

News+Views

Issue 36 / Winter 2011

News of the World's phone hacking scandal

Will the true public interest prevail?

> Details pages 1



Garnaut on climate change reporting

Is the ABC providing a balanced view?

> Details page 2



Public broadcasting in the United States

Lee Burton on the importance of our ABC

> Details page 3



Review of Radio National

Public broadcasting for young and old

> Details pages 4



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

Media matters

Murdoch – down but not out

Many issues are raised by the *News of the World* phone-hacking scandal that rocked Britain. Prominent among them must be who owns the media and how much of it anyone should be allowed to own.

There is the matter of whether Rupert Murdoch is a 'fit and proper' person to hold a media licence. Police say more than 4,000 people may have been the target of NoW phone hacking, including murdered children and their families, the relatives of soldiers killed in action, and London's 2005 terrorist bombing victims. If true, this is not the result of a rogue reporter or executive. The pressure to do what it takes to maximise profit comes from the top and it is difficult to believe that authority for the widely reported payment of £100,000 a year for a contractor who illegally taped phones would not have come from high up the corporate ladder.

However, NoW's reprehensible actions, and the state's failure to act on the root causes when revelations of NoW phone-tapping came to police attention several years ago, are also potent examples of the dangers of insufficient media ownership diversity.

Until the latest shocking revelations, British politicians were reluctant to criticise criminality at News International (News Corporation's British division). The Press Complaints Commission failed to take decisive action on information that indicated the problem of NoW phone-hacking was widespread, and the police inquiry was shamefully inadequate.

The prominent position of Murdoch's News Corporation in the media landscape has resulted in a media corporation which some governments have a vested interest to support, most politicians are afraid to curtail, and which believes itself to be above the law.

The *New Statesman* wrote on 7 July: "The issue concerns the intimate relationship between one media corporation and the British state. Many prominent figures in British society live in terror of Mr Murdoch. It is not just concern about how the *Sun* and NoW can influence opinion, but also the fear that, if they cross News International, its papers



Cartoon by Tandberg. First published *The Age*.

might unearth some fragment of their private lives and use it to discredit and embarrass them. Moreover, the tentacles of News Corp reach so deeply into national life that almost everybody of importance has been seduced in some fashion."

It concluded: "This is the result of allowing one corporation to control almost 40 per cent of newspaper circulation."

News Corporation's Australian newspaper circulation is almost 70 per cent.

Continued on page 4

Thank you

Friends of the ABC wishes to thank its wonderful members. Your contributions and support have enabled FABC to continue its important work at this time.

A membership 'renewal' notice is enclosed with your newsletter if your membership is due. Please help by renewing promptly.

A recruitment flyer-form is included for everyone. If every FABC member were to recruit one new member, you will help to ensure the ABC thrives as a valuable centre of culture, information and ideas.

ABC fails to report responsibly on climate change

The Federal Government's key climate change adviser, Professor Ross Garnaut, has criticised the mainstream media's treatment of climate change.



Professor Ross Garnaut, independent expert advisor to the Multi-Party Climate Change Committee

In releasing the March update of his climate change review, which found the evidence that human greenhouse gas emissions are the primary cause of global warming has strengthened, Prof Garnaut suggested that support for action has been undermined by the mainstream media giving equal weight to the peer-reviewed science and sceptical views not backed by published evidence.

"Our mainstream media will often seek to provide some balance between people who base their views on mainstream science and people who don't. That's a very strange sort of balance; it's a balance of numbers of words and not a balance of scientific authority," Professor Garnaut said.

More recently, Professor Garnaut criticised the "crude" and "distorted" reporting of plans for a carbon tax, especially by News Limited. The Murdoch media has campaigned strongly to throw doubt on climate change science and the bona fides of climate scientists.

So, what of our ABC, you ask – surely we can rely on our public broadcaster for quality reporting that gets to the truth?

Unfortunately, not always. A paper titled *'The politics of reporting climate change at the Australian Broadcasting Corporation'* by academics from the School of Journalism and Australian Studies at Monash University provides a damning assessment.



Melbourne floods (2011) Photo by Simon Kosmer

The paper examines the ABC's reporting of visits to Australia in 2010 by two international commentators on anthropogenic climate change – celebrity denialist Lord Christopher Monckton and Dr James Hansen. Dr Hansen, a highly regarded climate-change scientist who promotes government intervention, is director of NASA's Goddard Institute for Space Studies.

In summary, the Monash study reveals that Monckton received saturation coverage on the ABC (twice a day). Despite his contentious statements and lack of formal qualifications in the subject on which he spoke, he was always treated as an authoritative source until ABC TV's *Media Watch* report at the end of his tour. In one-third of his appearances he was unchallenged by opposing sources.

On the other hand, Hansen never appeared on ABC television. He had only two interviews on Radio National (one on a program that goes to air at 10pm) and three mentions in online coverage. The extent of Hansen's ABC presence was five appearances in total, compared to 47 for Monckton.

There have been some admirable ABC science programs on climate change, and incisive analysis by ABC TV's *Media Watch* of the media's coverage of the topic. Radio National's *Background Briefing* produced an excellent exposé on Monckton and the forces behind his return tour of Australia this year.

Nevertheless, it is incumbent on those producing the ABC's daily programs that deal with news and current affairs to accurately inform audiences about matters as important

as climate change. Their responsibility is even greater, given the abysmal performance of commercial broadcasters on the topic.

Is the ABC's failure, as illustrated by this study, the result of the public broadcaster having become less fearless in the face of an orchestrated campaign by those constantly shrieking 'ABC bias' in an effort to silence the truth?

Or is it the result of a culture that stems from the former Howard government's stacking of the ABC Board, with the appointment of chairman Maurice Newman (a self-described agnostic on anthropogenic climate change) as its head – a culture of political conservatism and populist programming that at times makes the ABC barely distinguishable from commercial broadcasters?

Either way, Maurice Newman's attack on ABC journalists for being too ready to accept arguments that support the human causation of climate change, which came soon after the Monckton and Hansen visits, is even more astounding in the light of the study's findings.

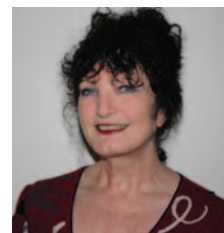
'The politics of reporting climate change at the Australian Broadcasting Corporation' by Associate Professor Philip Chubb and Professor Chris Nash of the School of Journalism and Australian Studies at Monash University is at www.fabc.org.au

Take the link to *Background Briefing's* 'The Lord Monckton roadshow' from www.fabc.org.au

In the land of the free where there is no ABC

by Lee Burton

We are driving through California on the first stage of our US holiday, hungry for local and international news, interesting talkback and current affairs. The scenery is spectacular but local radio is a desert. We switch from one radio station to another but they are all clones of each other, music stations playing the same hits, talk stations full of opinion and bluster and stations begging for money for new-age religions.



Oregon, Washington, Idaho, Wyoming, Montana and Nevada over the next five weeks present the same picture but with right wing huff and puff thrown in. In some areas we can pick up the occasional national public radio (NPR) station providing much-needed relief. NPR is a privately and publicly funded media organisation that serves as a national syndicator to 797 American public radio stations.

Although NPR produces and distributes news and cultural programming, individual public radio stations are not required to broadcast all its programs. These local stations' mixture of NPR programs, content from rival providers, supporter and sponsor 'ads' and locally produced programs creates a variable listening experience with great swings in quality.

It is a good service but it lacks the resources of great public broadcasters. The quality of the programs depends very much upon the skills, knowledge and experience of the staff of each station. Absent is a sense of well developed national values that inform the content and delivery and a consistency in style and quality that you get when you tune to ABC local radio as you drive around Australia.

It is pretty much the same for television. The US Public Broadcasting Service (PBS) is a non-profit public broadcasting service with 354 member TV stations. PBS is the most prominent provider of television programs to US public television stations. However, PBS it is not responsible for all programs; stations usually receive a large portion of their content from third-party sources just as for radio.

Viewing public TV and listening to public radio in America is like tuning into community radio and TV in Australia with some high quality programming and a mix of local news, issues, very little arts programming, thanks to sponsors, and lots of music. As a colleague from the University of Washington remarked on a visit to Australia some years ago, 'America states its core values as being democracy and freedom of speech, yet we do not have a national broadcaster such as the ABC to help uphold those values'.



Photo by Julie Cattlin

This served to remind me of how much Australians depend upon the ABC and how we risk undervaluing its services and the vital role it plays in our democracy. It was heartening to read an affirmation of those values in a Rudd government report: 'The services and programming of our national broadcasters are integral to Australia's cultural, economic and political way of life'. (*Strengthening our national broadcasters*, Report Department of Broadband, Communications and the Digital Economy, 2009)

But we can never take the ABC for granted. SBS now has commercials throughout its programming. While Television New Zealand (TVNZ) continues to be a public broadcaster, 90 per cent of its funding now comes from selling advertising during programs. Like CBC Television in Canada it is essentially a fully commercial network in continuous ratings battles with other stations.

We should be ever vigilant as to the actions of governments and the ABC Board, its managers and commercial arm. We need to ensure that in 10, 20 or 50 years' time the ABC has not become extinct, marginal or irrelevant but remains a vital source of news, analysis, culture and reflection of Australian life and democracy.

Lee Burton is an independent media analyst and commentator who regularly comments on media issues for ABC Radio and other media outlets. An unedited version of her article can be viewed at www.fabc.org.au

ABC Board appointments

Two more women on ABC Board

Highly respected WA-based maternal and child health expert Fiona Stanley has been appointed to the ABC Board. Professor Stanley is the founding Director of the multi-disciplinary Telethon Institute for Child Health Research, has published numerous papers in scientific journals and given many national and international presentations on the socio-economic determinants of child health. She was 2003 Australian of the Year and in 1996 was awarded Australia's greatest civic honour, the Companion of the Order of Australia.

Appointed at the same time was Jane Bennett. In her role as managing director of Tasmanian company Ashgrove Cheese, Ms Bennett has been honoured as ABC Radio

Australian Rural Woman of the Year (1997), National Regional Development Award-Young Australian of the Year Awards (1998) and 2010 Tasmanian Telstra Business Woman of the Year. She is currently chair of the Tasmanian State Government Food Industry Advisory Committee and a member of the Brand Tasmania Council.

This is the third round of appointments since the Labor Government introduced its new merit-based process for appointments to the ABC and SBS boards. The Howard-era appointees who remain on the ABC Board are ABC Chairman Maurice Newman, Stephen Skala (reappointed by the Labor Government), and Managing Director

Mark Scott, who was appointed by the ABC Board.

Friends of the ABC has identified ways in which it believes the Government's bill to translate the present appointment practice into legislation can be strengthened. FABC is urging politicians to consider its proposals. It expects the bill, which will also restore a staff-elected director to the ABC Board, will proceed given the recent change in the balance of power in the Senate.



**Professor
Fiona Stanley**

Radio National review

The ABC is presently considering changes to Radio National, including ways to attract younger listeners.



ABC
Radio National

Friends of the ABC has written to Radio National's Acting Manager, Michael Mason. In its letter, FABC said: *RN audiences are not averse to change, and appreciate innovation.* However, in the context of the ABC's record across its networks in recent years, many listeners are worried. Much programming now broadcast on the ABC reflects a cut in the number of specialist staff and the time needed to produce quality content. It appears that the public broadcaster's interest has moved overwhelmingly in favour of lightweight programming and infotainment.

We pointed out that some listeners appreciate particular RN programs being repeated at a different time during the week which is more accessible for them personally; but many are also critical of the overall number of repeats throughout the year and would prefer RN to develop new culturally and intellectually challenging programs.

FABC asked that RN address the gap in important information, analysis and debate on matters dealt with by RN's specialist media and religion programs until they were axed in 2008

Friends sought the ABC's assurance that any change to RN will not result in programs of a lesser standard, and that efforts to increase RN's younger audience would not be at expense of its existing audiences. Older members of the community are entitled to have their interests catered for by the ABC, and increasingly have less access to content of interest to them than do other audiences the ABC now seeks to attract.

In reply to FABC, Mr Mason wrote that those undertaking the review are "committed to retaining and improving Radio National's quality and integrity as the nation's leading specialist network" and are "looking to continue to encourage and nurture genuine intellectual debate – a core part of the network's raison d'être". He explained that RN is looking to attract and engage with a new generation of thinking Australians, and hopefully exceed the needs of its existing loyal audience.

You may want to let the ABC know what you like and dislike about Radio National, how great programming could be even better, and of your ideas for exciting new programs.



Richard Aedy,
presenter of RN's
long-running 'Life
Matters' program

Derek Guille – popular 774 ABC Melbourne and ABC Local Radio presenter, and talented musician – is leaving the ABC. Derek has been an important part of the lives of Victorian ABC audiences for over two decades.



Friends Officers

PRESIDENT: David Risstrom // VICE-PRESIDENT: Gael Barrett // SECRETARY: Georgina Simmonds // MEMBERSHIP SECRETARY: Dave Robertson // TREASURER: Peter Monie // CAMPAIGN MANAGER/EXECUTIVE OFFICER: Glenys Stradijot // ADMIN OFFICER: Elizabeth Paull

Friends Newsletter

EDITOR: Glenys Stradijot // 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: @FriendsoftheABC

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

Feedback on programming and services:
www.abc.net.au/contact

Media matters Continued from page 1

It's not the end

News International is retreating only to the extent needed to confine the fallout and leave open the door for future expansion.

News Corporation's sudden closure of NoW was widely considered to be a shrewd attempt to save its plan to take full ownership of Britain's prominent pay TV company. News Corporation subsequently dropped its BSkyB bid, but only when it looked like the British Parliament was set to vote unanimously to urge it to withdraw.

Will Murdoch be found to have any culpability in what has happened at NoW? Can his expansion, in Britain at least, be curtailed?

The corporate business structure exists for owners to outsource their risks and responsibilities in order to maximise their profits.

News Corporation has not ruled out the possibility that it will replace its NoW sensationalist Sunday tabloid by simply extending *The Sun* to Sunday. *The Sun* is Britain's best selling daily newspaper, infamous for its semi-naked 'Page 3 girls'.

*News Corporation's
Australian newspaper
circulation is almost 70%*

Murdoch had already gained in-principle government approval to secure total ownership of BSkyB. He is not prohibited from

resurrecting the bid, which would deliver him dominance of the British media market, and in the meantime continues to maintain effective voting control of BSkyB.

There is no certainty that the interests of the British public will prevail.

Even before the Murdoch phone-hacking scandal, FABC and many others had expressed serious concern about Australia's dangerously high concentration of commercial media ownership, including the threat it poses to public broadcasters which the powerful Murdoch empire views as competitors for its audience.

Please write to the Australian Government to let them know you want its action to achieve strong media ownership diversity to ensure our culture thrives and our democracy is uncompromised.