

Submission: Inquiry into the Competitive Neutrality of the National Broadcasters

Both the ABC and SBS are much more than media businesses. They operate as public institutions. Institutions that are trusted and retain excellent reputations. As such they are both obliged and committed to offering a much broader and more complex perspective on issues that is commonly seen in the commercial media.

Many of the investigations that these broadcasters have initiated and maintained over a long period of time would not be possible if they were part of the commercial world. And in some cases these investigations have led to public inquiries and bringing matters to public attention that would otherwise have not seen the light of day (e.g. Banking Royal Commission, Dondale Inquiry, Live Sheep Export Trade, etc). This is the role of a public institution – to work for and on behalf of the public. Commercial media by their very nature are beholden to commercial interests, not public interests.

In this way, the public broadcaster is not in direct competition with commercial media. It is a different type of organisation. However, it must be noted that because of the quality of the programming, the diversity of topics addressed, and the innovative design of programs, some of the programs rate highly. When this has been the case, they are often emulated by commercial media – not always successfully. The commercial media is not required to demonstrate how the ABC or SBS undermines them through unfair competition, meanwhile the ABC and SBS both have strict accountability requirements.

There should definitely not be any restriction on who can watch the ABC or SBS by setting up pay walls. Pay walls are undemocratic and undermine the role of a public institution, one that is paid for by all our taxes. The ABC and SBS access to digital media should not be limited or restricted. People access broadcasters and media outlets in a variety of ways these days, and the ABC offers platforms to enable participation and for all the population.

Our public broadcasters, ABC and SBS, are at the forefront of providing Australian content, of giving voice, time and place to Indigenous issues. Often telling very positive stories that would never be heard. Not the more 'stereotypical' versions that tend to get perpetuated on commercial media. Over many years the ABC has provided us, the Australian people, of all ages, backgrounds, and circumstances an opportunity to see our lives reflected in the stories that are told, the issues that are addressed and provoked us to think more broadly about some of the complex challenges and concerns that impact our lives both locally, nationally and globally.

I am concerned that this inquiry is politically motivated and arises from the right wings dislike of the ABC. Other countries who have gone down this path, for example New Zealand, have very much regretted their decision. If anyone involved in the Inquiry has ever visited New Zealand and watched their TV, they will understand that the woeful state of the commercial media. The public broadcasters in Australia set the bar high for commercial media, and should continue to do so, not be pushed into a position where they are required to 'dumb down' their programming in order to gain ratings in order to compete with the commercial channels. The ABC is a 'different' kind of media organisation – one that we can trust.

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