

ABORIGINAL REPRESENTATION IN THE MEDIA

AN ADDRESS BY BRIAN JOHNS, CHAIRMAN, ABA, TO 'THE MEDIA AND INDIGENOUS AUSTRALIANS CONFERENCE' IN BRISBANE ON 16 FEBRUARY 1993.

I appreciate that I am here to speak to you about codes of practice and policies under the new Broadcasting Services Act introduced last year, but I have to say at the outset that all guidelines, regulations and bold statements of objectives will be as nothing until Aboriginal Australians have creative control over their own programs.

It is ironic that one needs to make such an assertion even today.

Australians above all should be sensitive to the needs of people to see and hear their own voices. Yet, sadly, this proposition, which I regard as self-evident is yet to be accepted and acted upon.

I have had some experience of the difficulties involved in finding the funds and the resources for programs made by Aboriginal Australians.

Yet the fact is that these are difficulties inherent in the making of any Australian program, which has to compete against the world's programming wholesalers and chain stores.

As Australians we are up against the resources of the major program producers around the world when trying to find resources to create our own programming.

Few would agree that the difficulties involved are an excuse for not confronting the issues.

I realise that I am preaching to the converted in saying that Aboriginal representation in the media will not be realised until Aboriginal Australians control the means of production.

This is important for the development of the Aboriginal community's self-respect, just as it is for the self-respect of any group that finds itself in the minority and assailed by the power and culture of another dominant group.

There are examples of successful ventures, programs such as the ABC's 'Black-out', SBS' 'First In Line' and a new series being made by Rachel Perkins. In each of these examples indigenous Australians had creative control.

And, there are other outstanding examples of Aboriginal communities running their own broadcasting stations by way of the special interest licences granted by the former Australian Broadcasting Tribunal.

Moreover, there are now ten major Aboriginal production companies in operation, over 40 radio broadcasting groups now presenting on-air radio programs - mainly through the Community Broadcasting Network and more than 60 BRACS units (Broadcasting to Remote Aboriginal Communities) presenting television and radio programs to their regional communities.

Just yesterday, the ABA approved the release of a frequency at Port Augusta for a narrowcast service specifically directed at the needs of Aboriginal people living in the area.

These instances aside, what can the ABA, as the regulator of Australia's commercial media, offer you about the future under the new Broadcasting Services Act?

I see three major ways forward for those of you who want to pursue the issue of Aboriginal representation in the media.

Firstly, it is important for you to explore the new Act which introduced a new style of regulation with new opportunities and new responsibilities in October 1992.

This change in legislative outlook was introduced to increase the efficiency of the broadcasting industry and to promote greater diversity and choice by allowing a greater number of providers and service types.

The potential is now there for local opportunities, for what could be called niche broadcasting, as there are now more entry points for groups wishing to participate in Australia's broadcasting future.

The Act places primary responsibility for the conduct of broadcasting services on broadcasters themselves.

In terms of programming, broadcasters are required to develop codes of

practice relating to issues of community concern. The codes of practice will replace the former Australian Broadcasting Tribunal's program standards, which were carried over to give industry the breathing space necessary to develop codes.

The issues codes may address include matters such as classification of program material and the promotion of accuracy and fairness in news and current affairs programs.

In developing these codes of practice broadcasters are to take into account community attitudes to, amongst other things:

'The portrayal in programs of matter that is likely to incite or perpetuate hatred against, or vilifies any person or group on the basis of ethnicity, nationality, race, gender, sexual preference, age, religion or physical or mental disability...'

The ABA will accept, or register, a code of practice once we are satisfied that:

- a code provides appropriate community safeguards
- a code is endorsed by the majority of providers of broadcasting services in that section of the industry, and that
- members of the public have been given an adequate opportunity to comment on the codes.

The development of codes of practice is a requirement of all sectors of the electronic media. That is:

- national broadcasters
- commercial television and radio
- community television and radio
- subscription broadcasting and narrowcasting services
- open narrowcasting services.

While this increasing diversity of service type means there are even greater challenges facing those of you determined to have an impact on the media, our experiences with the various industry sectors during this time of code development have been very positive.

Of course, these codes of practice should continue to be reviewed in light of experience - ensuring that they reflect

community attitudes to issues of concern must be an ongoing process.

Broadcasters also assume primary responsibility for the resolution of complaints, with the ABA taking the role of the final arbiter if no satisfactory resolution is achieved within a reasonable period of time.

The Department of Transport and Communications has prepared a draft statement of principles for media reporting on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander issues.

While there may be further debate about the principles, either in this forum or elsewhere, it should be remembered that they are an important start to re-shaping debate about the media and indigenous Australians.

The ABA endorses the statement of principles and I would encourage the broadcasting industry to consider them in developing codes of practice.

But participating in the development of codes is only one part of the process. Another important function of the ABA is to monitor industry compliance with the codes of practice.

The ABA has been provided with very broad information gathering powers. This allows the ABA to 'consult with such persons, bodies and groups as it thinks fit...' in administering the new Act, which has created opportunities to build more direct relationships between the electronic media and the communities they serve.

These opportunities should be recognised and explored to the utmost by those who wish to lead the way for indigenous Australians and the media.

This brings me to the second way in which the ABA can help in this regard.

Recommendation 208 of the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody refers to the need to establish contact between the media industry, media unions, and Aboriginal media organisations.

The discussion paper prepared by ATSIC, the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission, outlines possible strategies for encouraging this essential contact.

While I recognise there will be those in this audience who may not wish to endorse every aspect of this document, please do not ignore the role which can

be played by the ABA, even though it is another government body.

The ABA can bring together the media industry, media unions, and Aboriginal media organisations.

As the broadcasting regulator, the ABA considers ongoing consultative meetings with groups such as these to be invaluable in assessing community concerns.

Please use the ABA as a forum for discussion.

We are committed to helping industry and Aboriginal media groups exchange ideas and search for solutions.

The ABA has an appreciation of the commercial imperatives which drive the television and radio industries.

But it also has to be sensitive to issues of social justice and to support such needs as diversity in cultural representation on television.

One way we do this is through research by which we examine community concerns and provide access for groups to express their views directly to the broadcasting regulator.

Currently we hold Media and Community Council (MACC) meetings, where the ABA has the opportunity to listen and respond to specific concerns.

There is no reason these types of gatherings cannot be held between the ABA and Aboriginal media groups.

The third way forward the ABA can offer to those who want to chart new territory on the issue of indigenous Australians and media, is our research program, which offers knowledge and promotes debate both in the media and amongst the players involved in Australian broadcasting.

You may also find, once you have heard the results, that it gives you powerful tools with which to re-position people's thinking about what the media is, and should be.

The ABA's ongoing research program explores the attitudes of Australians, right around the country, to television and radio - what they like, what they dislike, want and dream about.

Because the ABA is committed to this work and to widely disseminating the results, I will take the opportunity today to launch our latest research monograph which is devoted to the representation of cultural diversity on television.

The focus of this research was overall community views on the representation of cultural diversity on television.

The portrayal of Aboriginal people was one of the issues considered, along with the portrayal of ethnic people on television.

The research used a telephone survey of 1014 people across Australia - a make-up consistent with the need to construct a representative population sample.

I will also provide you with the results of research which specifically addresses the issue of Aboriginal representation in the media by talking to indigenous Australians themselves.

The results will be no surprise to this audience, painfully aware of the media's shortcomings. But the research shows that there is a growing awareness and self-consciousness about the media's failure.

Our national research - conducted in June last year - found many people in the community felt mainstream Australian media did not reflect the true diversity of Australian society.

In the focus group discussions held as part of this research, many participants said that except for the occasional Aboriginal documentary or Aboriginal 'issue based' drama program, indigenous Australians were rarely seen on our screens.

Some people said that when Aborigines did make it onto commercial television, they were often cast as victims, drunks or as threatening, suspicious characters.

Generally, it was considered rare to see positive, significant Aboriginal representation on television. Those surveyed said this creates and reinforces myths and stereotypes about Aborigines.

As I have acknowledged, none of this comes as any surprise to you here today. The point is, though, that the research shows that others are becoming increasingly aware of the deficiencies - and the research validates your case.

The majority of respondents - 57% - considered the frequency of appearance of Aborigines on commercial television to be low. Nearly half of all those surveyed said that Aboriginal people should be seen more often on commercial television in Australia.

Interestingly, 53% of people of a non-English speaking background said Abo-

Aborigines should be seen more often on commercial television.

The call for more Aboriginal representation on our screens was, in fact, higher than the demand for greater portrayal of other community groups.

One of the issues that arose from this research was the need for more extensive input from indigenous Australians about their representation in the media.

It was recognised that any improvement in the way they are presented on television must be based on consultation.

Subsequently, further research was commissioned by the ABA which specifically addressed the ABA's commitment to giving Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people their own voice about their portrayal on television.

The research was a small scale study, conducted by Lester Bostock, well known to many here.

Over 100 Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders, mainly from various parts of NSW but also elsewhere, were included in this research.

The results from this study are not intended to be representative of what all Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders across Australia are saying but those included in this survey underlined what is well understood by this audience:

- that the media still persists in presenting stereotypical images of Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders,
- that it was rare to see significant Aboriginal representation on our screens,
- that there should be more Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander presenters on commercial radio and television,
- that indigenous Australians should be involved in all types of programming on television and
- that indigenous Australians are usually shown as victims of society on commercial television.

Some of the motifs that emerged from these comments were:

- that news and current affairs programs showed negative and often sensational images of indigenous

Australians,

- that the media was perceived as being strongly biased when reporting about Aboriginal people in trouble, particularly when in trouble with the police,
- that a common image on news or current affairs programs was of the



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drunken, homeless, or the violent.

The sheer strength of agreement in response to questions asked showed the media was of great concern for this group.

The results of this survey have interesting implications for the development of codes of practice.

There was strong agreement about the need for more positive, realistic and balanced portrayals of the culture of indigenous Australians.

They were in strong agreement that television should promote different cultures getting on well together in the community - some of the participants

said that judging by the current television portrayals, one would get the impression Aborigines don't have good jobs, shop at supermarkets, drive cars or have mortgages.

What these people were saying was that they want to be included as part of the every day television landscape. They want to be presented as ordinary people where Aborigines are just another television character, not just the character with the problem.

This would give them and their children something to identify with, some role models they could follow.

As one participant said - 'if you tell people often enough that they are worthless and their culture is of no intrinsic value, they will begin to believe it'.

More Aboriginal input on kids programs was a common request.

It was felt this would create a sense of how important Aboriginal culture is and the validity of the Aboriginal experience to young kids.

People said there needs to be more involvement by Aboriginal people in telling their own stories in their own words.

The ABA's research shows that both indigenous Australians and non-Aboriginal Australians are concerned about the current portrayal of Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders on television.

The Royal Commission recognised the need for realistic representation of Aboriginal issues in

the media - both in the interest of fairness and as a means of achieving better relations and understanding between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Australians.

Indigenous Australians want to have their own voice and tell their own stories.

So do non-Aboriginal Australians - this is clear from the strong support for Australian program content expressed by viewers during other ABA surveys.

But where all this knowledge and information has most power, and where you can use it to greatest effect, is in the new role all of you have to play in contributing to the interplay between the public and the broadcasting industry

during the development of codes of practice.

ABA research can be used as a basis for discussion with the networks, with your local commercial media and with individual journalists. These exchanges can then operate beyond anecdote and anger.

You can use our research to approach the industry both on codes and as part of the new complaints mechanism - because the research informs not only those complaining, but the ABA in its decision-making processes.

Under the Act, the ABA is no longer a one stop shop for complaints. Those

unhappy with the media must first complain to the broadcaster involved.

If after a 60 day period you do not receive a satisfactory response, then it is possible to complain to the ABA as a final arbiter or ombudsman.

In making your complaint, there is also the opportunity to draw on ABA research in order to suggest possible solutions and ways forward for everyone involved in the Australian broadcasting arena.

Today I have discussed several ways for you to tackle problems associated with the media and representation of

indigenous Australians.

I commend to you the three ways forward I have suggested -

- the opportunities presented by the new Act,
- the ABA as a forum, and
- the Authority's research program as a basis for thoughtful and informed debate by all sides.

I look forward to hearing from those of you who wish to lead Australians' thinking about indigenous Australians and the media.



THE CHANGING CONTEXT OF BROADCASTING

AN ADDRESS BY JANET CAMERON, OF GRANT BROADCASTERS PTY LTD, AN INDEPENDENT RADIO OPERATOR, AT THE ABA'S CORPORATE PLAN WORKSHOP HELD FROM 2-5 FEBRUARY 1993.

Thank you very much for the invitation to speak with you today. I should pre-empt my comments by saying that they will relate only to radio and more particularly regional radio. There are a few introductory remarks I would like to make before attempting to address the subject, 'The changing context of broadcasting'.

Radio provides many things to many people but these may be listed as follows:

- Entertainment mainly in the form of music;
- Information in the form of news, talkback and special programming;
- Localism by an identification with the community within which it operates;
- A media by which advertisers can promote their goods or services;
- And an investment for shareholders.

The current structure of the industry is:

The ABC
Public Broadcasters
Commercial Broadcasters
And a small number of services operating under the limited licence pro-

visions of the provisional legislation.

In addition to the extension of the current utilisation of the AM and FM frequencies we can foresee the start of digital audio broadcasting (DAB) in some five years which will allow many more frequencies, satellite coverage with large footprints and linear coverage e.g. along highways with the one frequency.

The future of narrowcasting and audio on pay TV carriers is still to be determined.

After that overview I find it is very early to be dealing with today's subject matter 'The changing context for broadcasting' from both the operational point of view and the planning aspects. In the operational context I might say the radio industry was delighted with the practical approach taken by the ABA to the revision of the form for the collection of annual financial data. We felt the result provided the ABA with the information they needed to know but reduced the burden on the industry to complete a long and overly complex form.

We have yet to see the effect of the new Broadcasting Services Act and the way in which the ABA will deal with it on planning aspects. Currently our major

concern is narrowcasting. It would be fair to say that the way narrowcasting was portrayed in the draft bill was akin to the former limited licences, but with an extension to provide a greater range of 'narrow' services. The impact of narrowcasting is causing a deal of concern to some operators because they cannot get a handle on what it is. No one has a problem with tourist radio but we query how the narrowcasting racing services in Newcastle and Wollongong turn up on two recently used AM frequencies with what appears to be the old AM station's operating conditions.

Many operators are asking, what next? This is even more puzzling when the one feature that the new Act emphasised again and again was the opportunity for more public input. The interpretation that we were able to make from the draft Bill turned out to be different from what seems to be happening in practice. It seems that a similar uncertainty has happened with MDS and pay TV.

For regional operators the most heartening aspect of the Broadcasting Services Act was section 39 which would finally allow them the opportunity to run a second service in their markets. The saga