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Submission to the Competitive Neutrality Inquiry

Competitive Neutrality Inquiry
Department of Communication and the Arts
GPO Box 2154
Canberra ACT 2601

I have long been a fan of the ABC and SBS having learnt to rely on each for the accuracy of their reporting and the quality of information supplied. I find theirs to be in stark contrast to much of the output from many of the commercial media sources in this regard. I do hope that you will not require either of them to scale back their accuracy or quality to become less competitive. They have acquired a standing in the community where they are looked upon as reliable and impartial places to turn to when one wants to know what is really going on or to obtain an update on a current or developing situation. We need broadcasters who are independent from the dictates of financial sponsors or mindless requirements to chase an audience no matter how banal.

Over my many years as an educator, researcher and consultant operating at secondary and tertiary levels both in Australia and abroad I have come to appreciate that we have, in Australia, public broadcasters that do not distort the material they provide for commercial perspective or political pressure. In 1992, a year working in Pakistan with the Institute for the Promotion of Science, Education and Training and, earlier in 1978, time spent in China visiting educational institutions taught me the dangers of excessive government regulation of media expression for political purposes. During those times I also learnt the value of ABC shortwave broadcasts and became reliant on them. The relatively weaker form of public broadcast, weakened by a dependence on commercial enterprise, that I experienced in Canada during time spent working with the University of Alberta during 1979 -1981 further strengthened my regard for the independence and reliability of our Australian system.

In more recent times, of course, we have moved on into the digital field of communication and I have been impressed by the way that the ABC, in particular, has been able to maintain the quality of its communications in the face of financial pressures upon it. To continue to do this they will require more resources, not to compete, but to maintain the standards of their offerings and to provide informed and meaningful input to public debate.

In a broader educational sense the contribution of the public broadcasters in the fields of culture and the arts – music, drama, dance - is also an essential aspect of their service that should be maintained. We need publicly sponsored media to cover a diversity of offerings in areas where the commercial players never venture.

In summary then I would advise your committee to resist the attempts of those who would seek to weaken the ABC or SBS for narrow commercial or political reasons. We need to know, now, what is occurring or what is being planned and how this will affect us and the broader community. We do not want to be kept in the dark. The few pence per person per day that it costs the government to do this is a small amount to be spent to ensure that this continues so that we can make our decisions for the future in an informed state of mind and a culturally acceptable environment.

Yours sincerely,
Dr M E march