

News+Views

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No time for complacency

Public broadcasting needs public support to survive Murdoch

Independent public broadcasting around the world is in danger from political parties antagonistic to its existence. And the privatisation, commercialisation or serious erosion of a service by one government is rarely reversed by another, regardless of its political persuasion. The commercialisation of SBS is a good example.

Public broadcasting is also under attack from the powerful Murdoch media empire. Its capacity to influence elected governments is growing, and it is actively trying to cripple public broadcasters whose free content threatens its profits.

Recent events in Britain provide an alarming picture of the Murdoch juggernaut and how quickly a public broadcaster can be shackled.

Murdoch's News Corporation is set to become Britain's largest private media company, with a turnover that is expected to be double that of the BBC by the next election – the result of recent approval for its purchase of the 61 per cent of BSkyB shares it does not already own. News owns four of Britain's biggest newspapers and BSkyB is the largest pay TV broadcaster in the United Kingdom, with 10 million subscribers.

Meanwhile, the BBC – in a far stronger position than the ABC – is being eroded and its independence undermined by the same government that is allowing Murdoch to increase his dominance.

The BBC's licence fee has been frozen until 2016/17 (an effective funding cut of 16%). BBC World Service funding has been slashed, and in three years time will stop altogether. The BBC will be forced to fund international broadcasting from its depleted licence fee revenue.

A former Conservative party chairman and cabinet member, Lord Patten, has been appointed to head the BBC, and has announced he will not resign from the party or cease his paid advisory work for BP (the global oil and gas company).

The reach and influence of Rupert Murdoch is also growing in the USA and Australia.

In the USA, where public broadcasting is already marginalised, Murdoch's stable includes two major daily newspapers (*The Wall Street Journal* and *New York Post* which are among the highest circulation newspapers in the US) and Fox News, with its deceptive trademark of 'Fair and Balanced'. There are public concerns that media scrutiny of local government is being lost as News Corp buys



Murdoch turns 80 Cartoon by Georgina Simmonds

up local television stations and consolidates the newsgathering staff.

The domination of the Murdoch clan is even greater in Australia, where the mass media is already dangerously concentrated in the hands of a very small number of proprietors. News owns eight of the twelve major newspapers, dominates the regional and suburban newspaper industry, and owns a major slice of Foxtel and Sky News (which is vying to run Australia's international television service presently provided by the ABC), and half of Fox Sports.

Lachlan Murdoch owns 50 percent of DMG, owner of the Nova radio network which operates in every mainland state capital and reaches 53 per cent of the Australian population. Lachlan Murdoch and James Packer have seemingly gained control of Channel Ten, with Lachlan having been appointed interim chief executive.

Joining Lachlan on the board of Channel Ten is billionaire iron-ore heiress and Australia's wealthiest woman, Gina Rinehart, who recently acquired 10 per cent of the Ten Network. Rinehart has taken an interest in the media since her mining company ran

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Gideon Haigh at the AGM

I've been a semi-regular contributor to ABC radio and television for about twenty years, but I personally quite like your nomenclature. I'm a friend of the ABC. I probably give an average three interviews to ABC radio a week, more naturally in summer. This week, for example, I've spoken to presenters in Dubbo, Canberra and Hobart on various subjects, spent half an hour being interviewed by a presenter from Radio National about cricket and gambling, another half hour by the presenter of ABC Overnight about Twenty20 cricket. I should be Mark Scott's pin-up boy. An hour and a half's free content, and I didn't even charge the tram fare.

Contestation around the ABC's works is surely inevitable. When an organisation is meant to be so diversely representative, no-one is likely to feel adequately served. When an organisation pays less than market rates, and this the ABC assuredly does, it will attract people for other reasons.

This is the mother of sometimes extraordinary outcomes in spite of threadbare resources. If there is, among some members of such a community, a disinclination to hew to a government line, especially when those governments are so routinely carping and vindictive, should that really surprise anyone?

Twitter. Text messaging. Dear God – don't get me started. I could ramble on at length about how the ABC deplorably neglects the best cricket commentator in Australia, Tim Lane, while employing the most irritating, Kerry O'Keeffe. But rather than do that, I thought I'd make a few friendly observations from the vantage of one who has been neither an outsider nor an insider at the ABC, and perhaps fittingly has ended up an Offsider.

My first long-term exposure was the five years I spent co-hosting more than 100 conversation hours on Jon Faine's morning show. I remain in awe of Jon's drive and enthusiasm. When hosts filled in for Jon, their first profession to me when I arrived for the conversation hour would always be that they were exhausted; now I was there, they were just going to relax. Had I read the books? Good job, because they hadn't. Jon? Well, Jon probably hadn't got much beyond the blurb, but he would still ask the first question, and usually the second, third and fourth too. At least initially, I found this irritating, because these questions would often be basic, beside the point or throat-clearing. But I gradually found it endearing. Jon was always, *always* interested. He doesn't fake it.

What could just occasionally be tiresome about Jon was his pose as *Mr ABC Contest of Ideas Man*. I used to joke that a conversation with Jon might begin with your proposing, as a preliminary to a larger point, that black was black. 'Ah,' Jon would say, 'but there are some people who would say that black is white.' When you took a deep breath and began enumerating aspects of black's non-whiteness, Jon would counterclaim that he was merely taking the reasonable view that there was much to be said for grey, and that your belief in black's blackness was surely too sweeping a judgement. By which time

you'd forgotten the larger point you intended making and were off on a tangent. I don't think Jon does this wilfully; it is just his devil's advocate default setting. But it is basically why I chucked it in after five years – because I realised, without being unkind, that Jon and I had already had every conversation we ever would have, and were starting to repeat ourselves.

That said, the great thing about Jon was his absolute dedication. When a live story was developing outside the studio, he would crackle with energy. Sometimes this would make me laugh. Jon would cut across what I or a guest was saying – 'I'm sorry to interrupt...' – in order to announce that they were just about to cross to the ABC's man on the spot who had discovered a smoking rubbish bin. What could he tell us about the bin? Was it a large bin? Was it one of those big green wheely bins, or an old-fashioned metal bin? Were emergency crews yet on the scene... etc?

If a story was developing in Melbourne, however, I knew to whom I'd turn first, because Jon would give it his last ounce of adrenaline. I only wish newspaper newsrooms had as much vitality as Jon on the burst.

The disappointment to me was the general lack of commitment to doing other than the bleeding obvious. The format was static. Jon and I wasted time bantering boringly at the top of the hour, when we could have spent more time with the guests. The segment was known colloquially as the product hour, yet there was no quality control, and some downright garbage was spruiked. The idea of having guests on who *actually* had something interesting to say rather than *possibly* having something interesting to sell, meanwhile, was never entertained.

I worked at the conversation hour extremely hard. In the average week, I would background myself thoroughly in two guests, tackle two or more books/films/theatrical productions – an obligation that required a day and a half to honour properly. For this, I was paid \$100 pre-tax. The producer intimated I was lucky to get this much. Perhaps she was right. In 2007, I was asked to co-host a similar hour on Lindy Burns' show, which involved slightly more work. The response to me asking if there was to be any remuneration was as if I had committed a major breach of etiquette.

In the first year of *ABC News Breakfast*, I was one of their *What the Papers Say* guests. I got up at 4am, walked into the ABC rather than charge a cab fare, and charged nothing.

Why? Because it sounded like something interesting to do and... well... I'm an early riser anyway.

In other words, one of the ABC's dirtier secrets is its pool of unpaid labour. If I talk on the BBC, or Talk Sport or al-Jazeera, I am always remunerated; on the ABC, staff ask, and even expect, quite extraordinary degrees of assistance, in return for diddly squat. Now, it's no biggie. I believe in an informed polity and the free circulation of ideas too. But I *also* believe that the labourer is worthy of his hire. Generally I don't mind doing things for nothing, but I don't think *others* should be obliged to do the same.

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I'm always struck by how the solicitation of comment by the ABC runs. Phone rings at 6am. It's a panting producer. 'We're looking for someone who can talk to us about Pakistan cricket/asbestos/the baggy green cap/abortion/CEO remuneration – delete where applicable?' It's always 'someone who can talk to us about'. Not 'you'. Just someone. Anyone really. And you'll do, because you answered the phone. To them, you're not so much a person as five minutes' air time they needn't worry about.

The practice of paying for services has become commingled with the absurd taboos surrounding the idea of 'chequebook journalism'. Twenty years ago, Jana Wendt had a programme on the ABC called *Uncensored* and some of the guests including Germaine Greer had been paid. When there was a fit of morality in opinion-making circles and Phillip Knightley wrote a sterling defence:

How does journalism come into it? Greer is a star. Why should she give up her time to be interviewed by Jana Wendt, who is being well paid for asking the questions, to appear for nothing on a programme for which the ABC is paying the production company a lot of money?

Once again it would be a case of everyone in the studio being paid except the one person without whom there would be no programme.

In Britain, France, Germany – all over Europe in fact – television pays people for interviews whether they be for news, current affairs, chat programmes or documentaries. If they want you, they pay, and the more desperately they want you, the more they pay.

Which is why Australian television producers have a reputation in Europe as being the meanest, stingiest, tightest, most sanctimonious Scrooges in the business.

'Tiny budgets'? Sounds familiar. The ABC is also, as we know, poor as a church mouse. So poor it's hugely expanding its suite of programs and services. So poor it's commissioned another series of *The Librarians*. Like talkback, like reading out tweets and texts on air, free content is a way of stretching the corporation dollar. The attitude I've encountered more than once, in fact, is that if the ABC can't offer money, it can confer that mystical phenomenon of 'profile'.

I've almost always enjoyed working for the ABC. But my experience as a freelance contributor to it suggests it has probably quite average proportions of people bored, apathetic and going through the motions, and highly motivated individuals with a sense of mission.

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This is an edited version of Gideon Haigh's address at Friends of the ABC Vic's 2010 AGM. A full version can be viewed at www.fabc.org.au



Gideon Haigh

ABC not listening to its audience

ABC Commercialisation

Despite a petition to the ABC Board signed by 10,425 members of the community, the ABC shows no sign of retreating from the commercial direction in which it is headed. The petitioners expressed opposition to the ABC's extensive promotions (many of which are irritating to audiences and some of which are for products that look to have no clear connection to ABC programming), the increasing focus on ratings-driven programming, and commercial activities that risk the ABC's independence.

In ABC Chairman Maurice Newman's letter to Friends of the ABC late last year, Mr Newman acknowledged the requirement for the ABC to remain a trusted broadcaster that is independent of commercial interests, and that the ABC's audience prefers a non-commercial broadcasting environment.

However, he justifies the commercial behaviour and activities in which the ABC is engaged. He argues that as a publicly funded entity, it is vital the community is informed about the ABC's services; that the ABC Act permits the ABC to make announcements relating to its

programs and products; and that all revenue raised through the sale of ABC products is used for program-making initiatives.

These arguments do not persuade FABC that the ABC's growing commercialisation is either justified or appropriate for a public broadcaster. Furthermore, it is difficult to believe that the ABC Board is simply naïve about what will be the ABC's likely future as the broadcaster increasingly demonstrates a willingness to raise funds through a broader range of commercial activities and as it becomes less distinguishable from commercial broadcasters to its audiences.

Friends of the ABC won't give up, and we urge you to continue to protest about commercial activities that risk the ABC's independence, damage the ABC's credibility, result in lesser quality programming or detract from audience satisfaction.

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A full copy of Mr Newman's reply can be viewed at www.fabc.org.au

Twenty years of Late Night Live



Friends of the ABC members have their say on two decades of Phillip Adams and *Late Night Live*:

People who let smears of 'left wing' deter them from listening to Adams' *Late Night Live* (LNL) don't know what they miss. Adams interviews fascinating people from all over the world with Left, Right and no politics at all. LNL's range of programs – on topics from humanity's relationship to the Atlantic Ocean, the history of footwear, surviving the mutiny on the *Bounty*, a food lover's pilgrimage through the culinary landscapes of ancient Persia, to a father's search to find a connection with his autistic son – have been nothing short of wonderful.

—David Dossier

Congratulations to Phillip Adams on 20 years of *Late Night Live*. If ever anyone epitomised Radio National at its best, it is Phillip. He and his programs are consistently erudite and entertaining and are 'must-listen-to radio'. Thanks Phillip from all the Gladdies and the Poddies.

—Ruth Boschen

Notices

Help FABC spread the word

What happens to the ABC should be of concern to every organisation and every person in the community. The public broadcaster's role in the cultural life of Australia and, for almost every major social and political issue, in informing, analysing, debating and scrutinising governments, is critical.

Please help FABC to let the community know why the ABC is important:

- Let FABC know if you are willing to be contacted on occasions that we need helpers to hand out FABC material at non-FABC events.
- Let FABC know on occasions that you can hand out FABC material at an event you plan to attend.
- Organise for other organisations and groups in which you are involved to invite FABC to send a guest speaker.

Steven Skala Reappointed

Steven Skala – vice-chairman of Deutsche Bank and a board member of the right-wing Centre for Independent Studies – who was initially appointed to the ABC Board by the Howard government, has been reappointed.

ABC international broadcasting weakened



Australia's international television (and now online) service established by the ABC in 1993 has been put out to tender.

The Labor Government's decision continues a process commenced by the Howard Government. It came not long after Prime Minister Gillard's first meeting with Rupert Murdoch and opens the door to his News Corp empire which is aggressively campaigning for Sky News to be awarded the 10-year contract to run Australia Network.

It is a waste of public money to require the ABC to compete in a tender process. The relevance and benefits to Australia of the national public broadcaster providing the country's international broadcasting services are overwhelming.

The ABC Act gives the ABC the authority and responsibility to provide the nation's international broadcasting services – to broadcast to countries outside Australia to encourage awareness of Australia and its attitudes on world affairs, and to inform Australians abroad.

The breadth and quality of the comprehensive national public broadcaster's local content, its functions, independence and

accountability to the Parliament of Australia make it the body which is most appropriate and best equipped to provide the country's international broadcasting services.

It would be contrary to the public interest for a service that is of such strategic importance to be outsourced to a company with foreign interests, or to a private operator that is driven by commercial imperatives or which may have political agendas. Not surprisingly, a Lowy Institute survey last year found that none of the ten biggest international broadcasting services was outsourced.

Australia's presence overseas is weakened while the ABC has to tender to operate AN. It is not feasible for the ABC to integrate the resources and content-gathering of Radio Australia and AN to achieve the cross-platform leveraging and presence internationally of the BBC, for example, which delivers its radio, television and online services under a single banner.

It would be foolish to risk losing the advantage of the ABC's outstanding record and trusted reputation in a highly competitive international broadcasting field by awarding the contract to any other tenderer. When the former Coalition government handed over Australia's international TV service to a commercial broadcaster several years ago, it collapsed and had to be rebuilt by the ABC.

AN's integrity is damaged by carrying advertising to supplement government revenue. The tender contract documents associated with Department of Foreign Affairs (DFAT) funding reveal an alarming interest of the Government to politically interfere in AN's programming.

International broadcasting is an important service for Australians abroad, our neighbours in the Asia Pacific region and for Australia's



International broadcasting - a bridge between Australia and its neighbours

Photo by Rob Gullan

strategic interests. The quality and integrity of our international broadcasting should be ensured by the ABC being fully resourced to provide the service through radio, television and online with an increase in its general funding which comes through the Communications portfolio.

Prior to the Government's announcement, Friends of the ABC outlined to foreign affairs minister Kevin Rudd why it strongly believes Australia's interests are best served by the country's publicly-funded international television service remaining a service of the ABC. Six months later, FABC is yet to receive a reply to its letter. Friends of the ABC's letter to the Minister for Foreign Affairs and submission to DFAT is at www.fabc.org.au

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No time for complacency Continued from page 1

a successful media campaign to force the government to back down on its proposed mining tax, and now also owns almost four per cent of Fairfax Media (owner of *The Age* and *Sydney Morning Herald*).

Governments alone cannot be relied upon to ensure that independent public broadcasting thrives. Thousands of Friends of the ABC members ready to defend the ABC are the ABC's best protection against weak or hostile governments and the Murdoch juggernaut.

It is a danger to democracy that one man has so much power to influence governments and public opinion. Please help to ensure the ABC survives. FABC can provide information that you can post or email to friends, relatives or colleagues to urge them to join Friends of the ABC.



Lord David Puttnam, film-maker and Labour peer, described Murdoch's takeover of BSKyB as a threat to 'consensus-based democracy'