



One ABC in the digital age

The Internet and digital broadcasting present profound challenges to the national broadcaster, writes its managing director Brian Johns.

Around the world, public broadcasters are in the midst of change – change triggered by the digital revolution.

Digital technology is profoundly affecting the way audiences gain access to information and entertainment, the way programs are made and delivered, and the economics of program production. And it poses significant policy dilemmas for the future of public broadcasting and its funding.

When I arrived at the ABC more than two years ago, there was a growing recognition that the ABC needed a bold but practical response to the challenges and opportunities presented by this revolution.

One ABC was born – a commitment to a strong ABC in the digital age.

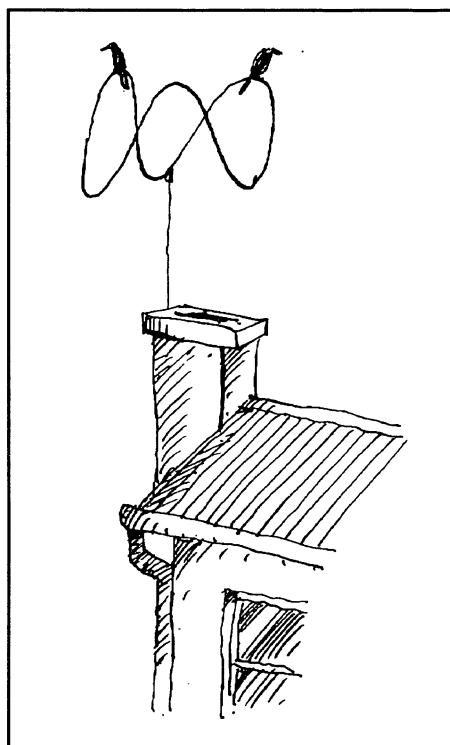
Initially the plan saw an evolutionary approach over four years, allowing for a staged and logical transformation of its operations and services. The government's cuts of \$66 million over two years meant that the process had to accelerate, and the real programming benefits for audiences scaled back.

One ABC has a clear conceptual framework.

The ABC as an organisation must be focussed on content, not just the delivery of programs. Production is our core business. And we must recognise that programming skills cannot be locked into media-specific compartments.

The ABC must be outward focussed, open to ideas from the broader creative community and looking to the opportunities for quality content presented by the burgeoning markets in the multichannel environment.

In a federal social and political system, the ABC must build on its strong regional base and the support of regional audiences.



Down the track it is clear that the process of a fundamental transformation has built its own momentum. The first programming dividends from this transformation have emerged. They are just a beginning.

The ABC must be allowed to participate in the digital age if it is to successfully maintain its central position in Australian public life. But the national broadcaster does not have the deep pockets of the commercial networks.

In news and current affairs, stories are increasingly being assigned

on a bi-media basis, delivering a more consistent editorial direction. Leading the charge are newsrooms in Perth, Hobart and Brisbane.

Particular content projects involve planning for radio, television and online services. Our integrated coverage of the Festival of Dreaming associated with the Cultural Olympiad is a pointer to our approach to programming for the Olympics themselves, the centenary of Federation, and in the more immediate future the Constitutional Convention.

Some small examples. We're developing a National Poetry Day involving radio, television and online services. This builds on the precedent established by Comedy Week and Science Week.

In the pipeline is a long-term project to map changes in the city of Newcastle following the planned closure of the BHP steelworks.

The ABC's online services are breaking new ground, capturing the attention of audiences. More and more people are clicking onto our sites and the feedback is excellent.

One success is 'The Lab' - the ABC's science online gateway, launched in July. A world first, it brings together all of the science content of ABC television network, the radio networks, programming developed specifically for the online site, and links to major science sites here and around the world.

More gateways are planned with education as a major priority. An education site would be a stimulus in planning for education programming across radio, television and Radio Australia.

The ABC's online service has been enhanced significantly. Its 24-hour



service offers a wide range of text audio and vision. Again this is a leader service to the development of the ABC's 24-hour news capability across all our services.

We will shortly be offering a regional dimension to this news service, using the pool of journalists in regional stations across Australia. We already have a rural newspaper on the Web - called the Bush Telegraph - and a rural news service.

However, to deliver an ABC which is relevant to the next generation of Australian audiences, the ABC needs access to the new technology.

The level at which the ABC is able to participate in this revolution will have a marked impact on the broadcasting and media services provided to Australians in the future.

The ABC has a commitment to provide facilities for HDTV in every state in Australia, ensuring that local programming does not become a 'second cousin'.

Without the ABC, opportunities presented for the growth of education programming both online and on radio and television might not be exploited.

Without the ABC, the capacity of the digital revolution to increase the amount of quality state-based and regionally-based television program might not be realised.

Without the ABC, programs which truly reflect Australian cultural endeavour may be relegated to the sidelines.

Without a proper 24-hour outlet for the ABC's independent news and current affairs service, on radiotelevision and online, its penetrating presence will fade.

Australian audiences want and appreciate these services - services which the commercial sector cannot deliver.

In the coming months the debate will intensify in Australia on the

introduction of digital broadcasting technology. The ABC was an early leader in digital production for radio, and has made a strong start in other areas. But the costs of conversion are daunting.

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across the Corporation. It is a strategy that will ensure that the visual quality of ABC programs will keep pace with international and local commercial programming. The strategy will ensure that the ABC can extend the values of its services by utilising the multichannel and program 'add-on' capabilities of digital broadcasting.

Most important, the strategy addresses our needs for production and delivery in all states and regions, in radio, television and online services.

The ABC accepts responsibility for meeting as much of the cost of conversion as it can. We have already said that any funds from property rationalisation will be translated into capital infrastructure. We are also looking realistically at our future requirements for program facilities to limit the cost of conversion.

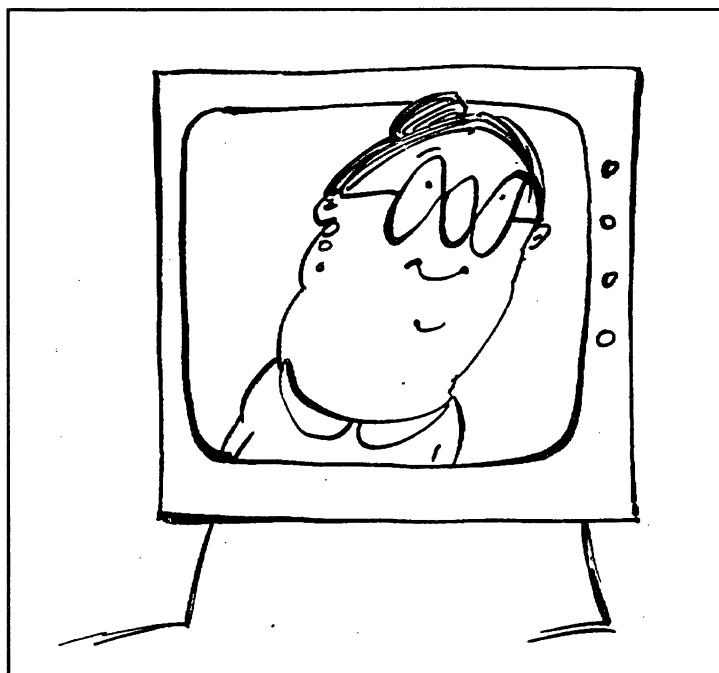
Before the end of the year there will be discussion with the government about how it might help the ABC fund this costly conversion. Just

as previous governments have come to the party in the transition from radio to television and from black and white television to colour.

The One ABC concept has set the wheels in motion for the most profound transformation of the ABC in a generation. The ABC will remain central to the media and cultural life of the nation.

They have been a tough ten months but the hard work is paying off. I cannot underestimate the extraordinary commitment of ABC staff. That audiences have remained sup-

portive and in many areas have actually increased is evidence that the ABC, and all the values which it represents, are as valid as ever.



As part of its One ABC planning, the ABC is developing a detailed five year technology strategy to allow it to extend digital technology