC



Professor Peter Greste

It is one of the most enduring lines in British comedy. In the Monty Python movie, *Life of Brian*, a band of would-be revolutionaries angrily catalogue their hatred of Roman rule. Their leader Reg (played by John Cleese) poses a rhetorical question: what, exactly, have the Romans ever done for us?

Awkwardly, his followers respond: Roads? Sanitation? Education? Peace? One by one, the benefits pile up, until the original certainty looks faintly ridiculous.

The question is worth borrowing when debates flare – as they always do – about the value of the ABC. What does Auntie actually do for us? Why should it exist at all in an age of endless content, commercial competition and social media abundance?

Like the Romans in Monty Python's sketch, the ABC's contribution is often so embedded in national life that it becomes invisible, noticed only when it is threatened, diminished, or politicised.

Independence is not an affectation

Start with the most obvious function: news. The ABC remains one of the few institutions in Australia whose core business is producing journalism independent of both commercial and political interests. That independence is not an affectation. It is the product of a statutory charter, editorial standards, and a funding model that – at least in theory – exists

precisely so that journalism does not have to chase advertisers, sponsors, clicks, or partisan approval.

This matters because so much of what democracy requires from journalism is not commercially attractive. Long-form investigations into government failures, forensic scrutiny of policy, coverage of courts, public administration, science, foreign affairs and social policy – these are expensive, slow, and often unpopular. They do not lend themselves to virality or profit. Yet they are the raw material of informed citizenship.

Commercial media, facing the collapse of advertising revenue and relentless cost pressures, has retreated from many of these areas. Newsrooms have shrunk. Specialist beats have disappeared. Regional bureaus have closed. This is not a moral failure so much as a structural one. Markets are good at producing content that people already want; they are far less reliable at producing information citizens need.

The ABC exists to fill that gap.

Programs like *Four Corners*, *7.30*, *Insiders*, *Background Briefing* and *Foreign Correspondent* are not just television or radio shows. They are civic forums.

They create shared reference points for national debate. They put power under sustained scrutiny.

In regional and remote communities, the ABC is often not one news outlet among many, but the only one left standing.

They ask questions that would be difficult to justify on a commercial balance sheet, but are indispensable to democratic accountability.

The same is true beyond metropolitan Australia.

Local radio stations provide reporting that no commercial network can replicate at scale: council meetings, local courts, regional industries, community crises. And as anybody stuck in north Queensland's floods or Victoria's bushfires knows, during times of crisis, the ABC's emergency broadcasting is not a nice extra – it is a crucial public safety service.

The ABC is a cultural necessity

Culturally, too, the ABC performs a function that cannot be reduced to ratings. It supports Australian storytelling, music, comedy, drama and ideas in a media environment otherwise dominated by global platforms and imported content. It gives space to minority voices, Indigenous perspectives, and regional experiences that would struggle to survive in a purely commercial ecosystem.

None of this is to say the ABC is perfect. Like any large institution, it makes mistakes.



It should be criticised, challenged and held accountable. And like the governments it keeps track of, that scrutiny is needed to keep the ABC on its toes. But critique is not the same as erosion. Persistent political attacks, funding cuts, and culture-war skirmishes have a cumulative effect. They narrow ambition. They encourage caution. They risk turning editorial independence into a theoretical principle rather than a lived reality.

There is a reason these pressures matter. Trust. At a time when confidence in media is fragile, the ABC consistently ranks as the most trusted media brand in the country. That trust is not accidental. It is the product of editorial standards, transparency, and a long institutional memory of serving the public rather than shareholders or parties.

Trust, in democratic terms, is not about agreement. It is about legitimacy.

Programs like *Four Corners*, *7.30*, *Insiders*, *Background Briefing* and *Foreign Correspondent* are not just television or radio shows. They are civic forums.



Citizens may argue with what they hear on the ABC, but they largely accept that it is produced in good faith, according to rules that prioritise accuracy over outrage and evidence over ideology.

Which brings us back to the counterfactual.

What would Australia look like without the ABC?

It would be a country dependent on commercial incentives to shape public debate. A country where regional news deserts spread further and faster. A country where investigative journalism became rarer, more fragile, and more easily intimidated. A country where global platforms filled the vacuum – not with our own public-interest reporting, but with algorithmically optimised attention traps.

In such a nation, democratic discussion would not disappear.

But it would become thinner, noisier, more polarised, and less informed. The cost would not be immediately visible on a budget line. It would be paid over time, in reduced accountability, weaker civic culture, and a public less able to see itself reflected honestly and critically.

So, what has the ABC ever done for us?

Like the Romans' roads and aqueducts, much of what it provides only becomes obvious when it is gone. The ABC is not simply a broadcaster. It is part of the country's democratic infrastructure – quietly holding things together, until we forget why it mattered in the first place. ●

Peter Greste is Professor of Journalism at Macquarie University, and the Executive Director of the Alliance for Journalists' Freedom.

State presidents speak: Why I support the ABC

Cathy Bardon

President ABC Friends WA



I grew up in a country town in Queensland. My family listened to ABC radio all the time. To this

day I have ABC radio on every day, at home or in the car. When overseas, we use the ABC Listen app to keep up with the news.

I have lived in Brisbane, Sydney and Perth, and have connections to far north and south-east Queensland and South Australia. I love that the ABC provides news all around the country; I receive newsletters from the Wide Bay and Great Southern bureaux. No other network provides this nation-wide coverage.

I am full of admiration for what the ABC achieves on a budget that has been reducing for decades. I wish that there was more money for investigations, for Australian content, for emergency broadcasting and international broadcasts.

Pam Creed

President, ABC Friends Victoria



I rely upon the ABC to keep me informed and bring me the local and international news. I trust that it's

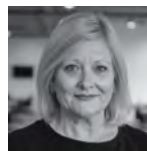
reliable, accurate and balanced and that I will hear a range of opinions. Consumed across the day on my mobile, radio, and screens.

The ABC fearless, in-depth journalism shines a light on issues which otherwise would remain hidden. It shapes our thinking as a nation, can impact governments' policies and actions, and brings us connections to others whose perspectives and realities are different.

The arts, music, Australian drama, comedy, our rich cultural heritage, our unique Australian stories, our informative science shows, political and social discussions, available anytime in podcasts and iView. Radio National, classics and triple j fill my commutes. The investment in children's television, and education, enables our children to see and hear themselves in programs made locally, explore values we share.

Dr Tess Howes

President, ABC Friends NSW & ACT



I support the ABC because it is one of Australia's most trusted democratic institutions. The ABC

keeps us informed, connected and entertained, tells our national stories, holds power to account, and reaches Australians of every age and background — from our children to our elders, from our cities to our regions. The ABC is more than a broadcaster; it is a national asset held in trust for future generations.

The ABC provides a wide range of balanced and thoughtful content that is designed to serve the public rather than advertisers or shareholders.

The ABC Friends network amplifies grassroots activism and brings together powerful, diverse voices to advocate for 'our ABC' – to ensure the ABC remains free from political interference and strong enough to serve the public interest. As President NSW & ACT, I am proud to work alongside passionate volunteers and national leaders who share this commitment.

My wish for the ABC is sustained funding, fearless independence, strong public interest journalism, and continued investment in Australian stories, culture and regional voices – so the ABC can prosper for generations to come.

Roger Joseph

President, ABC Friends Tasmania



The ABC has influenced my whole life, from the serials and Argonauts to more adult programs

as I grew older.

After school I listened to parliamentary broadcasts and used information I had gained in assignments.

Sixteen years ABC employment was an honour; we valued commitment to quality and the independence of the ABC.

Post ABC employment I took pride in the balanced reporting that underpinned Australia's public debate. Facts and balance were critical to the gold standard reputation of the ABC.

Ross McDowell

President, ABC Friends Queensland



I like the ABC because it represents something

increasingly rare in today's media landscape: a commitment to informing, educating and entertaining, without being driven by profit. The ABC's news coverage helps audiences understand not just what is happening, but why it matters. In a world full of misinformation and sensational headlines, its programs tackle complex issues, encouraging viewers to think critically.

The ABC supports Australian culture and storytelling. It showcases local voices and gives Australian creators a platform to share stories that reflect our identity and experiences.

Without the ABC, many of these stories might never reach a wide audience.

The ABC is accessible to everyone. Because it is publicly funded, its content is available free of charge, available to people from all backgrounds. This inclusivity strengthens communities and helps create a more informed society.

Whether I want to learn something new, stay updated on current events, or simply relax with a good program, the ABC delivers.

Peter Vandeleur

President, ABC Friends SA & NT



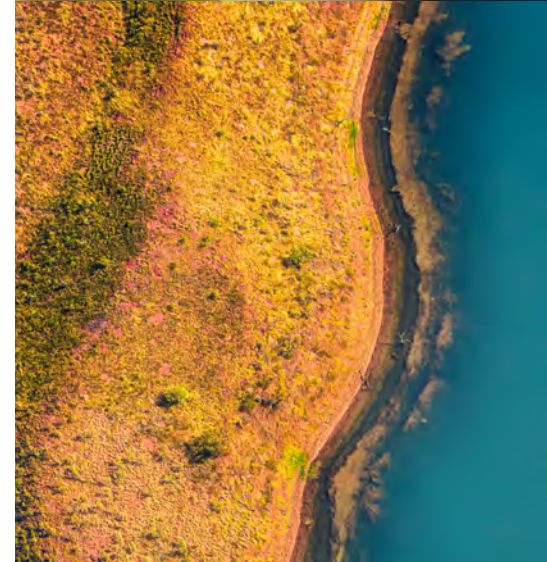
The ABC has been with me all my life. From a very small boy living in a very big

house on a very big farm on the banks of the Lachlan River in Central West NSW the ABC has been with me all the way.

There were no close neighbors, no phone, no TV, no social media, but there was ABC radio (2CR Orange) with The Children's hour, the Argonauts Club and the schools broadcast that we listen to at my one room, one teacher school four miles down the road. The ABC encouraged me to listen and learn and engage with matters outside my immediate environment.

Today I am devoted to their long form interviews, trustworthy news, documentaries, music and quality entertainment. All available anytime and from anywhere.

The ABC is still with me. ●



Intelligence, democracy and public service media. What does the future hold?



Dr Margaret Simons

When Mark Scott started as Managing Director at the ABC in 2006, the audience was already fragmenting across multiple websites and screens. Smartphones soon meant that small screens joined the throng. The family no longer gathered around the television at news time and stayed to watch familiar dramas.

Advertisers pulled back, revenue shrank, and commercial broadcasters, once required to provide certain levels of Australian content, began to replace scripted drama and documentary with reality television. It was so much cheaper.

The ABC under pressure

Through the 1980s and 90s, the ABC suffered successive deep funding cuts. To protect news and current affairs, it sacrificed television drama and documentary. A pitched internal battle raged between those who wanted to outsource most TV production and those who believed significant in-house capacity must be retained. But the truth is, the ABC no longer had the internal capacity to produce these kinds of shows in bulk.

Today, internal ABC production is a shadow of its former self and it has been lost completely in many capital cities west of the dividing range. This is a great vulnerability for our culture.

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In 2006 the ABC presented the national broadcaster as part of everyday life for Australians. But in 2005, only three hours of new Australian drama were screened.

Thanks to extra funding under the Rudd government from 2009, combined with a shift to outsourced production, the ABC gradually rebuilt. By 2011-12, the drama budget was close to \$45 million per annum, supporting almost 70 hours of drama and scripted comedy. Because independent producers could draw on Film Australia funding, tax offsets, and rights sales, the ABC's \$45 million effectively underpinned close to \$100 million in total drama output.

What the ABC does is reflected in almost every area of Australian life. If it stops commissioning drama and documentary, our creatives suffer.

The streaming revolution

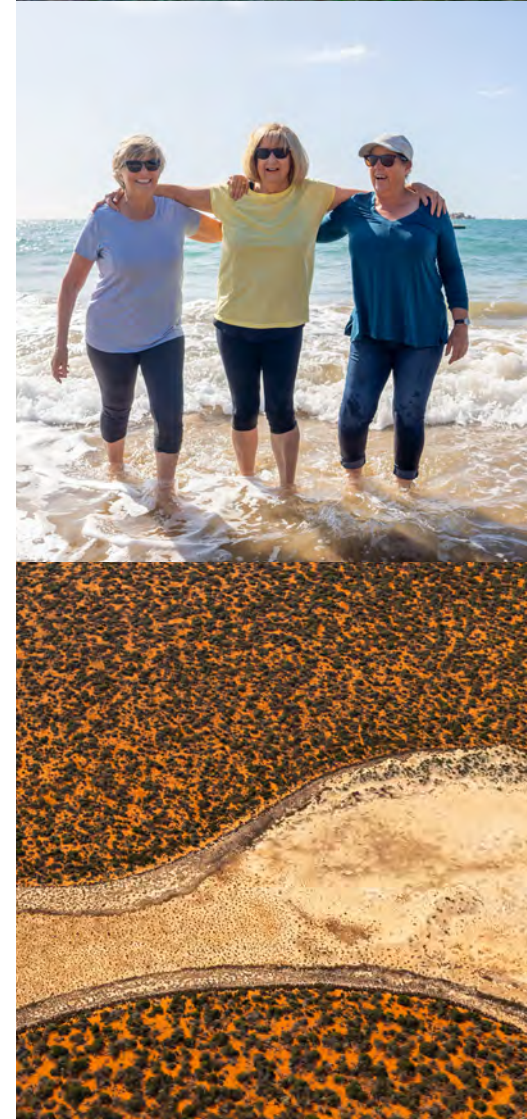
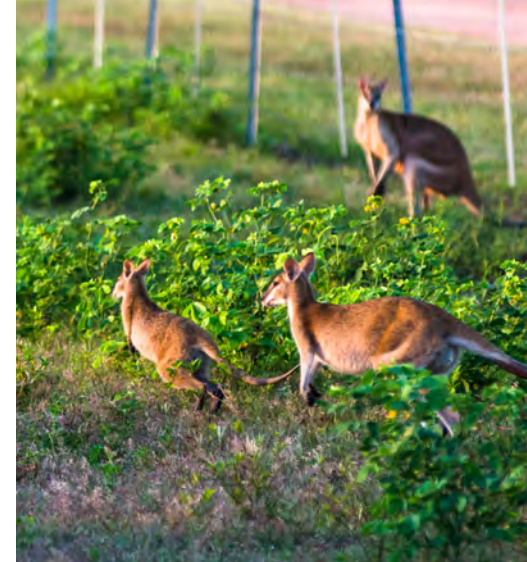
In 2015, Netflix launched in Australia. Within a year it had 2.2 million subscribers, quickly followed by Stan, Prime, Disney and the rest. The ABC, ahead of the pack, had already launched ABC iView on the smell of an oily rag.

Today more than 25.3 million Australians hold streaming subscriptions, and 70% subscribe to more than one service. More Australians now watch subscription video on demand than free-to-air or free video on demand television.

Australian content quotas were progressively watered down and ultimately removed by the Morrison government. The result: commercial television has abandoned Australian drama and documentary. Media commentators now predict commercial TV may have only three years of viable profitability left, and nobody is arguing with them.

Some predict that by 2030, terrestrial television — content delivered over the broadcasting spectrum — could cease altogether. Instead, we will all be streaming on the internet. The television companies aren't contesting that idea. Indeed, many are embracing it.

First, they won't have to pay licence fees if they're not using spectrum. Secondly, the justification for much government regulation, including of standards, disappears if these companies are not licence holders.



Nonetheless, government may still choose to regulate, as the Labor government did by setting Australian content requirements for streaming services in November 2025.

Democracy, culture and identity

Today, Australian content is effectively commissioned by two parties, often working with independent makers: the public broadcasters and the streaming services. Without one or both, most local series and films would not be made. And despite their contributions, the total volume of Australian drama and documentary continues to fall.

Academics worry that the global streamers are not genuinely interested in telling Australian stories. That, because they're playing to an international audience, we will end up with stories that might be produced in Australia but are not specific to Australia. Stories from everywhere and nowhere, that don't engage with Australian social and cultural themes in any meaningful way.

In the democratic ecosystem, artistic expression and explorations of identity are often overlooked, but they are essential.

Democracy is not only casting a vote; it is also the sense of participation and agency in a society. A sense of who we are, and how we relate to our community and nation, depends in part on the stories we tell about ourselves.

What must change

Now is the time to rebuild significant internal production capacity at our public broadcasters. If we want to safeguard our screen culture, our cultural health, our democratic health, we need innovative, fast changing, responsive public broadcasters. Rebuilding meaningful internal capacity at our public broadcasters is urgent.

Mark Scott once described the ABC as a gathering place where Australians understood and came together, heard each other's voices, shared debates, and had cultural experiences in common. It remains the home of Australian conversations and stories.

We need the ABC to have seriousness of purpose. Certainly, it needs to respect its traditions and values but we also need change, imaginative leadership. A broadcaster that is more than a broadcaster, a broadcaster that can meet the challenges of our time. ●

Margaret Simons is an award-winning freelance journalist, author and journalism academic. She is currently writing a history of the ABC, covering the decade 2006-2016 with a second volume to follow.

This is an edited transcript of her presentation at the Rod Wallace annual lecture in Canberra in 2025.

How will we celebrate the ABC's century of public broadcasting in 2032?



Margaret Reynolds

This year ABC Friends marks 50 years of public advocacy and support for Australian public broadcasting. This national advocacy organisation has been actively protecting the ABC from funding neglect since 1976.

Over subsequent years 'Friends of the ABC' groups formed around Australia and now, as the re-named ABC Friends, has a significant national presence lobbying Federal parliamentarians to value public broadcasting and to ensure that the national broadcaster is well funded and able to fulfil its independent role according to its Charter.

From the beginning ABC radio was strongly influenced by the BBC and some of us can remember when ABC newsreaders adopted fake British accents, but fortunately these have now been replaced by a diversity of Australian voices. However, the BBC continues to influence Australian television programming with repeats of crime, drama, and quiz programs we may have enjoyed some years ago.

Official assessments of Australian content fail to convince free to air ABC viewers that locally made content is a top priority for either the government funder or ABC TV programmers. How else can we explain the introduction of a variety of TV quiz shows that reflect little of Australia's history, science, environment, politics, or experience of Australians themselves?

Where is the iconic Australian television series about significant contributions being made to science or the arts?

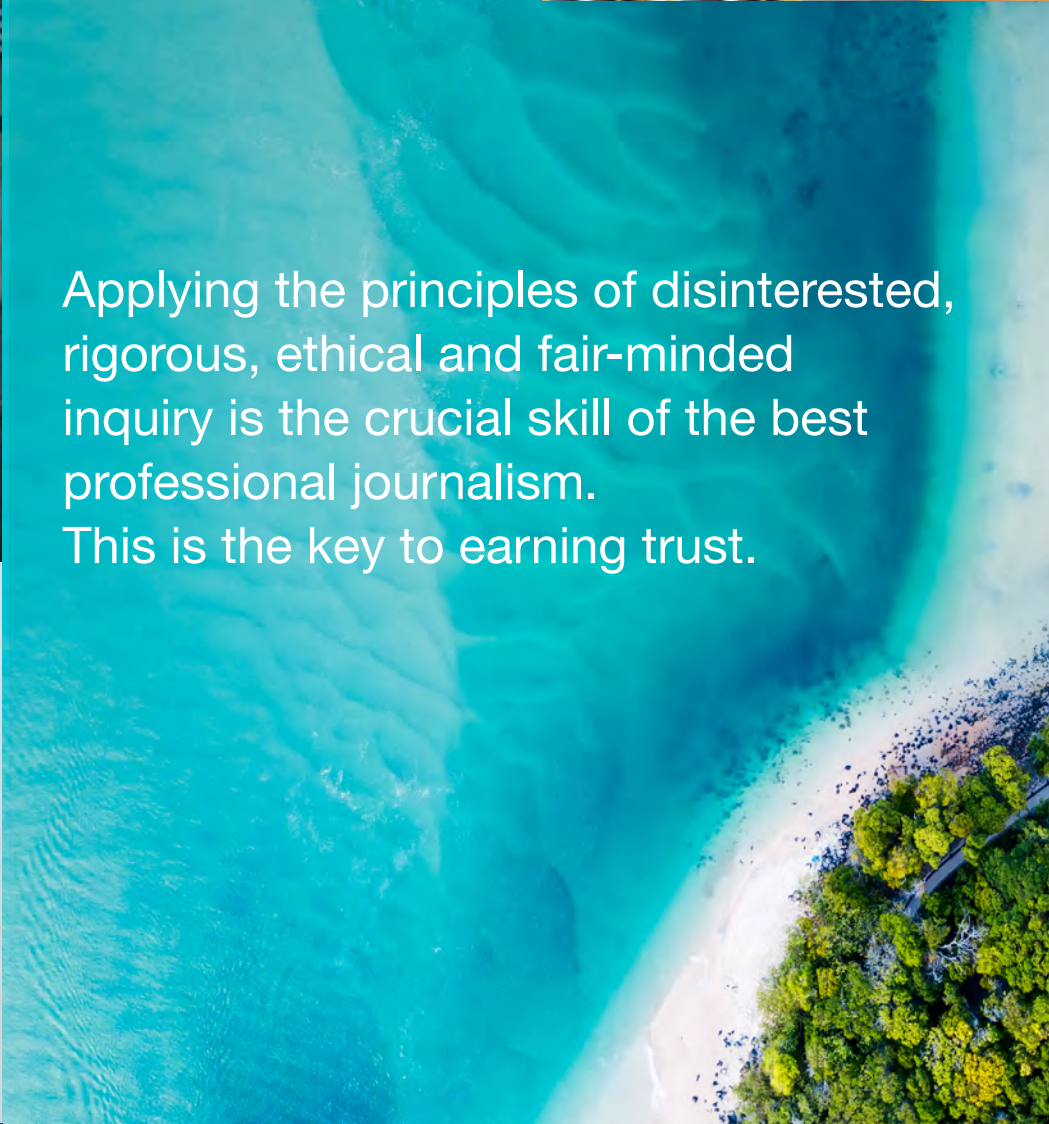
The half hour television news does not adequately report local, national, or international news, partly because it is competing with sport and weather in a limited time frame. It has long been advocated the ABC should provide a state based current affairs program at least four nights week because 7.30 will always be seen as having primarily a Sydney centric view. 'Four Corners' and 'Foreign Correspondent' make a major contribution to Australian current affairs reporting but these two programs cannot cover the many issues impacting Australians.

We cannot celebrate 100 years of Australian broadcasting if the ABC's inadequate funding forces it to rely on outdated content that does not appeal to a majority of Australians.

Our television news service is still dominated by events in the United States and Europe, and we have limited regular reporting from the Southeast Asia and Pacific region on free-to-air television.

These are urgent issues both the Federal Government and the ABC Board must address in the years ahead if Australian made content is to be reflected by our public broadcaster, which must be funded to screen more Australian content in drama, children's programming, and documentaries. We cannot celebrate 100 years of Australian broadcasting if the ABC's inadequate funding forces it to rely on outdated content that does not appeal to a majority of Australians. ●

Margaret Reynolds was the inaugural national president of ABC Friends from 2016 to 2022. She was a Senator for Queensland from 1983 to 1999 and held ministerial office in the Hawke government.



Applying the principles of disinterested, rigorous, ethical and fair-minded inquiry is the crucial skill of the best professional journalism. This is the key to earning trust.

Science is not a white lab coat



Gael Jennings

As we raced along the Great Ocean Road through the reddened night, fleeing the bushfire in the nearby Otways on 9 January, neither the Vic Emergency Services app nor Google could tell us what we needed to know. We turned to ABC state radio 774.

It felt like an eerie déjà vu of the tragic Black Saturday fires of 7 February 2009, when ABC radio colleagues were trapped in the studio for over 48 hours coordinating calls from thousands of panicked listeners, whose eyewitness accounts were ahead of official information as some 400 fires spread and demolished homes — and in some cases, lives. Those calls, and the ABC's capacity to respond and guide, cemented its role as Australia's primary, trusted source of emergency information during bushfires and increasingly common extreme weather events.

Extreme weather is the talk of everyone — but somehow the role of climate change in these catastrophic events isn't. Why? Because climate change has political and financial implications for vested interests. Media has been silenced or diverted, or has actively spread misinformation about this inconvenient truth.

But science is evidence-based. It is comprehensively investigated, peer-reviewed and probed.

You can't make it go away by calling it lies: the unvaccinated are more likely to succumb to disease than the vaccinated; weather systems and ecosystems are now on a trajectory of change that may be cataclysmic.

Science isn't people in white coats in labs. It is the living world around us, and the unfolding of its mysteries.

Science journalism researches, explains, predicts and analyses the science behind massive impacts on our lives, economy, work, wellbeing and future. It is a core responsibility of the media — and most particularly, our ABC. As a public broadcaster, its role is to provide not just independent and accurate news, but evidence-based information and objective analysis to support a healthy democracy.

The ABC's historic lead in science journalism

The ABC has championed science content since the 1960s, when Dr Peter Pockley, a scientist and polymath, founded the ABC Science Unit and set up a range of science programs on Radio National. He hired Robyn Williams, who continues to host The Science Show 50 years later.

Until the 1970s, there was little understanding that scientific research and development (R&D) could generate hundreds of billions of dollars for our economy if commercialised.

It wasn't until the 1980s, when the Hawke government and its Federal Science Minister Dr Barry Jones (1983–1990) introduced a pro-science agenda, that an Australian science renaissance arrived. Together they valued, funded and helped commercialise R&D, turning every research dollar into more than \$3 for the Australian economy.

In 1986, ABC TV introduced its first national science and medical report for News (luckily for me) and its first national environment reporter soon after. The natural history unit in Melbourne churned out documentaries. Quantum ran a wildly popular weekly show on national TV from 1985 to 2001, replaced by Catalyst that year until it was dropped and never properly replaced in 2017. The ABC's first official website, Hot Chips, about computers, went online in 1995.

The decline of science media

Successive Coalition governments from 1996 to 2022 cut ABC funding so severely that by 2022 the corporation faced a \$1.2 billion accumulated funding loss (the Rudd/Gillard interregnum increased ABC funding by only 3%).

Around 2017–18, science content across media began to drop off sharply.

Science isn't people in white coats in labs. It is the living world around us, and the unfolding of its mysteries.

As advertising revenue followed eyeballs from print to the internet, specialist science journalists were cut from newspapers, and ABC science content dipped. Non-news content on ABC TV (including science) dropped by an estimated 40% between 2013/14 and 2022/23.

This drop in specialist science content mirrored a glaring disinterest in science from government. Since 2009, Australia's spending on R&D has declined steadily from 2.5% of GDP to 1.68% (2021–22) – well below the OECD average.

The ABC: a vital foundation of facts and evidence

The good news is that the ABC is currently Australia's number one digital news site, with over 12 million unique users, and has held the top spot for digital live streaming for 21 consecutive surveys at 28.8% share. The Albanese government has also increased ABC funding by a total of over \$350 million since May 2022.

Nonetheless, the ABC's operating budget is \$800 million less than it was in 2013 and ABC funding sits at just 0.13% of the federal budget, compared with 0.65% in 1970–71.

Will there be increased funding for more science and medical content? Despite intensive lobbying, ABC Friends and ABC Alumni have received no guarantee that science content will be boosted.

Meanwhile, AI means Australians are increasingly getting their 'facts' from large language models and algorithms that can produce inaccurate summaries, hallucinations, or out-of-context information, often without links to original sources. Only 9% of Australian politicians making decisions about science funding have a background in science or engineering – which makes informed public debate, and trustworthy science journalism, all the more vital.

As AI overtakes conventional knowledge sources, it is vital that the ABC steps up to provide a trustworthy foundation of facts, evidence and original journalism.

The science of our warming planet, our changing bodies and our evolving technologies will not wait for our institutions to catch up. The ABC must not fall behind. ●

Dr Gael Jennings is a longtime science and medical broadcaster and a member of the ABC Alumni Board.

The ABC benefits all Australians



Bobbie Mackley

How does the ABC benefit all Australians? The ABC is not beholden to follow a 'government line', as is regrettably the case in too many countries. Publicly funded, the ABC is required by law to be 'fair and unbiased'.

Certain sections of society constantly slate the ABC for bias. While at the ABC, I was often responsible for taking phone calls from the public. Following a controversial program, I would receive multiple calls asserting (sometimes rather too vehemently) that the program favoured a particular side of politics – often the side opposite to the previous caller! This is what I call 'the mind of the beholder'. I never stated a view, just thanked them for their interest and advised that I would log their call. In my time, and I'm sure today, call logs were circulated around the ABC – and read!

The ABC has the broadest reach into all parts of Australia of any media outlet – across radio, television and online. It presents local, national and international news; produces drama and documentaries in all formats; has many offerings for children and young people; takes part in community events; holds forums on matters of local and wider interest.

The ABC is Australia's emergency broadcaster. Its broad reach is a lifeline for many when danger threatens. The ABC receives no extra funding for this critical service.

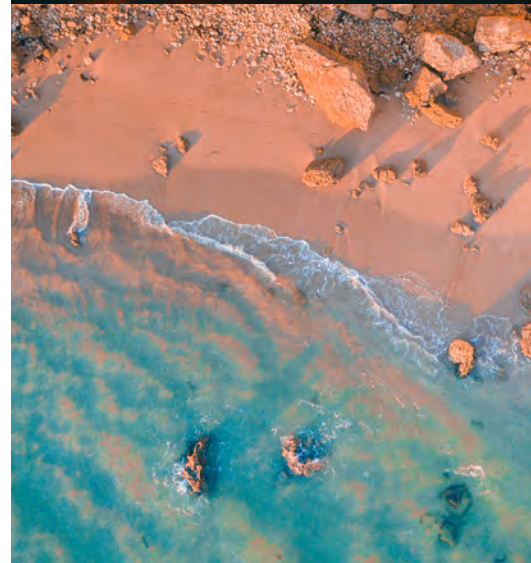
As a staff rep at ABC Perth, I knew most of the people who worked there.

ABC people understand the importance of the organisation they work for, they care about their product and will go the extra mile when necessary.

They often support the ABC in their own time (sometimes on the barricades!).

The ABC had a proud role as a training ground for the next generation of media people, those in front and behind the camera or mic. Young people especially wanted to do work experience at the ABC or become cadets. This may still happen but in Perth, which has become much smaller over the years, the opportunities today are limited. ●

Bobbie Mackley was the inaugural secretary of ABC Friends National. She worked at the ABC in Perth for 30 years. She was a CPSU workplace representative with local and national roles for 20 of those years, and after retirement volunteered a further 10 years to ABC Friends locally and nationally. She is currently the WA Convenor for ABC Alumni.



About ABC Friends

ABC Friends is a not-for-profit, non-partisan, volunteer-based organisation which is active in all states and territories across Australia.

We have been working to uphold and promote the vital role of the ABC as a national public media organisation since 1976.

Our vision is for a fearless independent ABC valued by all Australians and fully supported by government.

With more than 95,000 members and supporters we are active across Australia.

ABC people understand the importance of the organisation they work for, they care about their product and will go the extra mile when necessary. They often support the ABC in their own time (sometimes on the barricades!).

The ABC needs Friends!

Become a member of ABC Friends to support independent public broadcasting.

Consider a donation

As a volunteer not-for-profit charity, ABC Friends receives no funding from government.

Your tax-deductible donation will help us:

- Push back against political and other interference in the ABC
- Build our already-strong movement to amplify support for public broadcasting
- Dramatically increase our presence in noisy, crowded social media spaces
- Make the public case that a strong, independent ABC is central to Australian democracy

Leaving a bequest in your will to ABC Friends

A bequest is a gift that is passed on by means of your will. You can make a bequest of any size, big or small that will be gifted from your estate after you pass away.

Get in touch

ABC Friends Ltd

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ABC Friends are true friends, doing the vital work of campaigning and organising, doing the hard yards to keep the national broadcaster on the national agenda.

Anthony Albanese MP,
Prime Minister

