

Submission to:

**The Inquiry into the Competitive Neutrality of the National Broadcasters.**

I am writing to you as a person for whom the ABC is an integral part of life. It is the only news source that I critically trust, the source of the majority of my viewing and listening experiences and gives me a sense of “Australianness” and of being part of a unique Australian community.

**ABC and “Unfair” competition**

I find the argument around the ABC unfairly competing with privatised media completely lacking in logical consistency. The ABC does not compete for the advertising dollar, and hopefully it will never do so. It is a pity that SBS is also not excluded for accepting advertising. Hence all arguments regarding unfair competition must centre on audience numbers and audience preference. If the ABC is out competing private media in terms of audience numbers, it is doing so because they are offering what the audience wants to watch. If the private media is not successfully competing for the audience, then that is a failure of competition on their part. Surely the argument is against protecting poorly performing private enterprises.

**Without the ABC and SBS there would be less, not more competition.**

The situation in the USA is a reminder that the lack of a national broadcaster does not ensure increased competition. Even with the vastly larger numbers, there is a good argument that competition within the media is more restricted, not just in terms of ownership, but in the diversity of voice. I have frequently heard guests from the USA comment on the ABC how appreciative they are of the amount of time, the quality of interviewing and the exposure to diverse points they experience on the ABC.

**ABC lifts the national media performance**

Any Australian who travels overseas quickly becomes very aware that few countries enjoy the quality of media that we do. In many countries it has been a fast race to the lowest common denominator, and free to air TV is virtually unwatchable, except in a fascinated horror. I doubt that this is because the commercial media in other countries is less talented than in Australia. I believe it is because our national broadcasters are by charter expected to reach a quality that is not seen in many countries, and it demands more of their commercial counterparts. I find that I returned Australia thankful for my ABC and SBS.

**The charter of the ABC is a protection of diversity and quality.**

A logical flaw in the argument that ABC should do “only do what the commercial media doesn't do” is that the very same people put forward the argument that attacks the ABC as “catering only to a minority” and “not justifying the amount of tax payers dollars”. The internal inconsistency in this argument is obvious.

- if the ABC produces programs that attract a wide audience it is “unfairly competing”.
- if the ABC fails to attract large audiences it is “catering only to a minority”

- if the ABC pulls audience from the commercial media it is the unfairly undermining their commercial viability
- if the ABC produces shows directed to minority groups, it is wasting tax payer money and funding should be reduced.

It is clear that under the charter of the ABC and SBS it must in fact fulfil both these roles. As our community fragments, the ABC is a cohesive force, allowing the most remote outstation and the city dweller to share an experience or grow to understand each other more. It allows time for a depth of discussion or investigation that the commercial stations rarely allow, be it through documentaries, drama or discussion. At times, it will program for very minority interests but that in itself is cohesive as I often stumble across a show that I would not have sought out and that leaves me with a new understanding or appreciation. Sometimes, I feel that the ABC is not necessarily enjoyable, just “good for me” . I don't think I have ever responded that way to a commercial media offering.

### **ABC contributes quality to the commercial media.**

The contribution of the ABC to commercial media is obvious in at least three areas.

- the number of stories investigated and broken on the ABC that then become content on other news and current affairs programs
- the number of high quality journalists, anchors, actors and technicians who were trained and given prior training on the ABC before accepting more lucrative positions in commercial media
- the number of series given first showing on the ABC only to be purchased, taken over or replicated in commercial media.

### **The ABC faces cost and restrictions that commercial stations do not.**

We are all aware that the commercial stations are willing to “leave things” to the ABC until it is to their competitive advantage to complain that the ABC is unfairly competing on them. The prime example would be within numerous sporting coverages where for years, ABC and SBS were the only ones covering the sports, until suddenly they became of interest. Similarly, women's sports, children's programming, rural programming, indigenous programming to identify a few others. We can all name mainstream sports, shows and issues that gained popularity through the ABC, now subject to buy outs or subject to claims of unfair criticism competition. However, we rarely see the argument that the ABC is unfairly competing in rural broadcasting, or broadcasting in times of national emergency.

### **In conclusion**

The ABC is a national icon in a time when fewer and fewer such icons remain. It is a cohesive element that provides a depth and diversity to the national discussion and raises the standard of all broadcasting in Australia. It provides for populations and regions of little interest to commercial broadcasters as well as being the glue that brings us together, the nation as a whole. It remains the most trusted source of information and raises the quality of all broadcasting in Australia.

I would urge this Inquiry to conclude that the ABC is valued by Australians and that the best way forward is to restore funding so that the ABC can continue to be an institution that it is a mainstay of our democracy and artistic achievements.

