

Inquiry into the competitive neutrality of the national broadcasters

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The Issues Paper identifies 14 questions. Questions 1-7 are addressed to the National Broadcasters (ABC and SBS). The Panel are seeking responses to questions 8-14 from all stakeholders.

Question 8: Considering the commercial activities of the national broadcasters (e.g. where they are selling or purchasing goods and services), is there evidence that they have taken undue advantage of their government ownership, to the detriment of competitive outcomes?

Given the paltry income from sales on-line by the ABC to their total budget, I think not.

Question 9: What is the differential impact of regulation on commercial and national broadcasters, and is there evidence of consequent adverse impacts on competition and outcomes?

The problem is not within Australia. The problem of competition is from the FAANGs - Facebook, Amazon, Apple, Netflix and Google. Their budgets are gi-normous. Commercial broadcasters within Australia are having a go at the minnows of the ABC and SBS, not the whales overseas. Because they can't. Commercial broadcasters need to be innovative, and adopt the savvy tech developed by the ABC and SBS. It's not ABC & SBS's fault that the commercial broadcasters are lagging. (If the outrageous suggestion of privatising the ABC were to ever come to fruition, then its competition for the residual advertising revenue would of necessity place a greater burden on the existing commercial operators, to their great detriment.)

Question 10: Is the reporting and accountability by the national broadcasters on their best endeavours to observe competitive neutrality adequate?

My observations are that the ABC spends too much of its corporate overhead on bending over backwards (financially, too) to be fair and balanced, to the detriment of paying the workers at the coal-face to do the job of researching, and broadcasting fairly and impartially.

In our democracy, all consumers of broadcast, I believe, want - or, at least, need - to be told the truth, and have opinions from all sides of an argument presented. If the ABC and SBS could focus on doing their jobs properly, the consumers would get a better deal.

Question 11: Are you aware of any specific instances where the ABC or SBS may have received any other competitive advantage, due to their public ownership, to the detriment of a private competitor?

No; their remit is quite different from all commercial broadcasters.

The ABC and SBS must, and choose to, broadcast matters of no interest to the commercial broadcasters as the commercial companies are firmly focused on their ratings, and my observation is that they avoid covering issues of importance as ratings losers unless they can be made sensational.

Question 12: The SBS Charter requires it to take into account the activities of the ABC and community television on radio and television. In the context of the competitive neutrality principles how in your view, is the SBS complying with this requirement? From your perspective does it adequately cover the activities of the SBS?

Cannot attempt a fair answer to this. Suffice to say, we enjoy SBS's documentaries and investigative programmes as much as those of the ABC.

Question 13: From your perspective do the national broadcasters seek a balance between competing in the market and complementing the market? Is that balance the same for traditional broadcasting and for new digital platforms?

I cannot judge this fairly, but I do think that all organisations compete for their share of the relevant market, and in this digital global age, that market is larger and smaller all at once. (For example, currently, I am in Quebec and really enjoying listening to ABC Classic FM as I write this. Occasionally I listen to Canadian Radio Classique in Australia, or the BBC World Service, or BBC Radio 4.)

Each media enterprise chases its own mission and strategic objectives - in the case of commercial broadcasters - profit. The ABC & SBS are committed to their Charters. Whatever platform used is immaterial.

Question 14: Do you have comment on these guiding principles?

The ABC's raison d'être, briefly, as per its opening Charter paragraph is: '... to provide ... innovative and comprehensive broadcasting services of a high standard ... and ... to provide broadcasting programs that contribute to a sense of national identity and inform and entertain, and reflect the cultural diversity of, the Australian community; and broadcasting programs of an educational nature.'

I quote from Dennis Muller's article published in The Conversation 20June18 which I fully endorse:

" In January 1931, as the newly elected United Australia Party government of Joseph Lyons was contemplating the establishment of a national broadcasting service, the prime minister received a deputation of prominent Melburnians, including a barrister and member of the Victorian parliament, Robert Gordon Menzies.

They urged that the new broadcasting service "be organised on an independent basis and that cultural potentialities of the Broadcast Service be considered a matter of primary importance". "

Somehow we seem to have lost perspective of the whole idea of public broadcasting - it is for the public good; if business/political or other community are ashamed their behaviours are being called out, then maybe they should be looking to themselves rather than the democracy-enhancing public broadcasters, which stay fearless because of their independence of source of income.

In this day and age of 'fake news', we need the ABC more than ever.
