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It would appear that in these days of absolute parliamentary majorities and their associated hubris we can expect more direct control from the Central Department in Canberra. The ABC is not the only organisation to experience such measures, witness the recent nomination to the Board of Telstra!



Tandberg Talks

There are few cartoonists who pay so much attention to the travails of the ABC than Ron Tandberg. Winner of ten Walkleys, his often acerbic pictures and words say more about the situation to more people than any number of books, lectures or speeches and in this issue we pay him tribute.



These cartoons appeared in *The Age* between 16th June and the 5th July 2006 and they are reproduced with permission.

The Jonestown Saga

Glenys Stradijot

Was the ABC's reason for pulling *Jonestown*, the unauthorised biography on the influential radio presenter Alan Jones, political or commercial? Was it the result of an ABC Board stacked with appointees who share the political interests of the incumbent government, or a board dominated by people with a narrow business outlook?

And does it matter? If we accept the ABC's official line that it was a business decision and not censorship, is the damage to the ABC's integrity any less?

The ABC initially sought to have its commercial division take responsibility for the decision not to publish. On June 29, ABC Enterprises issued a media release that said, "ABC Enterprises has decided not to proceed with publication of the book ... on purely commercial grounds".

But public suspicion grew when, shortly after, it became known the ABC Board had met only hours prior to Enterprises' public pronouncement.

Five days on from the June 29 Board meeting, amid widespread allegations and claims of political interference, the ABC finally acknowledged the Board's involvement.

In claiming the book was not viable because of a real possibility that legal costs would result in the ABC incurring a significant financial loss, in a letter to staff on July 4, Murray Green, then acting managing director, made reference to the "Jones project" having been "appraised by the Board".

By July 7 Mark Scott had taken over as the ABC's new managing director. In answer to a question on 702ABC Sydney radio as to whether he had been consulted on the decision to drop *Jonestown*, Scott answered: "No, that decision was made by the Board and the management team prior to my arrival".

We now know the Board's decision was made in haste and despite legal advice that any defamation action would be defensible. It was also contrary to the recommendation ABC Enterprises put to the Board.

The decision not to publish came four years after Chris Masters – one of the ABC's and Australia's most esteemed investigative journalists – had been commissioned by the ABC to write the book. The ABC had already spent more than \$100,000 on *Jonestown*. Its final manuscript had been completed. Even its cover had been designed.

In the process of writing, *Jonestown* had been meticulously scrutinised by experienced defamation lawyers. It would have been considered par-for-the-course from the outset that Jones would threaten legal action. And so it came, a pre-emptive threat, without Jones or his lawyers even having read the manuscript.

The ABC Board's decision not to publish *Jonestown* undermines the ABC and the public trust in the broadcaster. A decision not to proceed on commercial grounds is as damaging as political interference. It sends a message that the public cannot rely on the ABC to be fearlessly independent on important public matters. It tells us the national broadcaster can be compromised by commercial considerations and there are occasions it will capitulate to threats from powerful forces.

The ABC has attempted to allay staff and community fears the ABC is willing to abandon rigorous and independent journalism when commercially expedient. In his July 7 interview on ABC Radio, Mark Scott

indicated there is a distinction between the ABC's core business and activities that exist solely to make money. Apparently *Jonestown* falls into the latter category.

Mark Scott's blunt revelation that profit is the overriding determinant in its commercial activities was news to Friends of the ABC. It contrasts starkly with past assurances given to FABC that the ABC's involvement in commercial activities would occur in a manner that "ensures that the public perception of its value and quality is maintained" so as "not

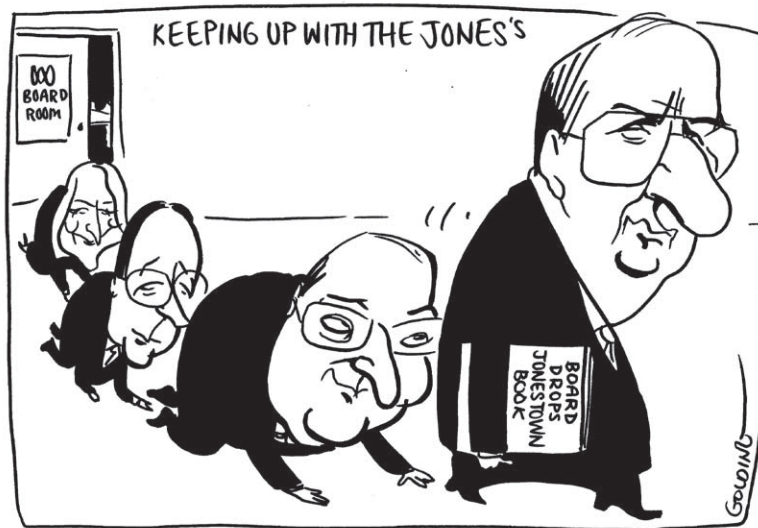
to compromise the actual or perceived independence of the ABC".

A serious problem with the ABC's newly-stated approach – one of many that arises if a public broadcaster engages in commercial activities – is that the public doesn't readily distinguish between ABC operations in which stringent standards of editorial integrity will apply, and others where profit is the guiding motivation.

And how could they?

The ABC's commercial activities are usually connected to ABC programs. *Jonestown*, which grew from an ABC *Four Corners* program, is just one example.

The commercial operations of the ABC trade on their association with the non-commercial ABC. Whether the ABC sells directly or through the licensing of external



Cartoon originally published in *The Big Issue*.

The ABC's Media Watch program revealed that a letter from ABC Enterprises to the June ABC Board meeting recommended publication of the book despite threats of defamation proceedings by Jones. The initial judgement of Enterprises, that *Jonestown* is financially viable, was confirmed by the flurry of commercial publishers keen to take over its publication after the ABC's decision to axe it.

The public may never know the full truth. The Board, which heads the country's most significant information and cultural institution, operates like a secret society. Even Board decisions that go to the very nature of the type of public broadcaster the ABC will become are not made public. And internal scrutiny has gone with the Government's recent abolition of the staff-elected director position.

commercial parties, ABC identification, in some form or other, is attached to its products. The 'branding' connects the ABC to products and those products to the ABC – even products which have dubious or even no relevance to the ABC at all. It is there to indicate to consumers the product carries the credibility of the ABC.

Widespread outrage at the *Jonestown* saga, including from informed members of the media, frequently revealed that the community fails to distinguish or is largely unaware that differing standards of editorial integrity apply to the broadcaster's commercial activities.

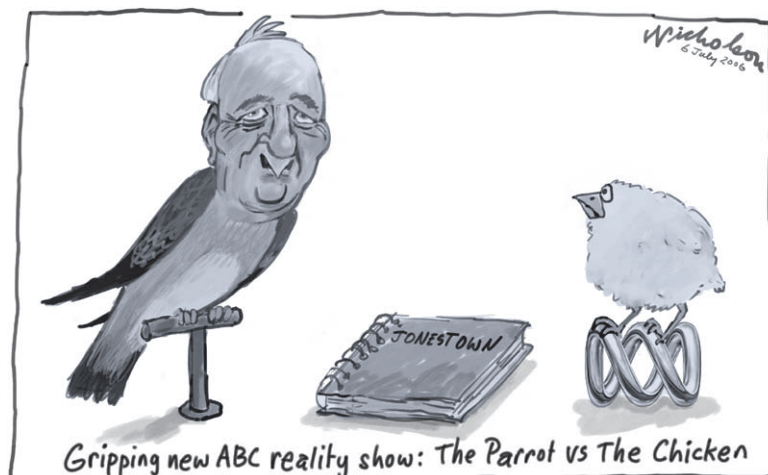
Commercial and non-commercial activities of the ABC become further entwined as the broadcaster uses its radio, television and online services to advertise some of its commercial ventures. And the line between them is even more blurred if you accept the ABC's claims that this is not advertising, but instead, the legitimate promotion of ABC activities – semantics which the ABC engages in to circumvent the ABC Act's prohibition of advertising.

The ABC can't have it both ways. Just as its commercial activities are trading on the good reputation of the ABC, so they risk damaging the credibility of the ABC as a trusted independent Australian institution. And if that were to occur, it would kill the goose that lays the commercial golden eggs.

If the ABC is to engage in commercial activities, then they should be relevant to the broad interest areas outlined in its Charter, and they should enhance or complement its broadcasting activities – as indeed the publication of *Jonestown* would have done. In all of its activities, the same rigorous editorial standards must apply.

If the ABC cannot conduct its commercial activities on those terms, then it shouldn't engage in them at all. It is inappropriate for the ABC to be exploiting the public trust the broadcaster has earned over 70 years of providing quality programming that is independent of political and commercial influence. It should get back to the job of being a public broadcaster that produces programs of excellence and treats the community as citizens, not a business that seeks to exploit them as consumers.

Cartoon originally published in *The Australian* on 6 July, 2006



A Slippery Slope Damian O'Keefe

Many a fervent footy fan went close to choking on his or her Weeties recently when the AFL (Australian Football League) announced it wanted \$1m for the 2007 radio rights for the broadcast of AFL games. In late July, the AFL announced its intention to restructure its weekend broadcast packages, offering an "A-class package" (unofficially costing at \$1m) to the highest bidding commercial station (ie. 3AW, Triple M or SEN). The A-class package would include the first choice games: Friday night, and the best Saturday and Sunday game. The ABC, unable to meet this 500% fee increase, would be relegated to covering the inferior and less consequential games. According to ABC national sport chief, Peter Longman, the \$1m was "a bit out of our league".

If the AFL were to proceed, the national broadcaster would be marginalised in the broadcast of Australia's only indigenous national sport, depriving hundreds of thousands of devout listeners throughout the nation and overseas. ABC Radio is the only network that provides a truly national broadcast of the footy. It is also recognised by many as the only network that provides an intelligent and analytical coverage of the game. More and more the commercial stations' coverage declines into a blokey, sexist, hysterical and self-indulgent treatment of the sport, favouring puerile entertainment over accurate description and well-researched commentary.

The following Saturday, ABC Radio appealed to its listeners to SMS their location to highlight the geographical spread of its audience. Thousands of messages were received from all corners of the globe, and the remotest parts of Australia.

ABC management has since held discussions with the AFL which, in recognition of the "unique value" of the ABC's role, appears to have assured it of a reasonable share of the action. This episode highlights the vulnerability of the cash-strapped ABC and the importance of its role in promoting a healthy sporting culture and national identity, in a world increasingly subject to crass commercialism and globalisation. Should the AFL succumb to short-sighted commercial temptation and treat the ABC and its listeners as second-class football citizens, it will be not only football that will suffer. If you support a continuation of quality national broadcasting of the best AFL games, write immediately to Andrew Demetriou, AFL, GPO Box 5275, Melbourne 3001.

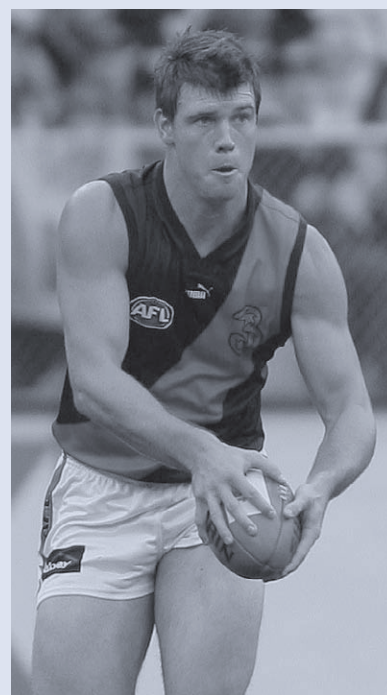


Photo courtesy Michael Willson

ABC Science – A Very Short History

Robyn Williams

It wasn't planned. I still don't quite know how it happened. Like the range of talent in the first Hawke ministry or the Welsh rugby team in the 1970s, ABC Science has a variety and depth no one seems to have registered.

I don't mean just the four obvious teams:

1. in radio (the oldest), 2. TV (*Catalyst*), 3. *Natural History* (based in Melbourne) and 4. on-line (*The Lab*, *Health*) – they are substantial enough and outrank those in nearly every country in the world with the possible exception of the Brits. No, look further. There's Adam Spencer on metros, Sophie Scott, Noni Walsh and Sarah Clarke on news, Dr Karl nearly everywhere and the wide-ranging coverage on *News Radio* and shows like *Four Corners* where Jonathan Holmes and Ticky Fullerton continue to score prizes.

And no one ever seems to be in conflict, despite the occasional overlap. It is really collegial. Adam Spencer pops up on *The Science Show* (talking about maths), I do a frolic over at *Natural History* and Norman Swan has his minutes on *News Radio*. Easy! If you listen across the networks and seek out what's on ABC TV (including Channel 2 – I am preparing a series of science interviews especially for that station) we do have an impressive scientific presence on the national broadcaster.

How did this happen? I believe there are two explanations.

First, the ABC has a comprehensive range of services for young and old, town and country. It is possible for most decent broadcasters to flourish somewhere in the panoply, getting the experience they need.

Secondly, most of us were given jobs at a time when the ABC had something like an open door policy for talent. I was recruited in the Jurassic (1972); Norman Swan ten years later; Dione Gilmour (Executive Producer of *Natural History*) arrived way back in the '70s and Dr Karl not much later than that.

In the main we were allowed to get on with our work, experiment and take on bright youngsters and teach them a few tricks. Only now and then were we subjected to the turbulence that rocked our colleagues in say drama or current affairs, such as when *QUANTUM* was killed off in the dark days of Shier.

This is not a vague and improvised policy but reflects the way science, itself a creative enterprise, works best. As Bill Gates said about his own approach to staffing: "hire the best people you can find and let them do what they want".

We don't exactly do what we want but we are much more free and unpredictable than some of our broadcasting cousins in North America and Europe.



Lucky old us, you might say, and some of us would agree. It is immensely gratifying to be able to talk to the best minds on earth about massively important topics. It also helps to find that our audiences rate science and technology very highly indeed. But there is an underlying philosophy to what we do. Our activities are not reactive or even random.

There are five good reasons to communicate science and to try to do it well and in depth:

1. Science is the basis for the creation of wealth. This is the reason polities notice first.
2. It is impossible to run a democracy unless citizens have some kind of scientific culture. Try having a debate about climate, energy, stem cells or most jobs without referring to science.
3. Science is fun. Your body, your animals, your surroundings are intensely interesting.
4. Science is needed for quarantine. Every new drug, new gadget, IT system or exotic disease needs to be assessed before reaching our shores. We, not just the experts, must know what we're in for from abroad or should try to keep out.
5. Science tells us who we are. Prejudice may claim women are daft, blacks inferior, men descended from gods. Science shows otherwise.

These reasons are a profound remit. Science may be relegated to the "And finally..." afterthought in the current affairs program (following the hundredth tortuous dissection of the leadership succession) but its place in every Australian's destiny is unarguable.

Without wanting to appear pompous, I'd even go as far to say that the ABC, as a public broadcaster has a duty to report science in a thoroughgoing manner. It can be lighthearted at times, even cheeky, in doing so, but there does need to be a critical mass. That is why we have so many programs on offer.

On Radio National there is *All In the Mind* (Brain stuff), *The Health Report* (Medicine), *The Philosopher's Zone* (Knowledge), *Ockham's Razor* (Ideas), *The Science Show* (Everything) and *In Conversation* (Dialogue) as well as coverage on *Background Briefing*, *PM* and *Life Matters*.

ABC TV has *Catalyst* plus the promise of many documentaries. One such, the story of the mysterious deaths of Dr Bogle and Mrs Chandler, was produced by independent Peter Butt (with whom I have combined on series about battleships and airships) and scored a massive 1.8 million viewers when broadcast in September. *ABC Natural History* has been an icon for decades and is famous all over the world.

Our online outfit has been in business for nearly nine years and has broken records. The service expands all the time and gets wonderful feedback from the public.

What next? No one is sure. Most are nervous. Our ranks are not replete with successors and I often wonder what will happen when a few of the more 'mature' of us disappear. It is time someone thought seriously about this. Do we want programs to vanish when those who nurture them go – as *Earthbeat* did when Alexandra de Blas left the ABC?

Meanwhile it is interesting to note, as one wry outsider did, on the winners of the three Eureka Prizes for science journalism in August. They all work at a single building in Sydney: the *ABC HQ* in Ultimo: Morag Ramsey and her team at *4 CNRS*; Jonica Newby and Chris Spurr of *CATALYST*; and Alex Barratt of Radio National's *HEALTH REPORT*. Says it all.

SBS Ads

More than just a nuisance – Glenys Stradijot

SBS has announced its plans to interrupt its programs with ads next year.

Commercials will even be inserted into news and current affairs programs.

The downside for audiences is not simply the disruption of programs with ads.

What is happening to SBS is a salutary lesson for any tempted to think the ABC could engage in sponsorship or any sort of 'controlled' advertising to address its monetary woes.

SBS's decision did not come out of the blue. SBS moved from a situation of a small amount of advertising initially flowing to the broadcaster to reach its small niche market, to SBS needing to distort its programming to attract more advertising. As some former SBS staff members have explained, SBS now wants to put ads in the places for which they were designed: in the middle of programs, most of which have themselves been designed to accommodate ads.

Once SBS took on advertising in 1992, it was inevitable the broadcaster would move to placing ads in programming. After crossing the threshold from independence to accepting commercial revenue, there was little reason why SBS should not travel further down the commercial track, and every reason why it needed to do so now the government had been let off the hook for its responsibility to adequately fund the broadcaster.

SBS argues its programming will be improved as the result of the increased revenue it can secure by breaking programs with ads. They've said that before, most recently in defence of their Ashes broadcast, but little good appears to have come from that 'boys' own' adventure. There's little on SBS at the moment that one could say was worth the massive charter betrayal that the Ashes broadcast entailed.

There is, on the other hand, more compelling evidence that advertising has had a long-term, negative effect on programming. The culture of SBS's ad sales and marketing people has always involved attempts to persuade buyers that SBS is 'cool' and not just for ethnics any more, and helpful hints to programmers to the effect that 'Hitler doesn't sell ads' and 'subtitles are a turn-off'. Two obscene examples of this were the idea that SBS run a business program produced by *The*

Australian Financial Review as a means of securing heaps of advertising revenue, at the expense of editorial integrity, and the outrageous suggestion that the voice of the head of radio, Quang Luu, be replaced by a more Aussie-sounding twang in a promotional video designed to attract more ads.

Then there's the 9.30pm weekday News bulletin. Before that came along, there was often a nice 'flow' for the audience from the 8.30 documentary to the 9.30 movie. The insertion of the bulletin interrupted the flow and also discouraged viewers from watching a movie that would demand their attention until nearly midnight.

So there was a dramatic reduction in the number of movie viewers. When the television division conducted a review of the schedule in early 2003, the scrapping of the 9.30 News bulletin was raised as an option. The idea lasted as long as it took for the ad sales-people to calculate the potential reduction in revenue that would attend the elimination of one nightly ad break (at 10pm) from the all-important A-zone rate card. So the movies continued to languish at the 10pm starting time, until a combination of the 'subtitles are a turn-off' mantra and the 'movies don't rate anymore' rationalisation saw them pushed even further back on many nights, to be replaced by more 'cool' (read English) programming efforts.

It's interesting to speculate what the proposed one-hour news bulletin will do to the schedule. It will, presumably, absorb the low-rating and expensive nightly sports program and include a beefed-up business coverage designed to attract more corporate advertising. And the price of the ads within that hour will be at a premium, because they'll be better targeted than ever before.

With this increase in nightly news output, it's hard to imagine the retention of the 9.30 News bulletin. If it does stay, it will only be for revenue reasons. Whatever happens, it will be money – not quality, variety, culture or charter – that is the determining factor.

1999 research by McKinsey and Co. on public broadcasters around the world found that those with advertising tended to mimic the more populist and less

distinctive programming of commercial broadcasters. The community would be foolhardy to ignore these findings and the SBS experience, which has been the commercialisation of a great public broadcaster by degrees.

This article includes information provided by former SBS staff.

PS – The concept of SBS as a broadcaster with a responsibility to reflect and serve Australia's multicultural society, and its past existence as a vibrant ad-free alternative is too important to lose. So don't give up on it. Jump up and down. Let the Government and SBS know that you want it properly funded by government, with no ads!

Limelight goes to former British political tsar

Jane Nethercote writes in *Crikey.com.au*

Another day, another surprising ABC development. *Limelight* magazine, the ABC's listening and viewing guide whose future was placed in jeopardy recently when its publisher iMedia Asia Pacific went into administration, has been taken over by Haymarket Publishing, owned by former Conservative Deputy Prime Minister Lord Michael Heseltine. The deal was sealed on July 4.

In Britain, Haymarket produces a vast range of titles, including magazines for the BBC, as well as iconic music mag, *The Gramophone*. The company is quite a natural fit for the ABC, and the new relationship should provide plenty of opportunities for cost-saving copy sharing arrangements.

Apparently Haymarket proved its mettle by helping the ABC to publish an edition of *Limelight* after iMedia had gone to ground and the grateful head of ABC Enterprises, Robyn Watts, was instrumental in negotiating the new deal.

It's understood that *Haymarket* had been looking for an in with the ABC. Now they've found one.

Margaret talks to Mark John Collins

Mark chose the music and Margaret asked the questions

ABC Classic FM: Monday, 7th August

Margaret Throsby was at her questioning best as she welcomed newly appointed MD Mark Scott to the microphone.

After Jenkins' *Adiemus* Mark described his newfound job as "one of the best in the country" and that "he was a good fit" for a number of reasons. He had the management skills to lead a large organisation, had worked within the culture of news and current affairs and, as a journalist, was comfortable being close to creative and dynamic people and in what is inevitably a political environment.

Margaret warmed to the fact that as Mark eulogised about the ABC being an important and most loved institution he made a strong mention of the national radio network. But she soon spoke of the current perception abroad about left-wing bias. He replied that bias depends on perspective and it is the job of the ABC to be honest, straightforward, fair and objective, and that it does its job well.

"You were a happy ABC consumer in the past. Did you then have coherent thoughts about the role of public broadcasting?" asked Margaret. Scott replied, "I had given some thought beforehand and there is a great distinction between commercial media, whose sole objective is to make money and give a healthy return to shareholders ... whereas the ABC is there to provide a service, not to make money. It has to entertain and to inform, to fulfil its charter – and only a public broadcaster can do that."

But Margaret continued to talk money. "I know advertising is a tricky one, but is it never ever or maybe one day?"

"There is no commercial imperative. There are no active plans. The ferocity of public response would be great and there is no need to do it."

Margaret added, "Are you happy with the status quo?"

"The ABC belongs to the people. The evidence is overwhelmingly against advertising. I'm relaxed and comfortable with the present."

"You sound like the Prime Minister!"

"I'm sorry but there is no argument for change."

"But", continued Margaret, "what if funding went down? It has really gone down in real staff numbers and in 1975 there were 7269; in 2006 only 5024."

Scott's reply was to quote the success of ABC Enterprises which brings in \$20m per annum and promotes the ABC 'brand'. He thought that aspect of the ABC was a long way from advertising but, even though the last budget had been 'good', technological change would inevitably mean the need for more funding. That was a good break for music, John Lord's *November Calls*.

Margaret still wasn't satisfied. After first asking whether there was anything about the Charter that Scott would change she swung back to advertising – this time on the Internet. She said, "the uptake is huge. Is this form of advertising different?" To which Scott replied very quickly, "Yes".

But the business of funding remained to the fore and Margaret acknowledged that it was a vexed question. "You are one of a long line of people who have had to argue with Government for more funds. What is your main argument?"

"First, the last budget was the best result in 20 years and a great place for me to start. The ABC offers a unique service and costs of delivery associated with technological change are likely to be huge. The ABC has to be able to play in digital space."

"All right," said Margaret, "but what about content? Last year only 20 hours of drama. That's appalling!"

A silence, then the riposte.

"We have to develop new models, joint ventures..."

"What about SBS?"

"SBS has become more mainstream than before and has used advertising. It now has higher cost programming especially including major events. ABC will be able to increase its drama output but we shall always want more as we evaluate change."

Margaret reminded Mark that he had been on Dr Terry Metherell's staff as an advisor and queried if he had ever been interested in politics. "Not me", was the answer, "I was never a factional player and never into

personal deals. I quite like the US system for pre-selection. In Australia it can be a dirty business."

"Why Liberal staff rather than Labor?" Margaret asked.

"A good question. I have always seen the principles of economic responsibility as the passport to change, but I have a total belief in the public education system that is well equipped to deal with competition and thus give parents the maximum of choice."

After Bono's *The Hands that built America*, Margaret concluded with a series of further personal questions.

"Was the timing of the job right for you?"

"Yes, it was a good time. I had been happy at Fairfax and wasn't on the hunt but an expression of interest from WA had got me thinking."

"What would you say were your strengths?"

"I'm good with people; good at providing leadership after I have listened & learned."

Are you an emphatic decision maker?"

"No, I'm far from impetuous and I do rely on advice from a number of people."

"What about weaknesses?"

"The vastness of the ABC operation is a challenge. I get on well with staff but I've never devoured P and L's and Balance Sheets as many do. I'd prefer broader strategies. I'm a manager rather than an administrator."

"How important is your Christian faith?"

"It is very important and I respect it in other people. It gives me a sense of purpose and responsibility."

"Do you want to do good things?"

"I admire faith in genuine action – people helping other people. I hope that using the skills I've been given will be for the good of the ABC."

Margaret's farewell comment as *The Dawn Mantras of Ross Edwards* grew in volume was to wish Mark Scott "Good Luck at Senate Estimates!"



Countdown to Commercialisation

Extract from address by Quentin Dempster, ABC staff-elected director (in exile), to the Communications and Media Law Association seminar in Sydney on 2 August.

I want to speak briefly about the latest initiative of the ABC Board to establish a third party website called *Countdown.com.au*. ABC television's *Media Watch* program reported last Monday that the website took advertising. In a letter to *Media Watch* our new managing director Mark Scott said the *Countdown* website was a wholly owned ABC site set up by ABC Enterprises to develop new business revenue streams through product and content sales, merchandising, downloading ... and advertising. Mr Scott seemed to imply that an ABC website taking advertising was not unprecedented as ABC-published magazines like *ABC Cricket* or *Delicious* or *Gardening Australia* had all taken advertising.

There is a difference, I believe. In the digital revolution broadcasting is morphing into cybercasting. I note on the ABC's *Countdown* website there's video streaming, blooper video clips, rare behind-the-scenes video footage that a *Countdown* Club member can click per view.

I think it is time for the ABC Board to table the legal advice on which it relies for its approval of cybercast advertising. My obvious fear is that the ABC Board is only one small step away from making a disastrous decision to allow advertising on the mainstream ABC website - one of the most trusted and most used in the country.

The ABC Act Section 31 (1) says:
"The Corporation shall not broadcast or televise advertisements".

That is the black letter spirit and intent of the ABC Act. I know it was written before the internet was invented but the Act and the Charter sets out quite clearly the ABC's public purpose. *Countdown.com* is the thin edge of the wedge for ABC broadband/cybercast advertising. It trades off the one piece of integrity we have ... the ABC's perceived non-commercial character.

It involves a substantial commitment of resources and financial risk and a large amount of public angst ... and for what?

Pin money.

The financial returns will never and can never be realised because the stated

desire of government is to lessen the drain of the ABC on the public purse. Hence any profits gained will be matched over time by a lessening of the operational base funding appropriation. It's a zero sum game. A no brainer.

As well it will unnecessarily aggravate all commercial players trying to establish their own products and advertising revenues on broadband websites. A taxpayer-subsidised outfit like the ABC has an unfair competitive advantage.

Since the early 80s the ABC has been under continual pressure to maximise revenues from commercial sources. ABC Enterprises could not exist as a stand-alone venture. It would have full copyright clearance, payroll tax and fully commercial business costs for its staff, products and services. It has existed as a value-adding vehicle for the taxpayer investment on the core operation of broadcasting. But as the core has been hollowed out by defunding, ABC Enterprises has itself commissioned programs (like cooking shows) on the basis of their own product spin-off - books, videos, DVDs - with the Board's approval.

If the central public purpose of the ABC does not hold, if the centre continues to be hollowed out, the ABC will fly apart. That is what the ABC is risking under the McDonald Board.

Had I made it onto the Board this year I would have moved for the full transparency of all the ABC's content rights and licensing arrangements and deals like *Countdown.com*. If it is fair enough for John Laws and Alan Jones to have to declare their commercial partnerships and contracts, it should be fair enough for the ABC. The taxpayers are funding this outfit. They have a right to know how their public purpose investment is being exploited and being put at risk of commercialised influence.

Quentin Dempster, an ABC broadcaster, was declared staff-elected director of the ABC by the Australian Electoral Commission in May, but the position was abolished by the Federal Government in June.

Mark Scott's letter to *Media Watch* revealed that ABC Enterprises has plans to set up further websites outside the ABC.

And there 's more . . . In *The Age* (16 Aug), Daniel Ziffer reported a commercial arrangement the ABC has with a company to screen ABC-created updates in news, business, sport and weather in shopping centres across Australia.

Sounds good, you think - getting the ABC out to the community. But, as Ziffer found, there is more to it.

The advertising company involved uses ABC content to sell products. A twelve minute loop is screened five times an hour, a mash of four one-minute-long ABC updates, two minutes of commercial content - typically a movie review - and six minutes of advertising.

The ABC news theme first captures public attention in the noise and visually polluted atmosphere of shopping centre food courts. As the company director Jonathan Papworth explained to Ziffer, "When you hear the classic ABC News trumpets you turn to hear the news", with the ABC content the hook to keep people interested.

Spliced between the short snippets of ABC News - or is it the other way around? - are commercials for makeup, junk food, mobile phones, credit cards, deodorant and more.

So much for our trusted ABC news!

— G.S.

FABC AGM & Speaker

Friday 17 November
Iwaki Auditorium, ABC Southbank

Meeting 6.45 for 7pm

Speaker 8pm:
Historian Ken Inglis,
author of *Whose ABC?*
The ABC 1983–2006

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POSTAGE
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AUSTRALIA

SURFACE
MAIL

Cross Media Legislation Glenys Stradijot



Originally published in *The Age* on 21 September 2006

At the time of writing, the Government is pushing ahead with major legislation dealing with an extensive range of media matters, including the lifting of Australia's cross-media ownership restrictions.

Cross-media ownership rules were introduced by a Labor Government in the 1980s to protect what little media diversity Australia had left. These rules prevent a single owner controlling the most influential forms of commercial media – the daily press and free-to-air television and radio – in the same area.

Without diversity of media ownership there is less diversity of content and viewpoint available to the community. There is less likelihood that public life will be reported in a fair and open manner and major media

owners will have the capacity to greatly influence elected governments.

The removal of cross-media laws will open the way for Murdoch's News Ltd to buy a free-to-air television station and Packer's PBL to acquire Fairfax (*The Age*, *Sydney Morning Herald* and *Australian Financial Review*). It will result

in a further loss of local programming in regional areas. It is not difficult to predict what might be the long-term future for the ABC if already powerful media owners gain even greater influence.

The Government is acting with obscene haste. A Senate inquiry, the only opportunity for meaningful public comment after the Government has spent over a year negotiating with the media moguls, has turned into a sham. The Senate Committee considering the matter was forced to cram more than 30 witnesses into just two days of hearings, with Opposition Senators being restricted to just ten minutes of questions for each witness.

Much will depend on how National Party Senators vote in the Senate.

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