

update

Friends of the ABC (NSW) Inc.
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friends of the ab

Reaching Audiences Wherever They Live: The Public Broadcaster's Duty

Extracts from an address Russell Balding made to a recent conference of Commonwealth Broadcasters in the U.K.

2002 is the Year of the Outback. So it's very appropriate I should be addressing this audience about the ways the ABC broadcasts beyond the cities and extends its reach throughout the entire Australian continent.

To Our ABC



Inside:- Stewart Fist, Robyn Williams, Hugh MacKay, David Salter and Ken Inglis

The ABC has three distinct delivery platforms: radio, which began in 1932, Television (1956) and our internet site, ABC Online, which started in 1995.

With almost 700 combined terrestrial and satellite transmitters, ABC television programs reach more than 96% of the population, and radio more than 98%.

ABC Online, our Internet site, is the most popular of our new media offerings. We are a country of 19.1 m. people where about 35% of Australian households have internet access, 98% have televisions, and there are over 25 million radios.

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Friends applaud Balding appointment

NSW Friends President Penelope Toltz, said the new Chief Executive, as acting Managing Director since Jonathan Shier's unlamented departure, had returned stability to the ABC and confidence to its executives. "Russell Balding has demonstrated that he is a team player," Penelope said "He has managed the ABC collectively in tandem with his executive group, working together. There has been no chaos. It's been a time for healing and production.

The ABC has returned to concentrating on broadcasting. Its latest ratings reflect its resurgence. As Mr Balding himself has said, the ABC is looking good, refreshed and bringing its audiences back.

"Since Mr Balding's background is particularly strong in finance, there is an expectation that future negotiations with the government will succeed in securing proper funding for the public broadcaster, if Mr Balding is to achieve his goals of expanding Australian content, including drama.

The ABC would need to make a convincing submission to the government when the ABC's triennial funding comes under review in the lead up to the next federal budget.

In the neighbouring columns you'll see an abridged version of Mr Balding's address last year to a conference of international broadcasters. It reads rather like a manifesto.

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"Synthetic" Test Cricket broadcast in 1934: L-R seated: CJA Moses, EL A'Beckett, Mel Morris, Bernard Kerr, Jim Hall. Standing L-R: A Grey, MA Noble, J Duffey, Dion Wheeler, RH Campbell, Clem Hill, CE Pellew, PC Harrison.

MORE ARCHIVE PHOTOS ON PAGES 10 - 11

While we broadcast throughout the entire country, we also bring back through each of our platforms local material from the regions and deliver it to a national audience.

Were it not for the ABC, much of the rural and remote perspective that makes Australia unique would not be available to the majority of Australians - more than 85% of us live in the coastal towns and cities. but we must never allow our communities to become isolated. How do we reach these audiences beyond the cities?

ABC Radio reaches about 98% of Australians, and beyond the cities a suite of five services is available: Classic FM for fine music, Radio National for arts and talks, Triple J the youth music network, and NewsRadio, a rolling 24 hour news service. Most relevant to this discussion, however, is ABC Local Radio.

In this regard, local means exactly that these stations draw on local stories and news and matters of interest to local communities, produced by staff who live and work there. ABC Local Radio is currently a network of 58 stations across the country, 49 of those Local Radio stations are outside the major metropolitan areas.



This now means that over 8,000 hours p.a. of new local programming from outside the cities is available to local audiences, thus reducing dramatically the amount of syndicated material.

Television: The footprint of our television services clearly demonstrates we are broadcasting to and reaching audiences well beyond those of the capital cities.



The Internet: Uppermost in ABC Online's thinking is the principle of equity of access for those living in those regions of Australia disadvantaged by the limits of non-city technology.

One of our Charter obligations is

Bias as a straw man Stifling debate and dissent

An 'argument' is rife in some sections of the press that it is un-Australian to write and speak against government policies because they are supported by a large majority of Australians.

This view is pushed by some politicians. At the federal Liberal council meeting 12/4 party president Shane Stone mounted a sustained attack on the media and its alleged mistreatment of John Howard in particular and his government in general.

'Stone simply chose not to even mention many consistent media supporters of the Coalition and seemed completely unaware that there were almost no media bar-rackers for Kim Beazley - and still virtually none for Simon Crean. Media opponents of the Government tend to also criticise Labor, albeit from the left.'

It is not a media conspiracy to which Stone and other conservatives object but criticism and critical debate. They should be reminded that without criticism there can be no democracy.

to provide programs that reflect the cultural diversity of the Australian community. To understand the country, you have to capture the special qualities of Australia that lie beyond the cities. Without the ABC the voices of country Australia might otherwise fall silent. Without the ABC the stories of country Australia might otherwise be lost.

It is an investment more about social and cultural values than about economics. Just like public broadcasting itself. And just like public broadcasting, you couldn't possibly create it again...but you could easily lose it.

For almost seventy years, ABC Radio has been there for these communities. Its presence mattered most of all during that era that people in this room may be familiar with - the last two decades where the bottom line dominated the thinking of governments throughout the world.

The Prime Minister has also been on the attack - against Lateline:

'He accused the ABC of running a "strong campaign against the government" on asylum seekers ... He objected to the "emphasis" which Lateline had "put on this issue."

'Whatever the present weaknesses of the ABC, it presents a greater diversity of views than a decade ago when John Howard did not make any public criticisms of the organisation. Lateline genuinely believes in debate - so much so that it regularly features supporters of the Prime Minister, including former Howard adviser Grahame Morris and former Liberal MP Michael Baume. The Howard Government's position on asylum seekers has been heard on Lateline - and rightly so.'

*Gerard Henderson
The Age 29/4/02*

When one by one during the last two decades country towns in Australia were being left behind, when the banks and the railway stations, the hospitals and the schools all closed, ABC Radio remained.



Sometimes towns that had once gathered around those institutions began to fade as the institutions disappeared. There is enormous social cost to that - a price paid for the process that politicians and business leaders described as micro-economic reform, the drive to do things more cost-effectively, to make savings by delivering services from a central location and deliver a dividend to the bottom line .

The ABC did not, will not and cannot adopt such a strategy.

President's Report

Welcome to our bumper issue of Update celebrating the Australian Broadcasting Corporation's 70th anniversary.

The organisation has had many ups and downs over its 70 years. I am reminded of Ken Inglis' book *'This is the ABC'* in which he talks about the troubles that those working at the ABC had with management as soon as people were permitted to talk. While the ABC played music there were no problems but once the spoken word came over the airwaves --- Often Big Trouble.

However we are all so proud of all that has come out of those early troubles. Today our ABC is undoubtedly one of the finest public broadcasters in the world.

ABC - Special, essential
and much loved

"Our ABC," I cannot help but think of it in this way. It has been a special, essential and much loved part of my life, and I have felt very privileged to be part of the Friends of the ABC team fighting to ensure the corporation continues as a fully-funded, independent public broadcaster.

But some things never change - governments think that they own the ABC and are entitled to use it as a government information service, or to sanitise the unpalatable. Governments always at odds with journalists wanting to search out the facts.

Other governments' tactics over the years to curb the ABC include funding cuts and direct attacks on its integrity or impartiality.

Out of these pressures the Friends of the ABC have grown, from small groups first in Victoria and then in New South Wales with Mr Walter Bass as president. The ABC Friends has branches in every capital city of Australia and many regional and rural areas.

We have become an organisation with its own web site and a Friends' chat room known as the Friends List. We have telephone trees throughout New South Wales, and there are trees in other states as well. We have run the first ABC Shareholders' meeting in New South Wales and similar events all over Australia and have events throughout the year that enable Friends to meet like-minded people.

*As I write, the ABC still lacks a Managing Director. However, it seems to be running perfectly well with acting Managing Director Russell Balding at the helm. It is to be hoped that when the new Managing Director is finally appointed, he or she will allow the creative people of the ABC to get on with their jobs.**

Friends National Conference

We held our National Conference in Canberra in early May. Papers were presented by national spokesperson, Darce Cassidy, and historian Ken Inglis. Abridged texts of both speeches are included in this issue of *Update* and they can also be read on the national spokesperson's web site:

www.friendsoftheabc.org.

You will also find many other interesting papers that can be printed off and used for discussions evenings or just to inform you and your friends. When printing them out, please remember to credit where they come from.

Send 70th Birthday Cards

Please send a 70th birthday card for the ABC to - Mr Russell Balding. Postal address is:

P.O. Box 9994, Sydney 2001; or you may prefer to send the presenters of your favourite programs a card. Fan mail is not as frequent as criticisms, so its important for our ABC broadcasters to know that we care.

Some of our groups are holding special 70th Birthday celebrations. We have included all notices received before our deadline.

However if there is none from your local group, please check our web site and the ABC Friends List which will be continually updated with what all the groups are planning for the 70th Birthday.



We have a new Editor for *Update*, Brian Davies, a former ABC current affairs producer and writer, and I am delighted to welcome him on board. In other parts of the magazine you will see photographs from the ABC library for our special edition in honour of the ABC's 70th birthday. Our thanks to archivist, Geoff Harris, and his colleague, Guy Tranter, from ABC Photo Archives for their generous efforts in searching the ABC's amazing and historic photo collection.

August Regional Conference

We are holding our first New South Wales regional conference in August. Each of the regional groups will be sending two delegates and we will discuss how regional and rural groups and the New South Wales Friends of the ABC can work together in the best way to help the ABC.

Penelope Toltz

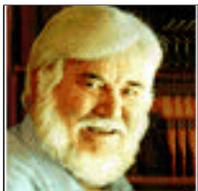
**This report pre-dated Mr. Baldings appointment as MD*

"Update" includes material from the South Australian 'Friends' publication "Background Briefing" compiled and edited by Joan Laing. In "Update" this material is credited as:



Stewart Fisk asks -

The ABC's MD - is it really mission impossible?*



Have you noticed how much better the ABC has been running since Shier left?

You have! Well I

think we need to ask: How much of the problem was the man, and how much the "mini-mogul" position?

It's not that I have any illusions about Shier. He was dragged from obscurity by political friends to serve political ends and, when they finally had enough of his antics, they sent him back to his well-deserved obscurity with scarcely a word.

My problem is that I don't see the value of having an "editor-in-chief" at the ABC, supervising radio, television, and the internet services. We already have heads of each of these broadcasting divisions and more heads for each of the independent networks. All these people are highly experienced programmers in their own forms of media.

Since Shier left, the MD's job has been filled by the Chief Financial Officer who does all that needs to be done at the top. He is quite capable of running the business and administrative side of the corporation, and letting the various heads of division get on with the job they were hired to do.

There's a Board to settle disputes and act in a supervisory or ombudsman role. The Board should also protect the corporation from political interference -- and hopefully, one day, we'll have one that plays this role.

The fact is that the MD's coordination role is necessary for finance

and administration, but not for programming decisions. He/she should be chief administrator, but not chief editor or chief programmer.

As we've seen in the past (and not just with Shier), the involvement of the MD in programming or program production is almost always an inhibitory force on innovation and independence. The MD is often used as a channel for political influence or pressure on the program makers because he is the direct financial link to Canberra.

Australians seem to be obsessed by the idea of super-heroes who control their corporations and ministries. For some reason we always imagine that organisations like the ABC need a superman (rarely a superwoman) at the top, and we search diligently around the world for a caped crusader capable of performing dozens of impossible tasks concurrently.

We want our superman-MD to be an expert programmer for our national television channel and for half-a-dozen radio networks, and he must also understand the intricacies of on-line service programming as well, and be able to negotiate deals with Telstra.

And we expect him to be able to hold up this ten-story programming structure with one hand, while using the other to deftly manipulate the financial operations of a diverse corporation with 300 transmitters, a dozen major offices, and a few thousand independently-minded staff, all spending money on hundreds of hours of program production.



At the same time our super-MD is expected to make friends with the rich and powerful; lobby the arts; understand business, science and technology; while blowing some sense into Canberra using his super-human breath.

Frankly, we ask too much of any one person, and the ABC is built on a foundation of Kryptonite. The focus of Board decisions and the role most coveted by MD candidates - that of making programming decisions over the whole massive national conglomerate - is the one that the ABC needs least.

The fact that the ABC board is taking its time making a decision, is good news. However the news that the Board is still focussed on a super-programmer, and has highly-paid head-hunters circling the globe looking for one, worries me.

As they did a few years back, the head-hunters are throwing up all sorts of obscure names, many of them ex-pats. And this is also a worry, because it reeks of an ideology which suggests that the best Australians went abroad and made their mark in the world, while the second-best remained at home in this Down-Under backwater.

This is 1950s thinking, and it underrates those who have lived and worked in Australian public-broadcasting and have the necessary administrative experience and understand the political realities. Including the man currently holding the job.

* *Stewart Fisk's contributed this picture of the MD's role before Russell Balding's appointment was announced.*

The role of the last managing director

Recalled in part by Errol Simper in
The Australian 4/4/02

Shier's removal was a bruising rejection of the forces (which) envisaged him transforming the ABC into a kind of publicly owned Channel Nine. Do you recall Shier urging the broadcaster to accept production monies from the CSIRO, the RAAF, state governments...the perceived ideologically inappropriate, such as Kerry O'Brien, would

be jettisoned. Remember Shier's frequent threats to *The 7.30 Report*...Donald McDonald - steeled by personal unease, overwhelming community opinion, an intimation that disaster beckoned and advice from saner board elements - decided to dispense with Shier's services. Here you get to the likely purpose of some of the information, or leaks... "We must (still) keep gnawing away at those awful cliques."
Do you believe the mindset lives on?

Shaping the Future *Robyn Williams*



You may find this surprising, but I've always been impressed by Bill Gates's approach to talent and innovation. Almost as much as I was unimpressed by J Shier's approach to changing the ABC's culture. I called the latter 'executive cleansing'.

You see, it's been my experience for over 30 years in the Science Unit, that you prepare for the future and adapt to change by hiring young, fresh minds. And I don't think we've done that too badly over the years. Example: Max Bourke (later Director, Australia Council), Robin Hughes (CEO Film Australia), Peter Pockley (correspondent for NATURE), Matt Peacock (ABC London), David Ellyard (author), Norman Swan, Peter Hunt, Alan Saunders, Natasha Mitchell, Rae Fry, Paul Willis.

This is precisely what we HAVEN'T been able to do during the last 6 years of penury (except for a special grant from Peter McGauran which saved us). As a result the ABC stultifies. Those able to obtain work elsewhere, often those most talented, do so. Others have nowhere to go because their specialities are not done elsewhere in Australia (science, radio drama etc.).

So: if you want to produce a static, self-reinforcing, uninnovative ABC culture, do precisely what Alston and Shier have done since 1996. If you want an ABC brimming with ideas, in thorough contact with its national audience, responsive to future needs, apply Bill Gates's maxims.

They were sent to the fellow asked to set up Microsoft's second lab outside Seattle. Just three lines:

1. Hire the best people you can find and let them do what they want.
2. If all your projects succeed, you have failed (not taken risks).
3. Recruit from far and wide, not only in your own precinct.

Gates's success is manifest. His method is also efficient and parsimonious because, in an outfit full of

A-teams mediocrity falls away. Experienced performers are challenged by young squirts and the interaction is stimulating and productive.

I've seen it happen where I am in the Science Unit for 30 years. The best is kept while innovation effervesces. You don't prejudge or guess the future but, by staying in touch with fresh minds, help invent it.

ABC New Media: *Discover - Experience - Interact!*

ABC New Media coordinates all the ABC's online activities and websites as well as developing content for new initiatives such as broadband services, digital TV, interactive television and datacasting. New Media and its staff are committed to providing more ways for people to discover, experience and interact with Australia and the world.

One of Australia's top ten most popular sites

ABC Online at abc.net.au, has enjoyed enormous growth since its inception in 1995 and consistently rates as one of the top 10 most popular sites in Australia. Over the last year, the site has received an average of 10 million page accesses a week, and it is one of the most book-marked sites in the country and ABC Online has received more than forty industry awards. In Australia and overseas, it is acknowledged as an industry leader.

ABC Online has a great breadth and depth of content, organised under 'themed' gateways. These gateways provide direct access to areas including News, Kids, Youth, Science, Arts and Culture, Rural, Sport, Indigenous, Asia Pacific, Public Affairs, as well as Radio and TV.

The site has undergone some important developments over the last year, including the addition of a highly effective new search engine, the re-development of several gateways and the inclusion of a global navigation bar to make finding your way around the site easier.



The site regularly hosts online forums, where internet users come to the ABC site and talk online to special guests, presenters and other users. ABC Online's many guest-books enable visitors to leave their comments and read what others have to say. Visitors to the site can also subscribe to email lists and receive regular updates about topics of interest.

I'm Online!!!



Many programs and special events can be accessed live through the website. There are also many ABC Radio programs available through audio-on-demand.

Broadband - an award winner

ABC New Media's innovative Broadband service, established in 2001, enables online audiences to view broadband service on demand. It offers several channels including *News, Kids, FLY* and *Rage*, and it won the inaugural Award for Excellence in Broadband at the 2001 Australian Interactive Multimedia Industry Association (AIMIA) Awards.



An industry leader in interactive TV

As interactive television (iTV) evolves ABC New Media is at the forefront of developments. Optus has conducted iTV trials since June 2001 and ABC New Media has participated in them. New Media has supplied high quality, repurposed content from the ABC website, including news, weather, finance, content for children and youth audiences.

ABC New Media also recently reached an agreement with BBC Worldwide to bring Australian audiences the ground breaking interactive television version of the acclaimed six part BBC science series *Walking with Beasts*.

BBC *Walking With Beasts* Interactive will be broadcast through the ABC's services on the Austar digital satellite platform and Optus cable iTV service from 4 July.

“...fifty seven channels and nothing on.”

Man came by to hook up my cable TV.

We settled in for the night my baby and me.

We switched 'round and 'round 'til half-past dawn,

There was fifty-seven channels and nothin' on.

Bruce Springsteen 1992



Friends National Spokesperson, Darce Cassidy, began his address to the National Conference, quoting from Bruce

Springsteen's 1992 hit...as a warning. Below are extracts from his address.

For more than a decade, it has been argued that the multi-channel environment (the Internet, Pay TV and now Digital TV) has made public service broadcasting redundant. The main rationales for public broadcasting, it is claimed, were twofold: public control over a scarce resource and, second, that public broadcasting should provide programs socially beneficial, but un-profitable for commercial broadcasters.

The argument goes on that with cable, satellite and digital broadcasting, not to mention the Internet, the scarcity argument no longer holds water. Moreover when people can access hundred of channels on their televisions or radios, the idea that the state should subsidise certain forms of broadcasting is wasteful middle class welfare.

“57 Varieties”

So why do we feel Bruce Springsteen, rather than the learned technocrats and economists, has got it right? Just as the 57 different varieties of Heinz soup all taste as if they came out of a can, anyone who has experienced the so called diversity of American television will understand what Springsteen meant.

The theory of scarce resources is a half-truth. The argument never really did hold water - clearly demonstrated by Australian radio. Before 1975 there were 8 radio stations in Sydney. Today there are 31, not including stations holding 'open narrowcasting' licences.

It is sometimes suggested that FM technology was responsible for this explosive growth, but it was politics and not technology. It suited broadcasters (and government) to claim there was no more room on the AM band and to delay the introduction of FM broadcasting for close to forty years.

While there is the technical potential for so called new media to swamp the old, it won't necessarily happen. Video has not killed the radio star. TV, video recorders, DVDs and the Internet were each in turn supposed to kill the cinema. Despite this multiple onslaught the corpse is still looking very healthy.

“Free to air” still dominates

Analysing the impact of cable television in the US, where around 75% of homes have cable, British expert Professor Brian Winston says that despite the strength of cable the so-called “free to air” networks remain dominant. Cable did not, as widely anticipated in the 1970s destroy the networks. While their market share fell from 93% in 1971 to 59% in 1995, the absolute numbers of people watching network television, due to population growth, has actually risen. Moreover, Winston says, the cable channels have almost totally failed to alter the established genres and forms of television broadcasting in any significant way.

The 24-hour news channels, for example, simply repeat a slowly (mostly very slowly) changing traditional news bulletin every half-hour virtually all the time. The Weather Channel repeats a standard television weather bulletin every few minutes. American cable's most original idea is Court TV, a cheap variant on studio talk whose gavel to gavel coverage of the O.J. Simpson trial is credited, together with CNN's nearly equally obsessive attention, with increasing basic cable's total 1995 rating by 1.6, a 20 per cent hike over the previous year.

Winston says consider how difficult it is for broadcasters to find material popular enough to refresh their schedules every season.

What if fragmentation threatens? If ABC TV were reduced from one channel in five to one in a hundred it is easy to see how it might be so marginalised as to not be a credible public forum...the ABC's role as a widely used public forum becomes even more critical.

In a study of twenty public broadcasters around the world McKinsey and Co. argue that if their output is insufficiently distinct from commercial broadcasters they have little impact.

Pressure on commercials

The McKinsey survey found PSB most effective when it not only broadcasts a distinctive schedule, but also exerts pressure on its commercial competitors to do the same.

Because of its unique role and funding method, PSB can popularise new styles of programming, and thereby encourage commercial broadcasters to create their own distinctive programmes. In this way, the viewing standards of the entire market are raised. ABC radio has already had a foretaste of the multi-channel environment, and responded well. From two channels in metropolitan centres in the '70s the ABC now operates five domestic radio channels, plus streaming audio on ABC Online.

ABC's listening share up!

True to the ABC charter, these channels provide specialist output (Radio National, Classic FM, Parliamentary and News Radio) and programs of broad appeal (Triple J, Local Radio). As the number of radio channels has grown from 8 to 31 in cities like Sydney, the ABC's share of listening has actually risen.

Television however is a much more expensive medium, and the ABC will require significant funding increases if it is to develop major additional program strands in television.

The full text of Darce Cassidy's address is on web site: www.friends_of_the_abc.org

What sort of place would Australia be without the ABC?



Having put the question, columnist and social commentator Hugh MacKay provides some of the answers.

Even with the ABC, new ideas have a hard enough time coming to the surface of public consciousness. Even with the ABC, there are disturbing signs of a 'dumbing-down' of public discourse, especially in the political realm. In the present climate of uncertainty, there's almost an eagerness to disconnect from 'the big picture', turn the focus in-wards and insulate ourselves from serious discussion about serious issues.

Without the ABC, it's easy to imagine an acceleration of that process. As in our diet of packaged takeaway food, so in our quest for media-packaged stimulation, we tend to opt for ever simpler, more easily digested, bite-sized chunks. In media programming, audiences demand 'relevance', but that usually amounts to little more than a plea to be left safely tucked up in their comfort zone: we all like to hear things that confirm our prejudices and reassure us that the status quo is just fine.

A challenge to think differently

The ABC does some of that but, especially in radio, it is also prepared to resist the siren call of populism in favour of doing things that are unashamedly elitist, appeal to special-interest groups, tell us things we didn't already know, or challenge us to think differently about things we thought we did know.

This is why the ABC never will (and, in my view, never should) command a huge share of the ratings.

Radio National is the paradigm: by presenting thoughtful, innovative programs that challenge our complacency, it adds unique dimensions to the Australian media landscape. People like Phillip Adams, Robyn Williams and Rachel Kohn are genuine media pioneers, creating programs of uncompromising quality and breadth. Yes, they appeal to minority audiences (but so does Alan Jones: 80 per cent of Sydney's radio audience *don't* listen to him.) Yet the accumulation of all those minorities means that Radio National, in any given week, reaches about one million Australians.

A near perfect model

This looks like a near-perfect model to me: the ABC, using public money, should be concentrating on doing things that commercial broadcasters aren't, for various reasons, prepared to do.

This doesn't mean the ABC should set out to attract tiny audiences: it should be bold in its willingness to fill in the gaps in the media landscape, it should do things it believes must be done, regardless of the ratings; it should take risks that commercial operators would be unwilling to take. (Why should public money be spent replicating what commercial broadcasters already do - and often do superbly?)



Step by step to a vast audience

The ABC should connect with a vast audience - not all at once, in a ratings bonanza, but in the steady accumulation of small audiences that, program by program, build into a big one. It's harder to do this on television (which is why, from time to time, I've wondered whether the ABC should be in television at all) but even on that notoriously bland and soporific medium, a charter must be found, based on uniqueness of content and exemplary quality, to justify the ABC's existence.

ABC archives contain a treasure trove of history

Along with the Australian Bureau of Statistics, the ABC is a national treasure of almost priceless significance. Its archives contain the story of modern Australian life; its current affairs programs continue to interpret the nation to itself; its multiple radio channels - Metro, Regional, Radio National, JJJ, Classic FM - form a remarkably comprehensive mosaic of information, ideas, music and discussion.

Unique in the media landscape

At 70 the ABC has much to celebrate and much to be proud of. Still, I'd like to see even more commitment to the things that give the ABC its unique voice: more willingness to experiment, more courage, more integrity, and even more encouragement of creative risk.

Radio National is the paradigm: by presenting thoughtful, innovative programs that challenge our complacency, it adds unique dimensions to the Australian media landscape.

Friends applaud Balding appointment

Continued from Page 1

"There are big challenges ahead for the new chief executive - broadband and digital broadcasting - and the ABC needs to maintain the momentum it has achieved to date

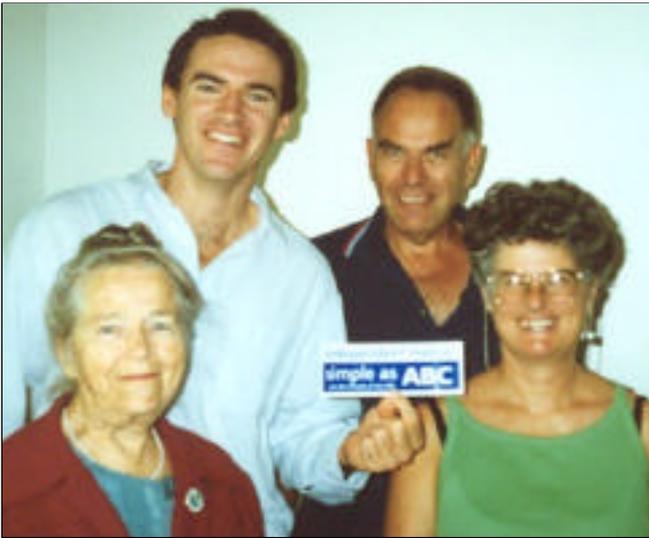
with innovative technology. "We believe that under Mr Balding's leadership the corporation can get back to its charter, leaving commercial broadcasters to their pursuit of audiences to sell products to, while the ABC concentrates on making and broadcasting intelligent, quality programs."

"Once again, however, quality is often hard to achieve without adequate funding.

Friends of the ABC wish Russell Balding well, and success in fulfilling his stated vision for the ABC."

Around the Groups... 'Friends' in action statewide

Port Macquarie/Mid North Coast



Membership Secretary Nancy Short, Independent MP Rob Oakeshott, Secretary Brian Symes and President and Treasurer Drusi Megget. Port Macquarie/Mid North Coast Branch of the Friends

At the last branch meeting of the *Port Macquarie/Mid North Coast Branch of the Friends* in April our local state Member for Parliament Robert Oakeshott, was a guest speaker. Robert recently became famous for resigning from the National Party in March because he felt individuals and the National party itself did not have the best interests of the region at heart. He is also a long time member of FABC.

**Come One Come All
to The
Friends Stall
at the
ABC
Gardening
Australia Live
Exhibition**



**The Sydney Showgrounds
Homebush Bay
10:00 - 6:00**

Thursday, 20 September
Friday, 21 September
Saturday, 22 September
Sunday, 23 September

NSW Premier honours pioneer Friend

Bob Carr made a Premier's Senior Award last April to Nancy Short of Port Macquarie. Nancy, 88, was a founding member of the Friends of the ABC, State Membership secretary for several years and a fierce and inspiring contributor. She still is. Eleven years ago she helped establish the Port Macquarie Group.

The award not only acknowledged her work for Friends, past and current, but her role as a champion of the environment movement, a fair go for refugees and reconciliation and a demonstrator for peace. Truly a renaissance woman!

Another member, Richard Mackay, won a similar award for his services to the disabled.

Port Macquarie group meets every two months, runs regular activities including street stalls, an annual Xmas picnic at South West Rocks and a Winter lunch or dinner with a guest speaker, the most recent of whom was Tim Bowden.

Port city formally re-launched itself as "The City of the Arts" with Phillip Adams as keynote speaker. The Friends' group monopolised the foyer at the function selling stickers, signing up new members and earning considerable community support.

Armidale

For Friends Armidale the months leading up to the Federal election were particularly busy ones. Candidates were invited to outline their Parties' policies and those who accepted were: Stuart Saintclair, the sitting Member, and other candidates including the Greens Party, the Democrats and Country Labour. Senator Sandy McDonald was unable to accept our invitation.

FABC also continued to maintain its presence at the local markets, including undertaking a survey of market patrons. The results were analysed and the areas of concern to the people of Armidale were identified as board political appointments, commercials, Australian content and particularly the shortfall in funding for the ABC.

In addition to activities relating to improving/maintaining the quality of the national Broadcaster, Armidale Friends also enjoyed several social events: in the Armidale Autumn Festival parade, brunch at a local café on a market Sunday and on 25 April, a night at the movies, 'Amalie', preceded by drinks and nibblies. This proved to be very popular. Just on 200 people attended.

Future activities are planned to ensure a positive profile for the FABC Armidale in the community by supporting functions organised by other local community groups.

Our next social function is proposed for 16 August - Dinner with Andrea Ho, our Local ABC Manager and one of the breakfast time announcers.

Around the Groups... 'Friends' in action statewide

Fundraising Fun



FABC Illawarra members (L-R) Alan Mackay, Trish and Peter Knevitt help out on the Friends stall at the Berry Fair (NSW South Coast).

Illawarra

Fundraising can be fun! There is a little shopkeeper in most of us.

Holding a stall at a local market, fair, festival etc is also a great way to meet and enlist ABC fans. The Illawarra Friends have recruited around 40 new members in this way over the past 12 months. Twenty two new members joined the local FABC Group at the Jamberoo Valley Folk Festival last September.

Draw up a stalls program

To find out where such events are in your region ask your newsagent for the magazine 'Australian Markets & Fairs' (around \$4). This is a great resource, providing such details as dates, times, charges, contacts and phone numbers. Each year, from this mag, the Illawarra Friends draw up a stalls programme with a stall every second month in a different town. By the way, tell the organisers you are a not-for-profit organisation and they may waive the charges.

FABC merchandise available

You will need FABC merchandise to sell and this is available from the NSW Branch (Gary Cook 0404 829 372). Contact your local ABC Radio station, they may have ABC stickers, bookmarks etc that you can hand out for free. Free handouts are a great way to break the ice

with passers by.

You will also need membership forms for the NSW Branch. A Contact List form is also a good way to collect details for future mail-outs. Send them a copy of your next newsletter together with an application form.

Another handout, with letter writing points and the contact details of your local federal MPs and relevant Ministers is also a good idea.

For a Stall Check List and samples of the above forms e-mail Chris Cartledge

ledge@bigpond.com
or phone (02) 4226 2323.

You will have to get up early to get a good spot for your stall but by the end of the day, I am sure you will feel good about your efforts.

Chris Cartledge,
President, FABC Illawarra

Northern Rivers

Northern Rivers completed its AGM with a social evening: 20 members entertaining three ABC North Coast staff - Fiona Wylie, Justine Frazier and (Lismore 'old-boy') James O'Brien - and were in turn informed of the issues from a staff perspective...and entertained. Northern Rivers includes two sub-groups, Nimbin and Byron Bay.

Parramatta

Membership was galvanised by the local Federal Member, Ross Cameron's call for the ABC to be privatised. In the run up to the November election, Parramatta branch ran a succession of street stalls, collected more than 2000 signatures on petitions defending the ABC's independence and held a public meeting at Granville Town Hall. The only candidate who failed to turn up was - Ross Cameron.

Central Coast

Central Coast group was compiling a fresh list of concerns for its next meeting - the Board selection process, funding and morale, bolstering Australian content across the broadcasting spectrum, the local issue of ABC reception - TV and radio - on the Central Coast and deciding are we a lobby group or forum or both? What is our role between budgets and elections?

Blue Mountains

Blue Mountains Friends: always busy, publishes a regular news letter and is currently inviting Friends to a 70th birthday 'bash' in the Palm Court Room at the Hydro-Majestic on July 27th from 4 to 6pm. Kerry O'Brien will be guest speaker. (Since Kerry spoke at Lawson last year we've had a flood of new members.)

Blue Mountains Friends Celebrate ABC's 70th Birthday

27 July 4 - 6 PM
Palm Court Room
Hydro-Majestic Hotel
Medlow Bath
Guest Speaker:
Kerry O'Brien

Contact:
Romola Martin 4759 3753
romola@bigpond.com
Cost: \$15 pp



St Kilda Palais ...Melbourne and the ABC in the 1930s ...The ABC Dance Band

Through
70 years
with the
ABC...
Pictures
from the
archives.



Jimmy Dibble's farewell. In the group are: Margaret Throsby, 'Nugget' May, Geraldine Doogue, Richard Morecroft and Ross Symonds.



"The Childrens' Hour" goes on tour. Jimmy wants to go with the luggage, but Robin, Earle, Mac and Diana won't let him (1960).



Gold medals galore! Olympic swim stars John and Ilsa Konrads



The ABC's original dance band formed in Melbourne by Cecil Fraser in 1932.
 Seated left to right: McDuff William, Dick Bentley who went on to comic fame and fortune in a series of BBC comedies beginning with "Much Binding in the Marsh", Peter McCarthy, Arthur Rothwell and George Dobson.



"Idiot Weekly" 1958 (Live to audience with ABC Dance Band)
 L-R Ray Barrett, Michael Eisdell, John Bluthal, Bobby Limb, Ray Goldsworthy, Spike Milligan.



Mother and Son: The Big Sleep. Maggie (Ruth Cracknell), Robert (Henri Szeps), Arthur (Garry McDonald) [1992]



6 O'Clock Rock with the ABC's first rocker, Johnny O'Keefe.

Lessons Learned from Kroger Affair

Update asks: given the uproar that ensued, what's left to be said about the 'Kroger affair'?

For a chuckle, the gamut ran from Michael Kroger's elevation of Alan Jones to the equivalent of Don Bradman to Richard Ackland's penetrating summary of Mrs Kroger's journalism in a Melbourne Sunday paper on dinner parties, hairdressers and clothing store fitting rooms. Issues, Ackland wrote, that Four Corners and Lateline ignored at their peril (but) "Never mind the coruscating vacuity, at least it is not 'institutionalised bias against John Howard'."

Very willing, but conflicting, public exchanges between Kroger and Four Corners' man, Chris Masters, as to what the board Member said to Masters during the preparation of his report left readers with the challenge of who to believe or what exactly constituted 'pressure.' ... something Kroger insisted he hadn't applied.

Kroger conceded however that he had stressed Jones was a good bloke and that any profile of him should be positive.

The Australian's Errol Simper remarked that this was the equivalent of a newspaper editor telling a journal-

ist to do a nice profile of Simon Crean – "Call it exactly as you see it, only make sure Crean comes out looking like a dill"

On the other hand, at the outset of the row, Mr Kroger declared he would keep on saying that the ABC was not 'balanced' about John Howard – "that's actually a statutory duty of board members," he said.

To which Richard Ackland responded: "This is a bold assertion. Hitherto no individual non-executive board member has assumed the authority to prescribe editorial tone, let alone content."

The federal Opposition called on Kroger to resign for having "cast a cloud over the integrity of the ABC and brought the organization into disrepute."

Friends' national spokesperson Darce Cassidy issued a statement calling on Mr Kroger to separate his political friendships from his role as an ABC Board member.

"While it is Mr Kroger's right, indeed duty, to express his views about the content of programs at board meetings, individual board members have no authority to act independently of

the ABC board, ABC Chairman Donald McDonald is to be congratulated for his reported defence of the Four Corners program."

So what's left to be said? As we go to press – just two things:

Victorian President, Terry Laidlaw, in a letter to the Melbourne Herald-Sun, questioning the propriety of Mr Kroger's action, remarked that "On his appointment by the present Government one of Mr Kroger's first moves was to propose that the ABC accept advertising and sell 49% of the highly successful ABC Online... Mr Kroger's actions demonstrate a lack of understanding of, and support for, independent comprehensive public broadcasting in general and the ABC in particular."

Last word – Errol Simper's*: "(Kroger's) done two really silly things. He propelled the ABC back into the news-making, media-circus mode that characterized the reign of its former - Kroger-mentored - managing director, J. Shier. And to compare Alan Jones with Don Bradman is unforgivably absurd. Anyone who witnessed the cash-for-comment inquiry knows Jones has tremendous problems with spin."

**The Australian, 16/5/02.*



Political interference and the BBC Solution

"running interference"- to run a public broadcaster.

It was if Michael Kroger had stepped out of the pages of *Above Board* - the Senate Inquiry into the Methods of Appointment to the ABC Board - or as a tailor-made case history to support Democrat Senator Vicki Bourne's private members Bill to de-politicise board appointments.

Above Board - currently lingering in limbo - concluded "the board as a whole lacks the range of depth of skills and experience which would be necessary to provide adequate leadership of the ABC. The overwhelming view of submissions," it states, "was that the ABC has become politicised, has lost its independence and, accordingly, has lost the confidence of the public."

A Friends of the ABC statement issued at the time - September 2001 - commented "that just about everyone disagrees with the current system - except for the party in power at the time." Or as past Staff Director, Quentin Dempster, put it: the Inquiry arose "because of a pattern of behaviour by executive government over almost the entirety of the ABC's existence since 1932...characterized as the application of the party political 'stack' of the board from time to time."

For Julian Burnside, QC, the need for a process of transparency

and the hand of Jonathan Shier highlighted the issue:

The ABC is a public institution of which the Australian public are the shareholders, who are entitled ... at least to have the Corporation operate in an open and transparent manner, and have Board members operate in this way too. To the extent that these public concerns are ignored, the Board is seen to be loyal to the government, or at least sympathetic to government policy interests, in spite of their responsibility to upholding the public interest.

The Board of the ABC has been conspicuously silent in the growing public debate about what is widely seen as the destruction of the ABC [under J Shier].

How can that be so? Board members of a company in private enterprise, faced with sustained shareholder dissatisfaction, would swiftly react to address shareholder concerns. The true stakeholders of the ABC are the Australian public.

Julian Burnside QC

Senator Bourne's bill, also backed by the ALP, is at the second reading stage (June, 2002) with Senator Bourne yet to make her second reading speech. Unfortunately she failed to be re-elected last year and her term as

Senator ended in June.

Friends' strategy is to lobby strongly to have the Bill progressed.

"Vicky Bourne's contribution to the Communications Debate will be missed. She has had a really comprehensive grasp of her portfolio - being on top of new technology, as well as legal matters and everything pertaining to the ABC," FABC NSW president, Penelope Toltz, said. "We should be conducting a 'write-in' to move the bill on," she said. Essentially Senator Bourne's bill seeks to adapt Britain's Nolan Rules for the ABC Board.

Recommendations of the Senate Inquiry into ABC Board appointments will be published in the next Update, space permitting. Briefly, they recommended a system similar to the Nolan Rules.

Way to go!

It was interesting to hear that Tasmania's Attorney General Peter Patmore has instituted a new way of appointing judges in his state. To open up the process to a wider range of candidates, judges are now chosen by a selection panel after advertisement in the press.

From RN's Breakfast program



Cartoon courtesy Somerville

bb

The BBC Solution

In 1995 the British Conservative government met charges that the appointments made to the BBC Board of Governors by the other side had been political by adopting far-reaching reforms to the method of appointing to government boards, including the BBC.

So for seven years the BBC Governors have been appointed under the *Nolan Rules*, a system recommended by an Inquiry, the Nolan Inquiry. It found;

A disproportionate number of posts were given to Conservative party activists, ex-candidates or those who donated money to the party, both as a reward for loyalty and as a way of ensuring boards who would be supportive of government policies and uncritical of Ministerial decisions. Also there existed a tendency for Ministers to appoint those who were closest to them and sympathisers to public posts.

This applied to appointments to the BBC Board of Governors. by means of:

. . . discussions of an informal kind between the Director General, a Senior Official, The Chairman of the Board and the Minister responsible - at which 'names come up' - which supplies the nominees for government appointments of to make sure that 'the right chaps are in the right jobs.'

Major's government accepted the Inquiry's recommendations and the 'Nolan Rules' now determine appointments to government statutory bodies, including the BBC.

How do the Nolan Rules work?

The selection process draws candidates by advertising and public nomination, as well as by invitation from the Government and the Board.

Selection criteria are advertised to attract candidates with qualifications and expertise that would contribute to the overall balance of relevant skills and backgrounds on the Board.

An essential condition for appointment is a declaration by candidates of any political activity or affiliation. This is not necessarily to exclude the politically active but to make political connections transparent and to monitor political balance on the Board.

Nolan considered the issue of potential invasion of privacy. On balance it was decided it was more important to serve the public interest above issues of individual privacy and reputation.

The interviewing of applicants follows selection of the short list

The cornerstone of the whole process is the *INDEPENDENT ADVISORY PANEL* which selects at least two candidates for the short list. On this panel are one or more *INDEPENDENT ASSESSORS* chosen by the Commissioner of Public Appointments. The Independent Assessors are generally retired public servants or retired members of the judiciary. Also on the advisory panel is a representative of the Minister's department and one from the BBC. The final choice from the short list is made by the Minister.

A key part of the system is the criteria for appointment of board members and the Independent Assessors. These are: selflessness, integrity, objectivity, accountability, openness, honesty and leadership.

Public scrutiny of the appointees, and openness to Parliamentary questions regarding the integrity of the process, ensures a democratic and accountable selection process.

The Way *WE* Do it!

The Minister for Communications chooses each member as a vacancy occurs. We do not know what process he follows in making his choice.

There is no clear system for developing selection criteria. The process has no formal selection criteria.

What qualifications are required of ABC Directors

'The ABC Act requires that Directors must be experienced in broadcasting, communications or management, or have expertise in financial or technical matters, or have cultural or other interests relevant to the provision of broadcasting services.'

That is all!

JL **bb**

There is without doubt widespread public perception that ABC Board appointments have been politically motivated. This public perception causes damage to the ABC and its reputation as the independent national broadcaster.

The process of appointing the Board can be made more transparent and produce better and fairer outcomes.

The political party which commits to achieving this will be acting in the public good and will win considerable electoral support.

JL

bb

...The moguls should be left on their present chains for ever. Once freed, they would put their enormous strength and insatiable appetite into cannibalising the media, the old and the new, with the eventual outcome probably a complete duopoly. A media door to which only a Murdoch and a Packer hold the keys is not press freedom.

*David Bowman
24 Hours, July '99*

Another attempt to change the media ownership rules

The Media Ownership Bill, introduced on 21/3/02, virtually removes all impediments to media ownership by current owners of newspapers, TV networks and radio stations, and it opens the media market to overseas interests.

Professor Flint, head of the Australian Broadcasting Authority, the man charged with supervising television and radio broadcasters and now with overseeing editorial independence under the new law, has already offered his backing for the changes.

Chris Nash writing in the SMH 27/3/02:

The media ownership legislation . . . is Orwellian in its implications for press freedom and in the doublespeak it uses to camouflage its effect. The legislation allows media moguls to increase their grip on Australia's media by owning electronic and print outlets in the same city or region. This flies in the face of the most widespread criticism of the Australian media: that ownership is far too narrowly based to be healthy in a democracy.

Now it proposes to increase what is the most concentrated media ownership in the Western world and introduce government oversight of newsroom management under the pretence of limiting the very powers it is seeking to expand. The cynical contempt for both logic and democratic principle is breathtaking..

To implement this Clayton's con-

trol, the Government proposes something extremely insidious: accountability to a government-appointed body by newsroom managers for their policies and practices... Government oversight of news gathering and reporting. Under the guise of safeguarding newsroom independence, this legislation subverts it in the most fundamental way. A truly audacious piece of conjuring!

There has been no widespread outcry against the proposal and it is interesting to speculate why. Perhaps the breadth of the Howard Government's attack on the independence of civil institutions - the Public Service, the Defence Force, the ABC and the judiciary - has people focused on their turf. In the ABC there is undoubtedly a measure of battle-weariness as well.

Chris Nash is director of the Australian Centre for Independent Journalism , Univ of Technology, Sydney

The greatest thing that could happen in the State and the Nation is when we get rid of the media. Then we would live in peace and tranquillity and no one would know anything.

Joh Bjelke Petersen

Brave New World of Digital Television

The federal government legislated to compel the ABC and the other free-to-air broadcasters to broadcast television digitally from 1/1/01.

The ABC is now beaming out two digital channels, ABC Kids and Fly for young adults (without additional funding). The commercial networks and SBS only digitally broadcast their normal programming.

So how is the digital revolution getting along?

It is 15 months since Australia's free-to-air television stations began simulcasting both analogue and digital picture, 12,500 digital set-top boxes have been sold. It means 0.18% of Australia's 6.8 million homes are digitally enabled.

'The theory was that people would rush to buy new set-top boxes, or new digital sets, in order to see high definition television services. That theory has now been shown to be nonsense. There is no demand for HDTV anywhere in the world. Australia is the sole country to have mandated it; interactive services are somewhere between zilch and nowhere and will remain so until its software can be agreed on; and analogue picture quality is 98% as good as standard definition digital. Who'll pay \$700 for a set-top box for a 2% picture improvement? About 0.18% of the population, I'd say.

Mark Day, The Australian, Media section, 18/24/02

bb



Cartoon courtesy Bill Leak

Travails with my Auntie

Photo of D. Salter here

David Salter recalls a checkered journey.

It is with no pride whatsoever that I claim the individual record for total number of resignations and/or sackings from the ABC. Since 1967 I've had to clean my desk out six times (and that's not counting all those silly relocations caused by the Corporation's unrelenting mania for "structural review". So much for civil service job security.

Why then do I remain such an ABC loyalist and Defender of the Public Broadcasting Faith? Because the alternatives are too horrible to contemplate.

Somehow, in the peculiar broadcasting landscape of Australia, the ABC has managed to maintain its genuinely independent national voice. Somehow, despite the best efforts of sour politicians and incompetent managers, it has found the courage to provide a platform for discomfiting ideas and disconcerting tastes.

At its best, the ABC is the gristle amongst all the pre-masticated pap that passes for content in this country's electronic media.

But let's not waste time just celebrating the achievement. Making a fuss over essentially meaningless landmark anniversaries is a poor excuse to avoid honest self-examination. The more constructive approach is to pause and consider the positive lessons of history: what we can extract from the ABC's past to help secure and enhance its future.

But this should not be an exercise in 'good old days' nostalgia. I've been in, or around, the Commission/Corporation for exactly half its 70 years and can assure you that many of those 'old' days were deplorable. Ultra-conservative management and board; ultra-cautious program heads; ultra-Anglophile cultural attitudes; ultra-wasteful and lazy permanent staff.

Dig out the tapes of ABC radio's so-called Golden Era in the early 1950s and you'll be aghast at the smug mediocrity they broadcast. The prevailing value-systems came directly

from the prefect's rooms of second-rate private boys' schools. Literature was anything published by A&R.

Yet despite all this tenured self-indulgence, the ABC's most valued asset is its core notion of independence was defended with vigour.

Charles Moses rightly treated politicians with disdain and usually ignored their attempts at pressure. Richard Boyer understood that protecting the editorial integrity of the ABC's output was the Board's primary function.

After a few years tied to radio's apron strings, the new and uniquely powerful mass medium of television was allowed to find its own feet. By the early '70s Channel 2 was setting the local information and entertainment agendas for the nation. The ABC made programs because producers felt there was an obligation or need to do so, not to satisfy the latest obsession or poach a few rating points from the commercial networks.

The ABC has always been at its strongest when it concentrated on the primary job of making and broadcasting programs for its established outlets. Everything else - the doomed Pay TV venture, Australia Television, its current multi-channel ambitions, even the Internet - all are dangerous distractions.

Dangerous, because they inevitably involve seeking additional funding from governments quick to impose conditions. Distracting, because the diversion of people and resources into these adventurist excursions weakens the commitment to mainstream broadcasting.

So beware of hucksters proclaiming the ABC will be marginalised unless it 'migrates' to broadband and embraces every new wave of technology. They make the fatal mistake of confusing delivery systems with content.

And content is what the ABC has always done best.

Davud Salter joined the ABC as part of the original This Day Tonight team. He was a Senior Producer in Current Affairs, Head of TV Sport and more recently Executive Producer of Media Watch and Littlemore.

Discouraging times for a well-meaning editor



Donald McDonald, chairman of the ABC, likens the beleaguered ABC to the first translators into English of the Bible:

John Wycliffe had made the first English translations from Latin in the 14th century, because he wanted common folk to be able to read it. Knowledge of Latin was limited to that era's elite - the priesthood. Wycliffe believed the Word of God was locked away from those who needed it most.

The Church was not happy with the English translation, nor happy to lose its monopoly on the Bible. Wycliffe was condemned at the Council of Florence in 1415.

William Tyndale provided another translation about a century later. In doing so, in setting out to liberate the Word of God, he set himself against Church orthodoxy as well. Naturally, he was condemned as a heretic, and he was strangled as a consequence. Which was a mercy - because after that, he was burned at the stake.

To make sure everybody understood how the Church felt about translations, the first translator Wycliffe's bones were disinterred, and they too were burned. You could say these were discouraging times for the well-meaning translator and editor.

There is a range of interesting stories there - about elites and the masses, about language and meaning, about the price you pay for heresy, for being different. The distance between yesterday's heresy and today's consensus is sometimes not so great.

From a speech at the University of Tasmania 4/3/02



The real cost of ABC's lost TV production capacity

*Friends South Australian President, Joan Laing, went to the ABC's defence in 'The Advertiser', but it was still a sad story, reflecting more of the Shier legacy and earlier political inroads.**

Earlier this month, The Advertiser published two letters about the axing of *Something in the Air*. One letter referred to "the ABC's decision to replace a top Australian program...with yet another overseas soap... shows how much it cares about Australian talent."

Why was *Something in the Air* replaced with yet another British import?

Not because the ABC doesn't care about Australian talent but because it has been robbed of most of its capacity to produce or commission local drama.

Under former managing director Jonathan Shier, the ABC lost more than 100 television production staff. The ABC lost 12 per cent of its budget in 1996-98.

The amount available for the production of television programs has not been increased since then.

Instead it has decreased still further as money has had to be diverted to other parts of the ABC: to the development of ABC Online, for example, and for content production on the two digital channels, *ABCKids* and *FlyTV*.

The cost of producing an hour of Australian drama is three or four times the cost of buying foreign drama. It is difficult to sell Australian drama overseas - not even *SeaChange* sold well overseas - so the costs often can't be retrieved. To fill its television schedules, it has to import programs. It has no choice but to do that.

If we want Australian drama on the ABC, it must be better funded.

Joan Lang

Friends of the ABC

*The Advertiser, 17/05/2002



ABC emerges unscathed from independent audit

For almost a year the ABC has been undergoing examination from the Australian National Audit Office. This was basically to discover how well the ABC measured up to its Charter obligations.

While the broadsheet press mostly gave a reasonable summary of the Australian National Audit Office's report on corporate governance in the ABC, tabloids like Adelaide's Advertiser went overboard in trying to put a negative spin on what was generally a favourable view of the ABC's operations.

The Advertiser led with the quite false statement that the auditor-general found 'the national broadcaster's audience shrank almost five per cent in less than ten years'.

The audit said no such thing. The audit made a statement about a decline in TV viewing generally, not about the ABC's total audiences (which includes domestic and international radio, and the ABC's Internet audience).

Here's what the audit really said: 'The ANAO found that, over the last ten years, there has been a decline in the number of people watching free-to-air television. This is the result of a combination of an increase in alternative leisure activities such as the Internet, subscrip-

tion television and less free time to watch free-to-air television for many. The analysis of audience reach and share for ABC Television showed that, over the last ten years, there has been a decline in the number of people watching the ABC as a proportion of the Australian population as a whole. *On the other hand, the ABC's share of people who are watching television has increased.*' [Our emphasis.]

Moreover, the Audit Office identified the Internet, where ABC Online is one of the top Australian sites, as one of the reasons for less TV viewing generally, meaning it is likely that some of the audience have simply moved from ABC TV to ABC Online.

The audit's broad conclusion

The ABC Charter sets out the functions and duties of the ABC and defines the qualities of the programs it is required to produce and the outcomes it is required to achieve. The audit did not disclose any evidence to indicate that the ABC does not comply with its Charter requirements. Nevertheless, there was significant scope for the ABC to improve its strategic planning and measurement so that the Corporation can demonstrate just how well it is performing against its Charter requirements.

Darce Cassidy



The PM chided Lateline for disproportionate coverage of asylum-seekers at the expense of other current affairs issues.

As ever, the PM was spot-on with his criticism. I've occasionally stumbled across Lateline by mistake and haven't seen a single story on dramatic weight loss, excruciating back pain, shonky car mechanics or the brilliant white dress Kylie wears on television where you can see everything except her plumbing. Indeed, if you look at the subjects the program tends to cover - things such as law reform, economics, foreign policy and reconciliation - the ABC should seriously consider a name change from Lateline to Latte-line.

Matt Price

W/E Australian 27

Friends of the ABC as “indispensable now as in the beginning”

Historian, Professor Ken Inglis, on an organization that, he says, has been "arousing and channeling public concern about the ABC for more than a quarter of a century." The story begins in 1976.

(These are extracts from a speech he made in Canberra to the National Conference of The Friends of the ABC, May, 2002)

The Friends came into being as a response to cuts imposed by the Fraser government on the national broadcaster. I quote from my book*: 'When ABC people met at gatherings of their unions, there was plenty of applause for speakers who said that the new government was deliberately weakening the national system in order to mute its independent voice and to make it compete less vigorously with private enterprise.'

'Outside the ABC, cells of troubled listeners and views began to form in April, first in Melbourne, where they took the name "Aunty's Nieces and Nephews, then in other cities where they were "Friends of the ABC" to deplore the cuts and generally speak out.

People who cherished the ABC

The Melbourne body described itself as "an association of citizens committed to the preservation of an independent ABC." They expressed the Argonautical concern of people who had cherished the ABC all their lives and sensed that it was in peril.'

(Next,) the Friends lobbied the Fraser government in 1982 to reject two recommendations of the Dix committee which had just reviewed the ABC. The first was to remove

the orchestras from the custody of the ABC - the second was the introduction of advertising or sponsorship or in the new lingo of managerialism 'corporate underwriting'. The minister's explanation of why his government was rejecting the recommendation was itself a tribute to the Friends.

"It is apparent,"he said,"that many people view the proposals as a direct threat to the ABC's editorial independence and programming ability."

That was TWENTY years ago. Looking briefly at the role of the Friends under the Corporation which replaced the Commission in 1983, I want to dwell on that rally last year in Canberra. The star of the day was Ruth Cracknell, Maggie Beare. She read to us, and spoke beautifully, these words by the great American writer, E.B White, in 1967:

"Non commercial television should address itself to the idea of excellence - not the idea of acceptability - that is what keeps commercial television from climbing the staircase."

'Arouse our dreams'

"I think television should be the visual counterpart of the literary essay. It should arouse our dreams, satisfy our hunger for beauty, take us on journeys, enable us to participate in events, present great drama and music, explore the sea and the sky and the woods and hills ... it should restate and clarify the social dilemma and the political pickle...."

So there's an item about the effects of public concern on the ABC. And here's another, from the same rally. When John Highfield spoke, he quoted from an article by

Anthony Rendell, about the effects of the new managerialism on the BBC under John Birt. We (were) riveted by the shock of recognition - 'The typical new CEO has not worked in public service broadcasting before, is combative and intolerant of dissent, and appears driven to measure his success by the degree to which he exerts dominance over people and organizations.'

Rendell's commentary, Highfield said, was a signal warning about our ABC. The Friends had given Highfield a platform he could not otherwise have had for making public his own and his colleague's concern about the condition of the ABC. That was true also of Quentin Dempster and other ABC speakers at the rally. If we're counting up the Friends' achievements, this is not the least: to give broadcasters a public platform.

Talking to the Friends is a heartening experience

They can't air the problems of the ABC when they're on the job. Getting out and talking to the Friends, one senior person in Radio National told me this week, is a heartening experience.

ABC board and management accept the Friends, sometimes reluctantly, as an institution having the right to be informed and heard on ABC matters - The Friends are taken seriously as watchdog for the public interest.

"This is the ABC" (1983).

Professor Inglis is now writing a book about the more recent history of the ABC. The book will be out late next year.



Working session around the table at the Friends National Conference in Canberra

FABC (NSW) Inc. Executive Committee

President - Penelope Toltz
Phone: 9960 5542 Fax 9960 5767

Treasurer - Peter Burke
Phone 9144 2668
email peter@triode.net.au

Secretary - Lilliane Leroy
Phone 9969 5159

Membership Secretary - Dev and Faith Webber
Phone 9990 0600

While the boss is away, the viewers stay: Aunty rakes in the ratings

David Dale

In theory, the ABC is a rudderless ship, drifting aimlessly while its board dithers over who should be the next managing director. In fact, ABC Television is going through one of the most successful periods of its history.

The week's ratings figures, to be released today will show the national broadcaster is attracting 15.5 per cent of the prime-time TV audience in the mainland capitals. This time last year, when Jonathan Shier was still ABC boss, it was sitting on 13 percent. The figures will also show the ABC is adding viewers aged 30 to 50 to its traditional base of children and retirees.

The audience surge is not the result of a single blockbuster such as *SeaChange* or *Walking With Dinosaurs*, which in their day attracted nearly 2 million viewers, but were freak occurrences. Instead, the growth in 2002 involves a string of "mini-hits" - programs which each draw more than a million viewers in the mainland capitals: *Monarch of the Glen*, *Kath and Kim*, *Walk on By*, *Australian Story*, *The Big Picture*, and the 7pm news, which is well up on its 2001 ratings.

The run began in March with *The Six Wives of Henry The Eighth* - a dramatised history program that was pulling so many viewers from Nine on Sunday nights that John Westacott, executive producer of *60 Minutes*, said publicly that he was grateful Henry had married only six times. The 1.1 million who loved Henry stayed on for a series about his daughter.

The current incumbent of the 7:30pm Sunday slot is the pop music series *Walk On By*, which gains 1.12

million viewers against *60 Minutes* and *Big Brother Evictions*, and which particularly appeals to men aged 40-54.

The most surprising mini-hit is *Kath and Kim*, a sitcom written and performed by Gina Riley and Jane Turner, attracts 1.1 million viewers Thursday nights, many in the 16-39 age group, which the ABC rarely reaches.

Kath and Kim was almost a victim of the Shier regime. It was to begin production in March last year, but was cancelled at the last minute, apparently because of Shier's view that it was not appropriate for the ABC. It was given a second chance this year by the new director of television, Sandra Levy.

Jane Turner told the Herald last month: "You know what the ABC was like for much of last year. It was in turmoil. Everyone was immobilised and we got caught up in that. It was shocking. We just thank God, Sandra Levy took over as head of television and that Robyn Kershaw came into the drama department and things got back on the rails"

As well as its new hits, the ABC maintains its command over two segments of the community ignored by the higher-rating networks: children under 12 and adults over 55. The children follow afternoon programs such as *Big Knights*, *George and Martha* and *Angela Anaconda* in preference to the cartoons and ancient sitcoms on commercial channels. The over 55s are devoted to *The Bill*, *Monarch of the Glen* and *Australian Story*.

What the doctor ordered

ABC Television should have no trouble maintaining its momentum for the next three months. Just as the nation is arguing about the medical indemnity crisis, it will launch *MDA*, an Australian drama series about doctors facing malpractice suits. Starring Kerry Armstrong (of *Lantana* and *SeaChange*), *MDA* supposedly combines the legal trickery of *The Practice* with the suspense of *E.R.* The ABC's emphasis on history will continue on Sunday nights. After *Walk On By* ends next week there will be a documentary called *The Real King Arthur*, followed by *Famous Faces*, about stars such as Marilyn Monroe. At 8:30, it will challenge the commercial networks with a dramatisation of the life of Queen Victoria.

Back in the Big Time

ABC Television's share of the prime time audience (%)

1999	15.5
2000	15.8
Mid-2001	13.0
Mid-2002	15.5

The mini-hits that are lifting the ABC boat

	Million*
Australian Story (Mon)	1.29m
The Bill (Sat)	1.29m
Monarch of the Glen (Sat)	1.2m
The Bill (Tues)	1.19m
Walk on By (Sun)	1.16m
The Big Picture (Tues)	1.16m
ABC News (weekdays)	1.14m
Kath and Kim (Thur)	1.11m

* Audiences sizes across the mainland capitals, third week of May. Source OzTAM

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update

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Phone 9960 5542. Fax 9960 5767

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FABC Update

Post The Editor
C/-FABC Update
PO Box 1391
North Sydney NSW 2059

Visit us at www.fabc.org.au/nsw
Links on our website will take you to all state sites.
Facsimile (02) 9660 5767
Email fabcnsw@optusnet.com.au

State and regional branches of Friends of the ABC

New South Wales

Penelope Toltz
PO Box 1391
North Sydney 2059
Ph: 9960 5542
Fax: 9960 5767
:fabcsnw@optusnet.au

Albury
ABC Support Group
Jim Saleeba
c/- 621 Lindsay Ave
Albury NSW 2640
Ph: 6021 5690
Fax: 6021 0616
saleeba@albury.net.au

Armidale
Priscilla Connor
41 Judith Street
Armidale NSW 2350
Ph: 6772 3454
cpsummers@northnet.com.au

Bathurst
Norah Taylor
254 Keppel, St
Bathurst 2795
Ph: 6331 1273
djtaylor@tpg.com.au

Bega
Eleanor Beasley
2 Main Street
Merimbula 2548
Ph: 6495 1392
Fax: 6495 3202

Blue Mountains
John Derum
P.O. Box 469
Springwood 2777
Ph: 4758 6979
johnderum@bigpond.com

Central Coast
Carol Bailey (Treasurer)
RMB 371 Cobbs Road
Mardi 2259
Ph: 4353 3565
d_c_bailey@bigpond.com

Eurobodalla
Michael Taylor
12 Hawkins Rd
Tuross Head, NSW
Ph: 4473 8261 (W)
Ph: 4473 8561 (H)
taylor@acr.net.au

Great Lakes
Audrey Semon (Secretary)
4 Bundacree Place
Forster 2428
Ph: 6554 8507
asesmon@tsn.com

Illawarra
Jan Kent (Secretary)
Friends of the ABC Illawarra
PO Box 336, Unanderra 2526
Phone/Fax: 4271 3531
jankent@bigpond.com

Newcastle
Hank Willems
c/ PO Box 265
Merewether 2291
gstruck@optusnet.com.au

Northern Rivers
Neville Jennings
PO Box 167 Alstonville 2477
Ph: 6674 3830 (H)
Fax: 6622 1833
njenning@scu.edu.au

Orange
Alan Sisley
52 Casey Street
Orange 2800hh
Ph: 63623775
alans@ix.net.au

Port Macquarie/ Mid North Coast
Drusilla Meggett
P.O. Box 1752
Port Macquarie, NSW
Ph: 65 8383 8798
drusi@felglow.com.au

Victoria
Friends of the ABC (Vic)
GPO Box 4065MM
Melbourne VIC 3001
Ph: 03 9682 0073
Fax: 03 9682 0074
fabcvic@vicnet.net.au

Queensland
Elisabeth McClement
P.O. Box 1658
Toowong QLD 4066
Ph/Fax: (07) 3378 7930
sirwalter_raleigh@hotmail.com

Gold Coast
Frances E. Rolls
PO Box 342
Nerang QLD 4211
Ph: (07) 5596 3835

ACT
Margaret O'Conner
GPO Box 2625
Canberra ACT 2601
Ph: 6254 8190 (H)
Fax: 6244 6690 (W)
margoferte@hotmail.com

South Australia
Darce Cassidy
PO Box 7158 Hutt St
Adelaide SA 5000
Ph 08 8362 5183
Fax: 08 8363 7548
darce@curpheymedia.com

Western Australia
Karen Treanor
PO Box 179
Darlington WA 6070
Ph/Fax: (08) 9295 1847
gandktreanor@ozemail.com.au

Tasmania
Austra Maddox
5 Albuera Street
Battery Point, Tasmania 7004
Ph: (03) 6223 2981 (H)
(03) 6211 9314 (W)
austtramaddox@ozemail.com.au

Northern Territory
Brian Holm
PO Box 210
Howard Springs NT 0835
Ph: (08) 8983 1251
Fax: (08) 8941 3350
Mob: 0409 831 251
abcfriends_nt@we-wont-byte.com

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*The Treasurer, Friends of the ABC (NSW) Inc.
PO Box 1391, North Sydney NSW 2059.*

Name _____ Email: _____

Please Print

Address _____ Suburb _____ P/Code _____

Phone (Home) _____ (Work) _____ Mob _____

Federal Electorate _____ Give my details to my local FABC

Age Group 30 or under 31-50 51+ Membership No. _____

I would like to join I would like to renew I am interested in helping I would like to join the phone/fax/email network
(and help pass on information to members

I/we apply for membership of FABC (NSW) Inc. and accept it's objectives and rules. Signature: _____

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 Pensioner \$15
 Corporate (covers 3 members) \$60
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Name on credit card _____

Expiry date _____

Cardholders signature _____

Amount \$ _____