

*The Age*

## **Deliberate dismantling of our diminished ABC continues Quentin Dempster**

August 4, 2011

Opinion

*The new ABC drama Crownies.... is this the best that Auntie can do?*

The latest cut hurts, but it's not the deepest in an already de-skilled ABC.

At last the hidden agenda has been exposed. The outsourcing of ABC television production to the commercial sector now covers all drama, documentary, natural history, most feature programming and, increasingly, studio-based light entertainment.

The ABC's explanation that resources from arts and other programming needed to be diverted to support prime-time content is disingenuous. In the digital revolution, prime-time is dead. Audiences can download programs at any time.

The anguish now felt inside the ABC from the latest program cuts would not arise if there was a genuine mixed production model with the ABC retaining the capacity and leverage to make the full genre range of copyright programs itself by developing its own talent and skills base.

But through a long and deliberate board and management policy to dismantle and de-skill internal television production, the ABC is now totally dependent on the commercial television production sector for almost all Australian non-news content.

What's wrong with that? Our creative independence is being crushed out of us along with a conduit for diversity and originality nurtured in a creative training ground. The ABC cannot be truly independent unless it has a capacity to create and produce its own original programming. The public trust in the ABC is based on an expectation that we are independent of commercial influence. We are not.

Many programs, particularly drama, are commissioned with external co-funders on the basis of their commercial "bankability", that is, their prospects for profitable on-sale to pay TV and other commercial operators and spinoffs after a showing on the ABC. When this commissioning model is applied, there is little room for public purpose, originality, innovation and risk-taking - much less independence from commercial influence. What the public is getting from this model is largely Hallmark TV, Reader's Digest documentary or lightweight, sexed-up and formulaic drama pitched at an AB demographic. Is *Crownies* - the latest so-called "bold" outsourced drama - the best we can do? It reminded me of *Nine's Underbelly*: a bit of shootin' and tootin' and a hell of a lot of rootin'. The taxpayers who fund the ABC deserve much better.

If our drama and other programming mimics the commercial networks, the ABC's *raison d'être* is destroyed.

There now needs to be an inquiry into the siphoning of taxpayers' funds to the commercial sector to establish the facts about the compromising of the ABC's public purpose. Such an inquiry would establish how the deals are done and how the ABC is betraying the public's trust. Television management has said that through co-funding and co-production arrangements, it can turn one taxpayer dollar into an effective three dollars of content on air. This claim now needs to be tested.

The terms of reference for an inquiry would need to require the ABC to produce and table all outsourcing contracts over the past five years showing the copyright and transmission obligations and the commercial producer's associated business plans. At the moment this detail is commercial-in-confidence. You will not find these details in the ABC's annual report to the Federal Parliament. As taxpayer funds are involved, full transparency should be mandatory. The ABC should be required to show revenue share, if any, from the commercial exploitation of ABC-commissioned programs. ABC managing director Mark Scott should be asked to explain how his claim that the ABC existed because of "market failure" can be reconciled with a program commissioning model that abandons in-house production.

The destruction of the ABC's creative independence has a long history. When the Hawke and Keating governments slashed funding, the management and board began a regime of co-productions in drama. By the mid-1990s, the ABC no longer produced any drama in-house.

The co-production model then moved to other genres, pursued by heavy lobby pressure on government from the commercial television production sector. The in-house natural history unit was soon gone, followed by documentary.

While ABC supporters maintained their advocacy through the Howard years, the commercial sector intensified its lobby efforts to get an ever bigger slice of ABC programming. The ABC does not publish any detailed data on the share of production funds, so supporters and critics could follow the debate based on established facts. This aspect is the most unsettling. While Australia needs a viable commercial television production sector, its siphon now clamped on to the ABC compromises the ABC's efforts. The Gillard government has a "convergence review" under way. In the digital revolution, Australians can download any content from any domestic and international source. National boundaries are smashed.

Perhaps understandably, the commercial channels want to be relieved of their local content quota obligations legislated by Parliament. If this happens, the need for a broadcaster to support national interest and cultural objectives will be greater than ever before. But the ABC, without public discussion, has allowed its skills base and creative culture to be eroded.

As taxpayer funds are diverted to the commercial sector, the ability of the ABC to deliver on its public mandate is reduced.

It is this trend that must be urgently confronted.

Quentin Dempster is an ABC journalist and broadcaster and former staff-elected director.

Read more: <http://www.theage.com.au/opinion/society-and-culture/deliberate-dismantling-of-our-diminished-abc-continues-20110803-1ibk9.html#ixzz1U1mklxSU>