

News+Views

Issue 46 / Spring 2014

Australian democracy at stake

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Save the ABC

Keep protesting

ABC Friends protested outside a special ABC Board meeting at ABC Ultimo last month.

It organised the protest with ABC staff unions to oppose plans that the ABC is reported to have to cut important programs and services in expectation of the Abbott Government further cutting the broadcaster's funding.

We wanted the Board to know it has the strong support of the community to fight Government cuts, and to express our opposition to ABC plans to restructure the national broadcaster without consulting the community.

The protest was the culmination of other activities opposing the cuts.



ABC staff were aware of the protest outside Ultimo. A sign appeared in the window to thank supporters.

ABC Friends has more than 14,000 'likes' on its Facebook page opposing cuts to ABC current affairs.

A petition of former ABC *Media Watch* presenter Jonathan Holmes (pictured below at the protest) on the GetUp platform, which carried the endorsement of ABC Friends, attracted 57,000 signatures in less than two days.



THE ABC MUST NOT BE DESTROYED IN SECRET

ABC Friends is continuing to collect and send signed petitions to the ABC Board that urge it to make public its plans for the ABC and to routinely publish ABC executive and board minutes, as does the BBC. Obtain your petition from ABC Friends office or www.abc.org.au

Action



Phone Your Coalition Politician Day

ABC Friends is asking people all over Australia to phone their local Liberal or National Party Federal Member of Parliament on Wednesday 19 November.

Or, if your seat is not represented by a Coalition politician, instead phone a Liberal or National Party Senator who represents your State.

Phone their electorate office to let them know that you value the ABC. Tell them that you are outraged the Coalition Government has broken its pre-election promise not to cut the ABC, that the ABC's independence from commercial and government influence is crucial, and that you want the national broadcaster maintained as an outstanding cultural institution, not run as a business.

Put a note in your diary now and spread the word. Be prepared to use your phone's redial button and keep trying throughout the day. If you can't get through in the end, send an email to explain that you haven't been able to reach them by phone, and request a reply.

To identify federal politicians that represent you and to locate their electorate office contact details: phone the Australian Electoral Commission on 13 23 26; or enter your postcode in the Keyword search box near the end of the page at: www.aph.gov.au/Senators_and_Members

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The ABC is vital to Australian democracy

by Fiona Stanley

From the age of five when I was an Argonaut, the ABC has been a force for good in my life and work. It has educated, informed, entertained and excited me for over 60 years. It is a fantastic resource for this nation.

Unfortunately, many of us have taken the ABC for granted. My hope is that readers will realise how valuable our public broadcaster is and fight to save it from further cuts and harassment.

If you only read *The Australian*, or listen to the views of some politicians, you would think that the ABC is struggling to provide fair coverage of events, is biased in its politics and its science, and that it is wasting taxpayers' dollars.

Have you noticed that journalists critical of the ABC have started to call it 'the taxpayer-funded ABC'?

Well, what do taxpayers actually think about 'their ABC'?

The most recent independent Newspoll shows an extraordinary level of support and enthusiasm.

Over 84% of Australians believe that the national broadcaster provides a valuable service to the community.

Moreover, 84% believe that its reporting is accurate and fair; 80% think that it does a good job on country and regional issues and 78% that ABC TV is of high quality.

If any other organisation had such high proportions of people valuing it across the country it would be very happy indeed.

I suggest that it is evidence that the national broadcaster is providing value for the money invested in it.

So how much does it cost and what do we get for that? It is interesting to compare the ABC budgets from almost 30 years ago to now in terms of real funding.

In 1986, with \$906.3M the ABC employed 6,092 fulltime equivalent staff, had one analog television channel, 38 radio sites, Radio National and ABC Classic FM with 90% coverage, and 2JJ, as it was known then, servicing only Sydney.

Last financial year, with \$825.7 million, the ABC had 4,679 staff with four major digital TV channels (ABC1, ABC2/ABC4Kids, ABC3 and ABC News 24) and an incredibly successful online catch-up service.

The average audience reach varies from nearly 10 million for ABC1 to just over 3 million for ABC3, with an astonishing 20 million plays a month for iView.

There are 60 local radio sites, nationwide RN, Triple J and Classic FM, plus ABC podcasts downloaded 71 million times.

ABC online has 19.5 million visits per month and there are now over 25 smart phone and tablet apps.

So much for quantity. What about quality?

The Board receives regular data on how citizens value ABC content and we continue to be impressed by these reviews.

As a scientist, I believe there is ample evidence to support the conclusion that the ABC is fulfilling its charter to help Australians to participate more fully as informed citizens in a democracy.

Why is the ABC so important for Australian democracy?

Society faces a number of what are called 'wicked problems' – complex in their causation, having major impacts on people and nations, costly and difficult to manage, and demanding whole of government responses.

These problems include climate change, environmental degradation, mental illness (including problems caused by substance abuse), obesity and inequality.

Citizens need to be informed about these issues to support appropriate political and whole of government policy solutions.



Fiona Stanley is a Distinguished Research Professor, UWA, Vice Chancellor's Fellow, UniMelb and ABC board member.

Australian citizens depend upon the public broadcaster to present the issues and the science in critical and clear ways so that we can make the best decisions and help our politicians and bureaucrats to do the same; spending taxpayers funds on policies and solutions that work now and in the future.

The ABC is crucial because we are poorly served by other parts of the media.

Too often, problems become politicised, the science is discarded and rational debate and decision-making go out the window.

Science is not perfect, particularly when you are dealing with the kinds of complex problems mentioned above. What we need is the best science to guide us as we continue to research and improve policy responses as more becomes known.

Critics allege the ABC is biased in relation to climate change.

I give one recent example: on 11 August, *The Australian* reported that media analysis of the ABC's coverage of coal and coal seam gas mining suggested that these industries had a negative environmental impact and that investing in renewables should be prioritised. *The Australian's* response was to assume bias and demand, the ABC be privatised.

In reality, the ABC's reporting accurately reflects the science on coal and CSG and the lower environmental impact of renewable, (particularly with regard to the emission of greenhouse gas.

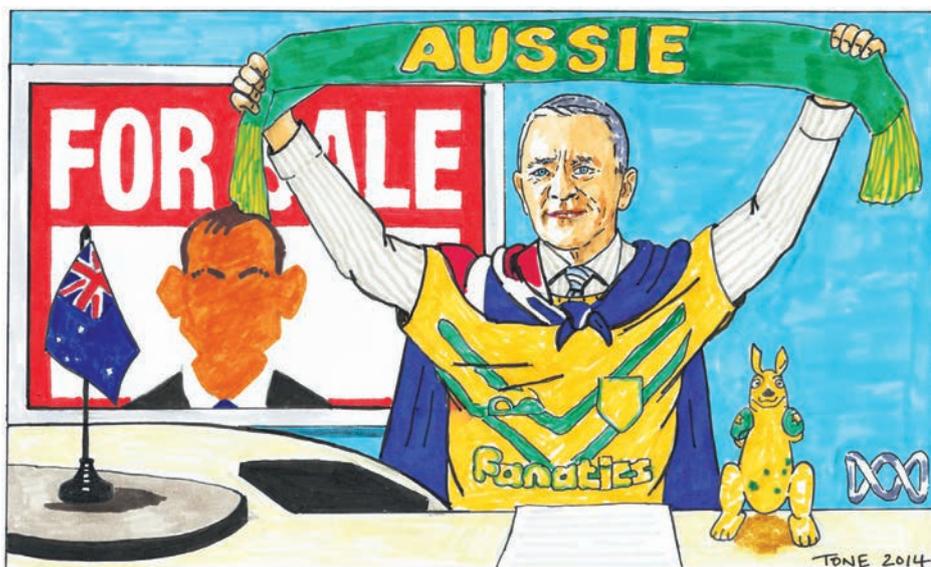
The requirement for 'balance' does not mean that bad science should be reported with the same emphasis as good science.

We are now in a situation where a major commercial news organisation is denigrating the ABC with a vicious, sustained campaign which is extremely damaging to our public broadcaster and to the nation.

The ABC has already had to make compromises: the Government has cut the Australia Network so the Charter obligation to broadcast news and entertainment to countries outside Australia has to be fulfilled by making cuts elsewhere.

We have lost some of our top journalists in this process. Further cuts have been announced and these are just the beginning.

Australians must realise what implications there are for the nation's capacity to be a well-informed and therefore competent country.



HERE IS THE ABC NEWS ... OI..OI..OI !!

Illustration by Tony Sowersby

Will it be *your* ABC? by Quentin Dempster

Hundreds of jobs are now on the line at the ABC. There are fears that those facing the greatest impact are older audiences and the program makers who serve them.

ABC managing director Mark Scott has been laying the groundwork for big changes at the ABC in several addresses he has given this year.



Scott and the ABC Board appear to be planning to combine the organisation's response to Abbott Government budget cuts with a radical reallocation of remaining resources to 'invest' in content creation for mobiles and tablets

pitched at a young audience.

Mark Scott has said:

"The ABC needs to act promptly to future-proof the organisation in the face of changes brought by digital technology."

60% of Australians watch ABC television and 40% listen to ABC radio every week. However, the 25% who come to an ABC website or app is too low, particularly in view of how important online and mobile will become in the future.

"The ABC's audience polarises demographically."

The ABC is a dominant force in children's television: "Nought to 14 ... they love us." Once audiences are in their 50s, they start to come back quite strongly to the ABC. But ABC television's hold over audiences in their late teens and in their 20s, 30s, and 40s is nowhere near as strong.

Excluding Triple j, whose 'blockbuster' reach has almost doubled in the past eight years, ABC radio networks: local radio, NewsRadio, Radio National, Classic FM – all skew age 50 plus.

It is this 'demographic gap' that Mark Scott says needs to be confronted.

Needless to say, ABC program makers currently working in these 'skewing-old' networks now apprehend a strategic management bias against them.

They are understandably worried about existing loyal audiences and their own futures with the organisation.

Scott says the ABC is seeing an 'explosive growth' in the desire of its audience to watch and experience content on mobile phones and tablets.

He has told his management teams he wants to increase the ABC's online audience from 25% of Australians to 40% in coming years by investing more money in online and mobile services.

Four key areas have been identified to achieve this: iView, Triple j, ABC children's services and ABC News.

So online and mobile is said to be the key to securing the ABC's future, but Scott says very little in terms of what actual content is needed, describing this simply as "great Australian drama, news, regional content, arts, narrative comedy, religion and science".

Exactly what future content which 'skews young' on mobiles and tablets is to be created and how, by whom and under what commissioning criteria is not mentioned.

In an address to Queensland University of Technology, Scott signaled a future commissioning strategy of default outsourcing. He said that outsourcing must be considered unless there is a compelling financial or editorial reason for an activity to remain in-house, or unless it relates to an area of core competence.

At risk with this default outsourcing is the loss of the ABC's creative independence and its negotiating leverage on price with commercial production houses.

Unless the ABC has a capacity to make its own copyrighted content and exploit its own intellectual property, it will be drawn inexorably into programming that is commercially 'bankable' as it will be dependent entirely on outside producers and their investors' subjective preferences.

Scott needs to explain exactly what content he will be asking taxpayers to invest in and how it fits with the legislated Charter of the ABC to enhance a sense of national identity, to inform and to entertain.

At a time of disaggregation of free-to-air television audiences and the decline of print



Quentin Dempster is an ABC journalist, author, broadcaster, and advocate for public broadcasting.

journalism, there seems to be a greater need than ever for a public broadcaster/cyber-caster that is not driven by the prejudices and preferences of demographic segments but more concerned with "broadcasting" - ensuring that young, old, geographically and culturally diverse Australians know what each other is thinking.

There is no doubt that we are undergoing the single greatest change in the communications era since the invention of the printing press. However, there are risks in making some short term decisions that anchor in the status quo that might well harm the ABC by 2032 (the ABC's 100th anniversary).

The role of the ABC is to expand the experience of the people of the nation: call it nation building, cohesion or inclusion. The programming ideas which evolve from this ethos should not be driven by ratings or by 'skewing' demographically.

The ABC should be building its younger audience. However, it should also return the strong loyalty shown by Australia's ageing population.

Whatever the merits of Scott's arguments for these changes, any reallocation decision of the ABC Board should not be presented as a fait accompli.

If change does need to happen at the ABC, the taxpayers of Australia, who pay for the ABC, must be engaged in a conversation about the role of the national broadcaster through the digital revolution.

This is an edited extract of an article on The Drum www.abc.net.au/news/2014-09-11/dempster-the-future-of-the-abc/5733918



National week of action to oppose ABC cuts

Monday 17 November

Protests to oppose ABC cuts will take place in every capital city and many regional centres around Australia in the week commencing Monday 17 November.

Check what is happening in your area at www.abcfriends.org.au



Badge Up!

We are asking people who appreciate the ABC to wear a badge to create

conversations and increase community awareness of what's happening to the ABC. Have fun and do something imaginative with your badge. Then post it as a selfie to the growing campaign on ABC Friends Facebook page by emailing it to abcfriends.photos@gmail.com

Badges from www.fabcnsw.org.au/fabc



Photograph by Fabia Paul.

ABC Friends

ABC Friends is a national campaign. It comprises ABC Friends and Friends of the ABC organisations across Australia.

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Friends Newsletter

EDITOR: Glenys Stradijot // DESIGN: Julie Cattlin // PRINTING: Arena Printing & Publishing

News+Views is produced for ABC Friends by Friends of the ABC (Vic) Inc A0034181A

Issued three times a year. Letters from members are welcome. Send to: *The Editor, News+Views, GPO Box 4065, Melbourne, VIC 3001* or email: office@abcfriends.org.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 ABC Friends.

www.abcfriends.org.au

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Useful contacts

The Hon Tony Abbott MP, Prime Minister, Parliament House, Canberra 2600

ABC – phone: 13 9994. GPO Box 9994, Sydney 2001
James Spigelman AC – Chairman, ABC Board
Mark Scott – ABC Managing Director

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

Identify your electorate: <http://apps.aec.gov.au/eseach>

What you could lose

Former ABC staff director, Quentin Dempster reported to protesters outside the ABC Board meeting at Ultimo information from concerned management and staff about programs and services considered to be in danger. The extent of cuts will depend on how much further the Government intends to cut the ABC. However, Dempster warned, ABC managing director Mark Scott also appears to be taking the opportunity for organisational change to redirect resources from output for older audiences to on-line and mobile content for young people.

In spite of the success of ABC television multi-channelling (ABC TV, ABC 2, the children's channel ABC 3, and News 24) it appears the ABC Board, in consultation with the Government, will halve these services. ABC 3 will possibly be merged with ABC TV, and ABC 2 shut down to save transmission costs. SBS 2 is also expected to be closed.

Under threat:

- Radio networks that attract older audiences – local radio, Classic FM, NewsRadio and Radio National.
- Classic FM can expect a reduction in live broadcasts, more presenter-less streaming of playlists of orchestral and other works for which the ABC owns the copyright.
- ABC Radio's *The World Today* to be cut in half. Other impacts on radio current affairs to reduce full time equivalent positions.
- ABC Radio news bulletins to be cut from 10 minutes to five.

- Specialist Radio National programs *Bush Telegraph*, *Rear Vision*, *360*, *Hindsight*, *Encounter* and *By Design* to be discontinued or cut in half.
- A reduction of foreign bureaux to four hubs: Washington, London, Jakarta and Beijing. Middle East coverage out of Jerusalem and Beirut to be done by video journalism, i.e. no dedicated camera crews. (Camera crews are vital to international reporting as collaborators and to the physical safety of staff who sometimes work in dangerous situations.)
- *Foreign Correspondent* – already reduced to 30 episodes a year over two seasons to be reduced to 26 episodes.
- On TV the final destruction of localism in current affairs with the axing of the 7.30 state editions in all states and territories.
- South Australia to lose all local television production outside TV news.
- *Lateline* – the hybrid news and current affairs program with reports and interviews which has been instrumental in the last 25 years in its international analysis and domestically holding government and this country's institutions to account – axed.
- In the new digital revolution, organisationally the ABC's separate radio and television divisions are expected to go.
- The final withering in the ABC of specialist units like science and religion.

I'm sure there's more we don't know about. The fate of Ticky Fullerton's late night market analysis program *The Business* is in doubt.

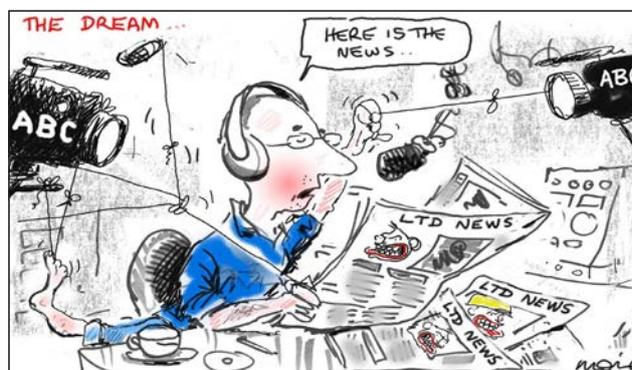


Illustration by Alan Moir. First published *The Sydney Morning Herald*.

These cuts to channels, programs and services will strip the capacity to produce the original content which has made the ABC distinctive. These are not the back office cuts that Communications Minister Malcolm Turnbull assured the public would be all that would result from his Efficiency Review.

ABC Board



ABC axeman appointed to Board

The appointment to the ABC's governing board of Peter Lewis sends an alarming message for the ABC's future. Mr Lewis is the commercial television executive with a career in executive financial roles who the Government appointed to head its recent efficiency review of the ABC. ABC Friends also believes that Mr Lewis's appointment is improper, as well as inappropriate. He was appointed by the Abbott Government to head its

ABC efficiency review after 15 years with Seven West Media. His work on the review, in which he had access to confidential information about the internal operations of the ABC and SBS, was barely finished when it became public that his next job, though short lived, was to be chief financial officer of another major commercial competitor to the ABC, Southern Cross Media.

Peter Lewis's appointment to the ABC Board appears to be a reward for having devised a blueprint for how the ABC should be cut. It also provides an indication of the type of public broadcaster that Communications Minister Malcolm Turnbull wants the ABC to become.