



# A National Institution

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The health and future of public broadcasting is a hot topic amongst media analysts, journalists, policy makers and politicians at the moment - but is it discussed across the breakfast tables of Australia? Unfortunately, public opinion is usually only demonstrated when the institution changes. A favourite radio program fails to return, a much loved presenter decides to do something else or an entire format is overhauled with a different audience in mind. Then you see, hear and read the reaction, then you feel the passion and rage, then you know the depth of concern and the connection with the community.

## Sectoral diversity

An interview with the musician Sting appearing on SBS Television last month saw him lamenting the fact that there was too much media choice these days. He felt there was something to be said for the time when all of Britain tuned to Wednesday Drama in the evening, a kind of electronic unification of the nation. This was a comment on the British broadcasting system; by comparison, it reveals how differently Australia approached the building of what has become a unique and highly successful radio broadcasting system.

Commercial radio was only introduced into Britain in 1974, with the only possible result being a threatened BBC monopoly losing audiences to the newcomers. Australia's system, on the other hand, commenced in the early 1930s with both the commercial industry and ABC Radio growing together with different objectives and providing, from the outset, a strong and competitive environment. As commercial radio was being introduced into Britain, Australia was adding its third radio sector, as community stations were licensed to meet broad-

casting and social policy objectives. The addition of SBS Radio to the national broadcasting sector in 1975 filled a need not being met by existing broadcasters.

The inherent strength of this three-cornered radio industry has provided not only competition and choice for listeners, but radio of exceptionally high quality. This system has allowed each of the sectors to develop reasonably independently of one another, with the occasional scuffle around the edges focused primarily on licensing and transmission policies.

## The outlook for national public broadcasting

The strengths of the national sector include its diversity, independence from Government or commercial influence, focus on quality and difference, dedication to comprehensive news gathering and analysis, freedom to make radio other than for a demographic with a large disposable income, geographic and sociographic spread, and commitment to producing radio which adds value to people's lives and helps them make sense of the world.

It has been widely reported that the ABC faces a budget shortfall this financial year and is about to embark on a major re-shaping. There has also been speculation that both the ABC and SBS will face budget cuts when next month's Federal Budget is brought down. Despite pre-election commitments, the Minister for Communications and the Arts won't rule out the possibility of cuts to the national sector. What does this mean for ABC and SBS Radio? Radio is a people medium - resources are mostly tied up in staff and discretionary expenditure is therefore minimal. Consequently, any reduction to its budget necessar-

ily results in staff losses and program changes.

The Corporation's re-shaping exercise to deal with the current funding shortfall will have a significant impact on radio programming. However, ABC Radio has also determined a number of key emphases for the future which will guide its strategy and further re-shaping. These emphases, considered vital to the organisation's continued relevance and success to audiences, are: refocusing localism, strengthening news and current affairs, and enhancing specialist and cultural programming. Clearly, any further decrease in the budget available to the ABC will result in a greater adverse impact on programming than is presently envisaged, and potentially affect the current range and number of ABC Radio networks.

## Listening to ABC and SBS radio

A quick tour through the national sector displays its breadth of coverage in terms of both programming and community reach. ABC Radio offers four national networks and a network of local stations across metropolitan and regional centres of Australia.

The package includes two FM music networks - *Classic FM*, which as the title suggests, has at its core classical music but which also ranges across various specialist music styles and includes award winning acoustic art programs and dramas. At the other end of the musical spectrum is *Triple J*. This network brings a younger audience the newest in music with a heavy emphasis on local content. The recent "Unearthed" project resulted in *Triple J* recording and playing some 29 musicians or bands from 19 regions around Australia. Triple J also



pushes the edges of the envelope as it covers issues of specific interest to young Australians.

ABC Radio's talk and information networks are distinctive from commercial and community radio, and from one another. One of the great identifiers across all of the ABC's networks, however, is the ABC news theme - albeit a little bent out of shape on *Triple J*. At a time when Australian commercial radio news gathering and production is at its lowest ever, the value of a strong and independent Australian news service cannot be underestimated.

In fact, the most recent addition to ABC Radio's package of services was the News and Parliamentary Network (PNN). This rolling news service was designed and launched in 1994 to incorporate the ABC's legal obligation to broadcast Parliament. *NewsRadio* relies on the strength of ABC News, which generates some 2500 stories a day across 58 domestic and 19 overseas news bureaux.

*Radio National* is the ABC's specialist network, a unique service providing listeners with in-depth information, discussion and debate on contemporary social, political and economic issues. The local stations are just that - quality programming covering local stories and issues in each of the capital cities and some 49 regions around the nation. The regional stations also have a particular emphasis on rural programming and service information, with both city and country enjoying ABC Radio sports coverage.

SBS Radio celebrated its 20th anniversary last year. It was established to provide the many community audiences with news, information and entertainment in their own languages and is unique in the world. In 1975 SBS Radio broadcast in eight languages. Today there are 68 languages represented on a national network reaching all capital cities and some larger NSW and Victorian centres.

### Measuring up to the future

The Minister for Communications called last month for the ABC and SBS to 'benchmark' their services in order to determine their success or failure. The national sector of the radio industry has always used a wide range of performance measures because the financial indicators of the commercial industry are inapplicable to publicly funded organisations. Unlike the commercial sector, the measure of market share for the national sector is nowhere near as important as the measure of audience reach - the number of Australians using the services each week. Last month, around six million Australians listened to at least one ABC Radio station each week. This weekly reach figure has grown from just over four and half million in 1990.

Other measures used by ABC Radio to benchmark services include regular audience appreciation research, international and domestic awards for programs, performance of individual programs, shifts and stations against performance briefs and targets, analysis of news content, audience feedback and transmission fault trends. ABC and SBS Radio are naturally subject to the strict accountability measures to Parliament already in place for the respective Corporations.

An essential measure of the national radio sector, and one of the fundamental tenets of a democracy, is the ability to provide a range of perspectives. With ten thousand voices heard on ABC Radio every week and the inherent diversity of languages, cultural perspectives and voices on SBS Radio, the National broadcasting sector is a vital part of the Australian broadcasting system and one not replicated anywhere else in the world. □

### ABA SEEKS COMPLIANCE WITH 'SPIRIT' OF OZ DRAMA RULES

The Australian Broadcasting Authority (ABA) has issued new voluntary guidelines for compliance with Pay TV licence conditions regarding expenditure on local drama programs, following the acknowledged ineffectiveness of the present rules.

Section 102 of the Broadcasting Services Act requires pay television licensees who provide drama programs to spend at least 10% of their annual program expenditure on new Australian drama programs. The ABA defines a pay TV drama service as one whose annual drama programming comprises more than 50% of its total programming. Presently, there are 13 drama pay television channels in operation.

The legislation, drafted prior to the development of the pay TV industry in Australia, fails to account for the fact that it is pay TV broadcasters and channel providers, rather than licensees themselves, who generally incur 'program expenditure'. As a result, the law's intention can easily be avoided.

The revised guidelines, developed in consultation with the pay TV industry, seeks to encourage non-licensee program purchasers to 'honour the spirit' of the licence condition. The ABA's Chairman, Peter Webb, expressed confidence that the industry would respond positively to the new guidelines.

The guidelines are intended as an interim measure pending the outcome of the Ministerial review of Australian content on pay television, which is to be completed by 1 July 1997. In a press release, the ABA stated it expected the guidelines would form a 'valuable input' into the review. □