

News+Views

Issue 33 / Winter 2010

Danger in public-commercial media pacts

Four Corners collaboration with the commercial media

> Details pages 2



ABC Self-censors

The ABC's obsession with balance and the documentary it banned

> Details page 3



Travelling Exhibition on the ABC

The ABC through the eyes of different Australians

> Details page 4



A message from the President

Friends of the ABC needs friends

Many of you have been very good friends for a very long time. I and all of us who dearly value Our ABC would like to thank you very, very much for that.



David Risstrom

We have however reached a point where our financial reserves are challenging our ability to do the work needed to keep the organisation healthy. This is why I am writing to you.

Yours is a quiet contribution that many who pass by would not be aware you make. It is all too easy to take that gift for granted. To assume it will always be received. And to expect that when there is a need for more, that you and others will be first hands to the pump. For those of us who work towards the world being a better place, in many ways it appears the world is constructed thus.

The Committee has been working for some time now to make the organisation more effective and efficient, reduce our costs and to increase our membership and contributions. We feel now that we are reaching the limits of what we can do in these respects.

My request is therefore not simply to ask more of those who already give so much. My request is to ask you also to consider how you can help to involve those who could and would help if they were aware of the need and value of their contribution.

With your help, the Friends of the ABC in Victoria has made great contributions aimed at keeping a great broadcaster as good as it can be. The traditions of public meetings as I observe them appears to be that many of us are getting older. One of our challenges is to involve younger people in sustaining their future with a strong ABC.

If you haven't done so already, please consider donating something to the Friends of the ABC. Or perhaps giving of, or cajoling a friend towards, membership to get them started on what we hope is a long journey with us.

Just as a little exercise each day is better insurance for a bright future than relying on resuscitation once one falls, keeping our ABC and the friends who support it strong is the best way to secure a great future.

Please, please, please help us keep the Friends of the ABC alive and strong. It is a great organisation that gives much more than it gets and right now, it needs our help.

David Risstrom

Congratulations

Pockley wins Academy of Science medal

Dr Peter Pockley, founding head of science programs at the ABC, has been awarded the prestigious Australian Academy of Science medal for 2010 for his outstanding contribution to science.

Friends of the ABC is thrilled the Academy has recognised Dr Pockley's pioneering of specialist reporting of science in Australia which commenced when he set up the ABC Science Unit in 1964.

Information on Peter Pockley's contribution to science is at www.science.org.au/awards/awardees/academy-medal-awards.html#2010



Presentation of the 2010 Australian Academy of Science medal to Peter Pockley. L to r: Prof Kurt Lambeck, then President of the Academy, Governor-General Quentin Bryce AC and Peter Pockley. Photo by Irene Dowdy

News+Views is the newsletter of Friends of the ABC (Vic) Inc.

GPO Box 4065, Melbourne, VIC 3001

tel +613 9682 0073

fax +613 9682 0074

fabcvic@vicnet.net.au

www.fabc.org.au

Inc No. A0034181A

Danger in public-commercial media pacts

'Dirty Money', the *Four Corners* program screened on May 24 that revealed how the Australian Reserve Bank became ensnared in an international bribery scandal, was the result of a joint investigation between the ABC and *The Age* (owned by Fairfax which also owns *The Sydney Morning Herald*, local newspapers and some major commercial radio stations).



There are benefits to media organisations of collaborating in investigative journalism. It makes financial sense to share costs and can result in important public information being more widely reported. It may even result in the exposure of a matter which there would otherwise be insufficient funds to investigate. (The advantages were highlighted in an article by Margaret Simons, 'ABC gets into bed with Fairfax ... and news is the winner', *Crikey.com*, 5 May.)

Nevertheless, there is a downside. Joint media operations run contrary to the public interest for media diversity. Australia already has a dangerously low level of media diversity. It needs more news sources, not less.

There are also risks for the ABC in collaborating with a commercial media outlet. They may have been smaller in this instance – *The Age* reporter on assignment at *Four Corners* to work on 'Dirty Money' began his career at the ABC and has taken unpaid leave to work at *Four Corners* on a couple of occasions, and *The Age* has a strong history of editorial independence. Nevertheless, there would be serious risks for the integrity of the ABC if partnerships with commercial media companies were to become more than an occasional practice:

- Decisions on content go beyond the probity of individual journalists to the political and corporate interests of the bodies that employ them. A strong incentive for the ABC to share costs with a commercial outlet could result in compromises – from

the selection of matters to be investigated, to program content, presentation and promotion.

- Classified advertising – thousands of small advertisers – was integral to Fairfax newspapers maintaining their editorial independence. As Fairfax increasingly relies on large advertisers to replace the revenue stream it lost when classified advertising collapsed, the pressures on its editorial independence are growing.
- And what would happen if media outlets of questionable independence which are considered by governments to be reputable, come to regard themselves as being entitled to their share of the public subsidy which collaborations with the ABC deliver to the private partner? Some influential commercial media players have already made clear their interest for ABC services, like news, to be put out to tender.
- Add to the business interests of the commercial media, the hostility of some governments to independent broadcasting and the apparent commitment of governments of both major political persuasions to scale back the public sector. The next step to full-scale outsourcing would not be far removed. Former Coalition Minister for Communications, Senator Alston, commenced a process that made funding for the ABC dependent on the broadcaster outsourcing much of its television production.

Despite a change of government, the ABC now produces no local television drama in-house.

The experience of the seriously under-funded SBS points to what happens to the level of government funding for a public broadcaster when it demonstrates a willingness to resource its activities (if only to a minor extent) with income from commercial sources. If government took a similar pecuniary approach to an ABC sharing costs by increasingly operating on joint projects with commercial media, the result would be less funding available to the ABC to undertake investigative journalism.

For the same reasons that the ABC should not be funded through advertising revenue, it should generally not enter into joint operations with commercial media outlets. The future of investigative journalism would be better served by the national public broadcaster being rebuilt and fully funded to engage in the independent journalism for which it is rightly respected.



Letter to the Editor

Fed up with ABC 774

The continuing commercialisation of the ABC's presentation style is worrying. I once enjoyed listening to ABC 774.

Now I can't stand it for long, due to the trivial nature of much of its content and its frequent and annoying commercials – for itself (but we are already listening!), other ABC services, personalities and programs that we have already been informed about many times over, community notices, the ABC shop and its products, etc, etc. It all adds up to noise! Richard Stubbs' ads assume the listening audience is stupid, so he repeats his statements several times using slightly different wording in case we

didn't understand. Many of the ads are broadcast at increased volume and with jarring music, eg the Red Symons and football ads. They are abrasive, annoying and inappropriate for ABC radio, or what once used to be ABC radio.

Why does the ABC bombard listeners with this commercial style when it is not a commercial organisation, but is fully funded by the taxpayer?

Rose Allaway

What you don't see on the ABC

Now that ABC TV makes no drama in-house and increasingly purchases much of its Australian documentary programming, ABC audiences are increasingly unaware of what content they don't, but perhaps ought to have had the opportunity to view. Nor do they know why specific programs are rejected by the ABC.

So the ABC's cancellation this year of an earlier offer to screen the documentary *Hope in a Slingshot* – a film produced by a young Australian filmmaker, Inka Stafrace, on the lives of Palestinians in the West Bank – has provided an important insight into the ABC's editorial policies and practices.

The ABC's head of television, Kim Dalton, wrote in a letter to the film's distributor that the documentary is an "opinion program" about a "contentious subject". To screen the program, clause 6.6.3 of the ABC's editorial policies requires the ABC to meet an "impartiality" requirement by "providing content of a similar type and weight and in an appropriate time-frame". He explained that the ABC is unfortunately unable to screen *Hope in a Slingshot* because it has not been able to access "content which would put an alternative view" about the ongoing conflict between Israelis and Palestinians.

It is a sad day for independent public broadcasting if an obsession with balance and a desire to avoid controversy has become the determiner of ABC programming.

This matter raises serious concern about the ABC policy that deals with impartiality for documentaries, and its implementation.

Impartiality entails the weighing of different views objectively. It is not necessarily met by balancing one opinion with another.

Almost every documentary presents a point of view: nature documentaries about endangered species, programs on disappearing rivers, historical accounts of war – the list is endless.

Is it really in the public interest that the ABC be required to balance every program that contains opinions with alternative views? As Greens Senator Scott Ludlam pointed out, that logic requires that the ABC broadcast a pro-war program to balance one in favour of peace.

The ABC does not seek alternative points of view to all programs in a futile search for balance. Dalton's letter indicates that in practice the ABC's overly restrictive impartiality requirement for programs that contain opinion is quarantined to those that deal with contentious subjects.

But that seemingly common-sense approach creates other problems.

Who defines which matters are contentious? The legitimacy of conflicting points of view is not necessarily a measure of a matter being contentious. It can be the outcome of determined minorities with the resources to make a loud noise, powerful interests whose influence doesn't quite extend to imposing their will outright, or the tyranny of an ill-informed majority.

How many different opinions should the ABC provide? There are always more than two points of view on any topic.

In the case of this documentary, it could be argued that there have been regular news and current affairs reports and a number of programs on the ABC (both television and radio) presenting varied Israeli and Palestinian perspectives. It is therefore difficult to understand why *Hope in a Slingshot*, made by an Australian, should not be screened.

Furthermore, Dalton appears to have limited the ABC's options for meeting its impartiality requirement. His letter fails to mention the last sentence of ABC editorial policy 6.3.3 which states that impartiality can be met by, for example, "presenting a discussion program after a point-of-view documentary".

Of course, ABC audiences don't want or believe it necessary to have a discussion program follow every documentary either. But how otherwise can the ABC meet its present arduous impartiality requirement?

It appears that the former government's constant shrieks

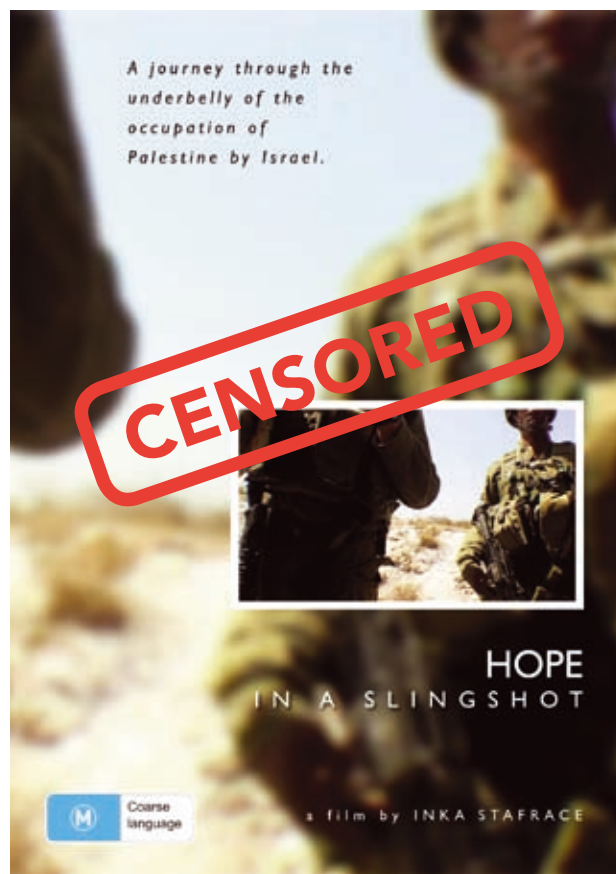


Australian filmmaker Inka Stafrace

of 'bias' have resulted in an ABC that is less than fearless. Possibly the ABC's decision on 'Hope in a Slingshot' is influenced by fear of a backlash (real or perceived) from some in the community who tolerate no criticism of Israel.

Either way, it is a sad day for independent public broadcasting if an obsession with balance and a desire to avoid controversy has become the determiner of ABC programming and is overriding the broadcaster's responsibility to inform and educate without fear or favour.

After Friends of the ABC brought the matter to public attention, the ABC has said it will reconsider its decision not to screen *Hope in a Slingshot*. However, the ABC's interest continues to remain contingent on it acquiring a program with an alternative view.



FABC Notices

Ensure the ABC's future

The survival of the ABC is crucial – for Australian culture, the integrity of information the general community receives, the platform for public debate the ABC provides, and its scrutiny of governments and other powerful bodies.

By leaving a bequest to Friends of the ABC in your Will, you will help to ensure the ABC thrives as an independent public broadcaster.

New FABC website

Friends of the ABC recently launched its new website. Over time, we will move more FABC information on important ABC topics to the site. In the meantime, please explore the site and give us your feedback via the link. The website continues to be at www.fabc.org.au.

FABC – Email, Facebook & Twitter

FABC continues to send notices through its subscription email service, which you can sign up for at www.fabc.org.au. FABC's name on Facebook is *Friends of the ABC (Vic)*, and on Twitter it is *Friends of the ABC*.

Films for FABC members

If you wish to be and are not already on FABC's list to receive film notices between full membership mailouts, please complete FABC's 'Help' form. The form can be obtained by phoning or sending an email to FABC's office. The conditions on which FABC is able to make films available to members are usually set by the supplier. Friends is sorry that in some instances we are only able to notify of films and taking bookings electronically.



Friends Officers

PRESIDENT: David Risstrom // VICE-PRESIDENT: Gael Barrett // SECRETARY: Georgina Simmonds // MEMBERSHIP SECRETARY: Pam Caven // TREASURER: Peter Monie // CAMPAIGN MANAGER/EXECUTIVE OFFICER: Glenys Stradjot // ADMIN OFFICER: Elizabeth Paul

Friends Newsletter

EDITOR: Glenys Stradjot // DESIGN: Dan Milne // PRINTING: Arena Printing & Publishing

Issued three times a year. Letters from members are welcome. Send to: *The Editor, News & Views, GPO Box 4065, Melbourne, VIC 3001* or email: fabcvic@vicnet.net.au Letters may be edited for length. Unattributed items are by the editor. Items attributed to other authors do not necessarily represent the views of FABC.

www.fabc.org.au

WEBSITE MANAGER: Peter Monie

News + Views and more is available. Subscribe to receive free email updates at www.fabc.org.au

Facebook: Friends of the ABC (Vic)

Twitter: Friends of the ABC

Useful contacts

The Hon Julia Gillard MP, Prime Minister, Parliament House, Canberra 2600

ABC – phone: (03) 9626 1500, GPO Box 9994, Sydney 2001
Maurice Newman – Chairman, ABC Board;
Mark Scott – ABC Managing Director

THE LAST WILL AND TESTAMENT...



Cartoon by Ron Tandberg

ABC Board Appointments

Three gone, more to go

Cheryl Bart AO, a Sydney-based corporate lawyer and company director is the latest Labor Government appointment to the ABC Board under its arms-length assessment process which is still to be legislated.

While Bart's appointment is uncontroversial, it is not known to Friends of the ABC what interest she has in the ABC beyond applying to become a member of its board. Bart is presently chairman of the AER Foundation, Environment Protection Authority (SA), the South Australian Film Corporation, the Adelaide Film Festival and ANZ Trustees Limited. She is a non-executive director on Spark Infrastructure Ltd and ETSA Utilities (two companies in the electricity distribution

business). Other boards she has served on include Shaw of Australia, the Economic Development Board (SA), the Information Economy Advisory Board, Defence Industry Advisory Board (SA), Women's National Basketball League, Australian Sports Foundation, Sydney Ports Corporation and the Institute for Biomedical Research (Sydney University).

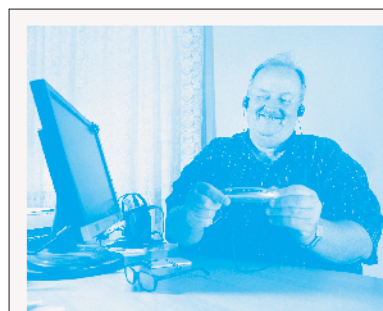
Bart's appointment to the position vacated by columnist and cultural warrior Janet Albrechtsen brings the number of appointees under Labor's new process to three. Four Howard government appointees remain on the Board, along with managing director Mark Scott who is appointed by the Board.

Travelling Exhibition on the ABC

David Dosser, media junkie

"I can't watch or listen to commercial media. I've tried, but ads ruin the continuity of programs and dictate their quality and content. Their interest is in you as a consumer not a community member, so no program must distract you from shopping! The ABC must not be privatised. We must be able to trust it to serve us all. It must be funded to entertain, inform and scrutinise without fear or favour."

Dave Dosser is one of ten posters in FABC's Travelling Exhibition on the ABC: *THE ABC – It's OURS, It's INDEPENDENT* and its *FREE*, an exhibition about the ABC as seen through the eyes of Australians from different walks of life. An information sheet on the display is available. Please contact FABC to borrow the exhibition for libraries, festivals and other places the public frequents.



David Dosser
Media junkie

I can't watch or listen to commercial media. I've tried, but ads ruin the continuity of programs and dictate the quality and content. The interest is in you as a consumer not a community member, so no program must distract you from shopping! The ABC must not be privatised. We must be able to trust it to serve us all. It must be funded to entertain, inform and scrutinise without fear or favour.