Friends of the ABC welcomes James Spigelman to his new appointment. To be chairman of the ABC is to hold one of the most significant positions in the country. We are confident that he will defend the ABC’s independence from both government and commercial influence, and encourage and support a public broadcaster of the highest quality and integrity.

Spigelman replaces Maurice Newman, the former head of the Australian Securities Exchange, whose term expired at the end of last year and was not renewed. He will take up his appointment, which also has the support of the Opposition, in April.

Retired NSW Supreme Court chief justice, the Hon James Spigelman AC QC, is the first ABC chairman appointed by the Labor Government under its merit-based assessment process. Spigelman has had a long and distinguished legal career. He is known to appreciate the importance of the media in Australian life, and has a strong interest in the arts and culture. He has been president of the Museum of Applied Arts and Sciences, on the council of the National Gallery of Australia and chairman of the Film Finance Corporation.

Prior to moving to the bar, Spigelman was senior advisor to Gough Whitlam. He was appointed as the head of the short-lived Department of Media which was abolished by the Fraser government soon after the Whitlam government’s dismissal in 1975.

In 1965, a 19-year old Spigelman was one of the key organisers of the legendary Freedom Ride, in which Charlie Perkins and a group of white students brought to wide public notice the deprivation and discrimination experienced by Aborigines.

The ABC will have permanent responsibility for delivering Australia’s international television service – a decision the Labor Government announced one month after it scrapped the process it had earlier commenced of putting Australia Network (AN) out to tender.

Throughout the tender process, the Murdoch media outlets had campaigned aggressively for the other contender for $23 million per annum of public funds to provide the service, the part Murdoch-owned Sky TV. When it appeared the Government might not act on the recommendation of a public service committee established to assess the bids, leaks that the committee considered Sky to be the preferred bidder began to appear in the media.

In the end, the Murdoch corporation was hoist on its own petard. The Government terminated the tender on the advice of the Australian Government Solicitor that significant leaks of confidential information to the media had compromised the tender to such a degree that it was unlikely a fair outcome could be achieved.

The Auditor General has since criticised the Government for its handling of the tender, but not the outcome.

No other country in the world outsources its international broadcasting service. As Australia’s national public broadcaster, the ABC has the integrity, experience, infrastructure and breadth of content to provide the best service for the country. A service of such strategic importance should never have been put out to tender in the first place.

FABC’s letters to Kevin Rudd MP and to the Cabinet can be read at www.fabc.org.au

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ABC correspondent Gavin Fang in Indonesia

The ABC correspondent in Indonesia, Gavin Fang, provides updates on Australia’s presence in the region. His reports help ABC’s International Broadcasting service keep Australians informed about events in Asia-Pacific.

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ABC to retain Australia Network

The ABC has been confirmed as the permanent provider of Australia’s international television service, winning a tender process that saw Murdoch-media owned Sky TV withdraw from competition. The ABC will now have sole responsibility for delivering Australia’s international television service.
Reports of two inquiries set up by the Labor Government have been released in the past few months.

Independent Media Inquiry

Urged on by the Australian Greens, in the wake of disquiet about the political campaigning of the Murdoch media and Britain’s phone-hacking scandal, the Gillard Labor Government late last year set up an independent inquiry into Australia’s print and online media and its regulation. The Greens had hoped for a more far-reaching inquiry that dealt with media ownership.

The inquiry’s report reaffirms the importance of a free press. As well, it considers the responsibility of the media that arises as the result of its power to influence society and the damage that can occur when press freedom is not exercised responsibly.

Despite the inquiry’s terms of reference limiting its ability to make recommendations that deal with the underlying problem of Australia’s dangerously high concentration of major media ownership, the report recognises that the market cannot be relied upon to deliver the high standard of information and analysis needed for the effective functioning of our democratic system. This is particularly so in view of inadequate media diversity – too few perspectives given voice, and the decline in standards that results from the effective absence of competition.

The inquiry has concluded that existing mechanisms are inadequate to achieve the accountability of news media which is desirable in a democracy, and recommends that a single News Media Council be established to enforce journalistic standards for all news media organisations, including the public broadcasters.

Weak regulation of commercial radio and TV is presently enforced by a federal statutory authority, which also has jurisdiction to deal with some areas of online content and complaints that ABC and SBS radio and television have breached their codes of practice. Print media is regulated by an industry body that relies on voluntary adherence to its codes.

Despite the inquiry recommending a media council that is funded by, but operates independently of, the government, the proposal to increase the external accountability of the media has been met with predictable opposition by the major commercial media outlets. Commercial media outlets are not declaring to the public their interest in being the sole arbiters of free speech and the truth and fairness of information and opinion they disseminate. Instead, they are making lofty claims to be defending democracy and free speech against government interference.

What are the risks of government interference? How do those risks compare with print media owners being allowed to operate unchecked?

Convergence Review

With technology having significantly changed the media landscape, the Government established the Convergence Review last year to examine Australia’s media and communications regulation.

Recommendations on the ABC contained in the Review’s interim report reflect the far stronger position that vested financial interests have to influence inquiries than the underresourced community sector which represents public interests. So while FABC was unable to make a submission to this extensive review in its early stages, it did respond to the Review’s interim report released last December.

In its submission, FABC expressed strong opposition to the proposal that the ABC’s charter be clarified with regard to its digital expansion to “give commercial operators certainty about the boundaries of public broadcaster activities”.

The ABC’s existing charter has served the community well. The retention of a charter which is sufficiently broad to enable the ABC to be innovative and to adapt, including to unforeseen technological change, is critical to the ABC’s viable future.

The overwhelming public benefit in having a thriving national broadcaster must outweigh the interests of commercial media owners to establish boundaries for the ABC in order to maximise their profit. This is especially so in the face of a dangerous lack of commercial media diversity and declining media standards and localism.

FABC was also alarmed the Review had taken up a proposal of the body that represents private production companies to impose on the ABC’s main television channel an Australian content quota consistent with the obligation on commercial free-to-air television broadcasters. (The quota contains sub-content quotas for Australian drama, documentary and children’s programming.)

The ABC’s low levels of Australian drama, for example, in the recent past did not result from a lack of will on the ABC’s part. On the contrary, when the public broadcaster had more funds its level of local drama production was greater than that of the commercial networks.

The ABC has a Charter which requires it to reflect and promote Australian life in a broad range of areas. Adequate funding, not a quota, is needed to ensure the ABC broadcasts high levels of local content.

All ABC television drama production and almost all TV documentary programming has been outsourced to the private production sector, along with considerable amounts of ABC funding. The quota that the beneficiaries of ABC outsourcing are seeking to have imposed on the ABC looks to be an attempt to ensure they would become a protected area, at the expense of other ABC program areas and services, on the frequent occasions that the ABC is inadequately funded.

The imposition of a quota would be an interference in the ABC’s independence. The ABC is far more than one television channel, and the ABC Board must determine how resources should be allocated to best meet the broadcaster’s Charter responsibilities.

Furthermore, the imposition of a quota on the ABC would set a dangerous precedent. Other groups in the community would be encouraged to seek quotas that reflect their program, financial or political interests.

FABC is anxiously awaiting the final report of the Convergence Review, which is yet to be publicly released.

It didn’t suit the arguments of those criticising the Independent Inquiry into the Media & Media Regulation to report that the Inquiry’s head,Former Federal Court Justice Ray Finkelstein QC, was assisted by Matthew Ricketson – Professor of Journalism at Canberra University, a former practising journalist and a long-time free speech advocate.

Highly concentrated media ownership has led to free speech being largely the privilege of a handful of unelected people who control the commercial media by virtue of their wealth. If you support the Inquiry’s recommendation to establish a News Media Council that can at least moderate abuses of journalistic standards, you should let the Government know. Political courage will be needed for it to do anything that is opposed by Australia’s powerful media owners.

The report of the Independent Inquiry into the Media & Media Regulation can be read at www.fabc.org.au
Rupert Murdoch’s domination of the Australian print media may soon be shared by Australia’s richest person, mining billionaire Gina Rinehart. Since joining Lachlan Murdoch on Channel Ten’s board 16 months ago, Rinehart has increased her stake in Fairfax Media (publisher of The Age, Sydney Morning Herald and Australian Financial Review) to 12.58 per cent to become its biggest shareholder. The Financial Review recently reported she had asked for a seat on the Fairfax board.

Should we be worried?
Associate Professor David McKnight thinks so. He wrote in The Conversation: “It would mean that all the significant newspapers in Australia would be controlled by two very wealthy individuals, Rupert Murdoch and Gina Rinehart. In both cases, they bring with them an overarching political ideology which will inevitably affect their newspapers and through them, influence their readers. This influence is not some comic book affair of the owner nightly dictating individual headlines and particular articles. Rather, owners choose editors and they in turn shape the coverage day in and day out.”

David McNight is Associate Professor, Journalism and Media Research Centre at University of NSW, and author of Rupert Murdoch: an investigation of political power (2012).
Christine Nixon at the AGM

The media’s role in public life

Christine Nixon became the first female chief commissioner of police in Australia. She regularly and closely observed the operation of the Australian media in her long police career.

I was very happy to accept the invitation to speak tonight. I think that the ABC is a very important organisation and a very significant part of our media landscape. I thought I would talk about some of the issues the media is facing at the moment and then share with you some of the experiences that I’ve had with the media over a policing career that extends from the 70s until recently.

The media, I think is amazing. It is also voracious, unforgiving, unpredictable and at times, thanks to the internet, unforgetting. As well it is a challenging time for the media with issues about ownership, integrity, and for some areas, viability. There is also an issue that many people are seeing the media as being less and less reliable.

We have an extraordinarily concentrated media in this country. The two major media houses hold an overwhelming share of newspaper circulation – 89% of capital city and national papers, 79% of suburban newspapers, and 34% of regional papers. Commercial television is similarly concentrated while radio is more fragmented.

As well it is a challenging time for the media with issues about ownership, integrity, and for some areas, viability. There is also an issue that many people are seeing the media as being less and less reliable.

I joined the NSW police in 1972, and started to pay attention to the media as it was a time when investigative journalists, for example Wendy Bacon, did an extraordinary job as they dug into policing, caused governments to take action, to look at corruption commissions and other ways of investigating police. I thought the media played a terrific role, although some colleagues did not think so, and for those who thought policing needed to change the media was a great source of support, whether TV, radio or print. It allowed some police officers the opportunity to say things they had no other way of saying.

I saw the other side of the media too. When I was one of the first three women to go to Darlington Police Station as a trial of women and operational policing, the media arranged us outside the station, walking along, swinging our handbags, with our very nice skirts and labelled us the “Darlings of Darlo”. I thought they could have treated us more seriously.

Similarly, in an interview conducted by Craig McGregor when I won a prestigious Harkness Fellowship to Harvard his profile observed “She has long blond hair, blue eyes, a highly articulate way of speaking, and doesn’t like wearing uniforms. Last week she was drifting around police headquarters in a black dress and a gold chain”. I’d never been accused of drifting anywhere in my entire life. The rest of the article went on to characterise me as a feminist who did not necessarily plan to marry, thought I was smarter than a lot of the blokes and fancied I’d do a better job than a current police commissioner. In a double page spread in the National Times it caused me a great deal of grief and embarrassment.

Much later, when I became Police Commissioner in Victoria in 2001 some media comment was balanced; others christened me “Mrs Doubtfire” and “The Wollongong Lolly Pop Lady” to ensure everybody understood that I didn’t have a long, strong operational background and that would be a problem. Such issues and my size, my background I saw as not important. What I was trying to do was important and some journalists grasped that; others clearly did not.

Among many media issues I’d like to mention one particularly sinister problem. This is the way loaded language can pull people’s strings, push buttons to ensure pain or hurt. Remember, ridicule is man’s most potent weapon against which there is no defence. It’s a cheap bullying tactic and I’ve learned when to confront and when to ignore the bullies. But fear is a powerful, palpable and paralysing and is a visible player in public conversations. Fear twists the game because it muzzles good people. Fear allows the powerful to keep the powerless quietly in their place. In the range of enquiries one issue to be considered should be whether it is right to ridicule people, to make people afraid, to actually conduct vendettas.

One of the things I think the ABC allows people to do is to say things. To actually say it and have it accurately reported. That is why a strong ABC is a really important part of our community and the way it behaves should influence other media outlets. I believe we need more good journalism, fewer commentators pontificating so that the media is a vibrant, strong part of our democracy.

Friends Officers

Friends Newsletter

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