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Viewpoint

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## Big Media Owners after APTV

Some of Australia's powerful media players are working to get their hands on the ABC's satellite television service that broadcasts into the Asia-Pacific region, Asia Pacific Television (APTV). Sky News Australia – the pay-TV service owned by Murdoch/News Ltd, Packer/Channel Nine and Stokes/Channel Seven – has successfully lobbied the Government to put the service out to tender.

The Sky consortium is interested in access to the market reached by ABC Asia Pacific TV and the \$18.5 million per annum provided by the Federal Government, through the Department of Foreign Affairs & Trade (DFAT) to fund the service.

There is a long history behind APTV and its associated online service. In 1993, with seed money of \$6 million provided by the Keating Labor Government, the ABC established Australian Television International (ATVI), Australia's first television service to reach its overseas neighbours.

When the Howard Government came to office in 1996, it cut the ABC's budget and decided that overseas broadcasting was not important. Following the 1997 report of the Mansfield Review into ABC operations, the Government closed Radio Australia's most powerful shortwave transmitter system and sold ATVI to Kerry Stokes' Channel Seven.

At the time the Government sold ATVI it was costing the public purse a meagre \$4 million per annum. Stokes gained the benefit of the seed money from the previous government and a subsidy of another \$6m over two years.

Seven's ATVI turned out to be a wasteful and embarrassing saga for Australia. Under the ABC, ATVI screened a wide range of ABC programs, plus tailored and credible news services. Seven cut costs to the bone, running endless repeats of low-grade programs, including soaps and old childrens programs. In March 2001, unable to make money from ATVI, Seven closed the service.

After the Seven disaster, some degree of Government sanity prevailed. Foreign Minister Alexander Downer convinced fellow Cabinet members that the Government should resurrect the service and, at the invitation of DFAT, the ABC tendered. Agreement was reached to fund the ABC \$90 million over five years to provide APTV.

In 2001, the ABC commenced the difficult job of rebuilding an audience and credibility for APTV. With the integrity that arises from the ABC's independence and better programming, APTV has become one of the fastest growing networks in the Asia Pacific Region. APTV is distributed in 39 countries on 155 platforms. Today it has 630,000 viewers a month (up 76% in a year) and its associated online services attract 200,000 visitors a week - about half being for English education.

Until the Sky News Australia consortium lobbied the Government to put the service out to tender, the ABC understood that, subject to a performance review, its contract would be renewed in 2006 for a further five years.

[\[continued on page 2\]](#)



You will see this Postcard to the PM at the Royal Show stand and at many venues throughout Victoria. Photography is by Ponch Hawkes (whose exhibition RISK is at the Monash Gallery of Art, 860 Ferntree Gully Road, Wheelers Hill until 2 October) and Design is by Lin Tobias.

[APTV article continued from page 1]

Friends of the ABC has concerns about the operations of APTV: the Government's requirement that APTV supplement its funds through sponsorship and advertising, its carrying of commercial programs and the need for the public to purchase access through pay-TV. (The service is provided free to the host distributor who then makes it available to the public through pay-TV). To protect the APTV's independence and credibility, FABC would prefer that its funds did not come from DFAT.

Nevertheless, as part of the ABC, APTV's allegiance and accountability is to the public interest. It provides an independent voice in the region and higher quality programming than Sky is likely to offer.

In present times, Australians have become critically aware of the significance of communication with our overseas neighbours. The ABC's overseas broadcasting services, Radio Australia and APTV, represent Australia abroad. They are important to the way in which Australia is viewed in Asia and the Pacific, and play a valuable role in regional relations, cultural understanding and trade.

It would be highly inappropriate for a commercial operator to take over the running of APTV's service.

Taxpayers' funds should not be used to further the business interests of commercial operators and, in the case of Sky News, already rich and powerful ones at that. The goals of a commercial conglomerate like Sky conflict with the need for Australia's overseas broadcasting service to represent broad public interests. Sky is not well placed to fulfil service objectives that include: 'provide a credible, reliable and independent voice in the region' and 'promote Australia's engagement in the Asia Pacific region by fostering public understanding of Australia, its people and its strategic and economic interests'.

Many remember the sorry saga that resulted last time the Government handed the ABC's overseas television service to commercial interests. We do not want to be portrayed to the world by old episodes of *Neighbours*. — G.S.

# 25 years on, is the SBS still special?

## Emma Dawson asks the question

When SBS Television first went to air, on the 24th of October 1980, it was unique. No other television station in the world had the same purpose or policy; no other public broadcaster had ever set out to provide niche programming for a specific audience. Established to complement the services of the ABC, SBS' primary purpose was clearly understood to be the provision of radio and television services in what were then termed ethnic languages, and its core constituency was Australian residents of Non-English Speaking Backgrounds (NESB).

Along with a vast amount of what was then called 'foreign language programming' with English subtitles, SBS Television broadcast English-language international news and current affairs and a range of arts and cultural programming of an international flavour that could not find a home on the ABC or Australian commercial networks. This second programming stream was intended to appeal to Australians from English-speaking backgrounds who had an interest in international culture and current affairs, and to encourage and develop such an interest within previously mono-cultural Australian mainstream audiences.

SBS Television had, from the outset, a clearly defined core audience of recent immigrants and longer-term residents from non-English speaking backgrounds, and a publicly declared goal of internationalising the largely Anglo-Australian middle class. This unique covenant resulted in some of the most innovative and groundbreaking television programming in the world during the first decade of SBS' existence. During this time, the service provided to its audience by Australia's second public broadcaster was very special indeed.

Since the mid 1990s, however, there has been a series of shifts within policy and practice at SBS Television that have steadily eroded the network's claim to be a unique player in the national media landscape. Many, if not most, of these shifts can be attributed to political pressure and changing government cultural ideologies.

As a publicly funded broadcaster, SBS in 2005 operates in an environment increasingly hostile to its original purpose and charter.

The Howard Government has altered the composition of SBS' Board radically, and the changes wrought by this, together with the atmosphere of the broader political environment in which SBS must compete for funding, are largely responsible for the shift in on-air programming and the apparent decline in multicultural content on SBS TV.

In 1983, when the new Hawke Government created the first SBS Board, it was to have only 'ethnics', in the terminology of the day, with just one Anglo-Australian member, to represent the broadcasting industry. Coverage of Indigenous issues was left to the ABC. This philosophy guided government appointments throughout the Hawke-Keating era, but the Howard Government has taken a decidedly different approach.

The SBS Board of 2005 is almost entirely made up of Anglo-Australian, American or British media and financial sector professionals, with the exception of Indigenous representative Joseph Elu and Chairman Carla Zampatti. The inclusion of Elu underlines the increasingly divergent purposes and charter obligations of the ABC and SBS; and apart from Zampatti, whose Liberal Party connections are well known, the last member of the board from a non-English speaking background was former Deputy Chairman Neville Roach.

Roach was also Chairman of the Council for Multicultural Australia until he resigned in protest at the Howard Government's refugee policies in January 2002. His second, two-year term on the SBS board expired in August 2003, and he was not re-appointed.

Roach's replacement was Christopher Pearson, a former speechwriter for, and noted public supporter of Prime Minister John Howard.

The new-look SBS Board evinces vast experience in commercial media and financial management, but precious little understanding of the role and purpose of a public broadcaster, with obligations to reflect public policy and social goals – in this case, the policy of Australian multiculturalism.

SBS's decision to compete with the ABC for broadcast rights to The Ashes test

series, which began screening during prime time on SBS Television last month, highlights the problem. The Ashes is a bastion of Anglo-Australian tradition, and a cornerstone of the mono-cultural Australia that SBS was created to challenge, if not displace. The supposedly multicultural broadcaster's bid for the telecast – which trumped that of the ABC – is the latest example of SBS' distance from its original charter, and calls into question yet again the logic of splitting limited government funding for two increasingly similar, and competing, public broadcasters.

The ABC had reportedly bid about \$500,000 for the TV rights when SBS entered the fray in late February. Its winning offer has not been disclosed, but it's safe to assume the amount was at least the same as the ABC's. More importantly, SBS apparently committed itself to devoting a greater proportion of its prime-time schedule to the broadcast, thus displacing its usual programs for 30 evenings in the peak ratings period of July, August and September - something the ABC was unwilling to do.

*Octagon Australia's* Sean Nicholls, the Australian representative of the global media conglomerate responsible for selling the TV rights for the England and Wales Cricket Board, has acknowledged that as recently as 2001 SBS had not considered the Ashes to be part of its charter. The then managing director, Nigel Milan, who left SBS in August, told the 2001 Australian Senate that broadcasting The Ashes was "...foreign to our charter... I would rather be a gold medal choice for those Australians who do not speak English and come from the majority of countries in the world that do not play cricket, than a silver medal choice for a group of folk which I am not chartered to serve particularly".

Obviously, much has changed since then. According to current SBS TV management, SBS no longer operates in terms of multicultural and ethnic minority programming. Instead, it's focused on reflecting Australian society back to itself, in all its diversity. This sounds admirable, but it is dangerously self-immolating, suggesting as it does that SBS's work in fostering a culturally diverse society has been done. The goals now espoused by SBS are arguably very similar to those contained in the ABC charter.

It is the growing resemblance between Australia's two public broadcasters that is the most dangerous development for the

future of SBS. After all, can the ongoing, public funding of two separate public broadcasters, with comparable charters and increasingly similar programming, be justified in a nation of around 20 million people? The obvious answer is no.

One increasingly vocal critic of Howard's Australia, Malcolm Fraser, whose Government established SBS Television in 1980, warned in 2003 that 'Given half a reason, this government will say "SBS has served its purpose", and save money by abolishing it'.

By traducing its original purpose, undermining its ideals and reducing its distinctiveness to the point where it becomes indistinguishable from the ABC, or even from commercial television, the Howard Government is driving SBS so far from its original purpose that it could conceivably be quietly disbanded and absorbed into the ABC with little complaint, or even notice, from the public.



**ABC Shop Discount STOPPED!**

The ABC has notified FABC it will withdraw the 10% discount available to Friends of the ABC members at ABC shops and centres from 31 December 2005.

FABC unsuccessfully sought to have the ABC reconsider the matter. It is painfully aware that the ABC's action sends a message of disregard for the loyalty and support FABC members give to the ABC.

Friends of the ABC is dissatisfied with the ABC's explanation that its decision is the result of a review by ABC Enterprises of ABC Shops. That is a description of the process, not a reason.

The question FABC is asking itself is, why would any organisation deliberately damage the goodwill on which it depends for its survival? Is it another effort of ABC management to appease the present Government? Abandoning this small but concrete expression of the ABC's appreciation to FABC members is an effective way to alienate people who continually pressure governments in the ABC's interests. Or is this action yet another example of what is increasingly occurring – the ABC's commercial operations overriding and damaging the longer-term interests of the ABC?

The loss of SBS would be a significant step backwards for Australian culture. The recent backlash against multiculturalism, following the terrorist attacks on the London Underground, displays the vulnerability of the concept within our society. The amalgamation of SBS with the ABC would signal the death-knell for multiculturalism in Australia, and reverse more than thirty years of progress during which Australia has led the world in the creation of a cohesive and successful multicultural society. If we lose SBS now, we risk losing all that it has achieved, and Australia will be the poorer for it.

**Emma Dawson is a fellow of the Melbourne-based public policy think tank Oz Prospect, and a Ph.D. Candidate at the National Centre for Australian Studies, Monash University. For 3 years she was a Project Officer at SBS Radio Melbourne. For further reading, see [www.sbs.com.au](http://www.sbs.com.au)**

FABC sincerely apologises to members for any inconvenience caused by the withdrawal of the discount.

**FABC AGM and Speaker:**

Thursday, 20 October at ABC Iwaki Auditorium, ABC Southbank. Meeting 6.30 for 6.45pm. Speaker: 8pm.

**Margo Kingston, founder of WebDiary. The Future of Fair Dinkum Journalism**

Public welcome. See flier for details.

**FABC Local Groups:** If you would like the name of FABC's local group contact in your area or if you would like to establish a local group in your area, please contact the FABC Office (03 9682 0073).

**Herald-Sun Reader:** FABC is seeking someone who is a regular Herald-Sun reader to contact FABC on occasions when the ABC or related matters are mentioned. If you think you could help, please phone the office to discuss.

**And here's a note from the ABC:** Internship: The ABC is offering a three month internship on Australian Story for a university student who produces the best five minute video in the style of this award winning program. For details see: <[www.ABC.net.au/austory/gas](http://www.ABC.net.au/austory/gas)>

# From the Journals

**Extracts from Robert Manne, *Murdoch's War, The Monthly*, July 2005, Schwartz Publishing Pty Ltd.**

'On the road to the invasion of Iraq, and through the two-and-a-half years of bloody chaos since Baghdad's fall, almost every Australian newspaper owned by Rupert Murdoch has supported each twist and turn of the American, British and Australian policy line.'

'Yet in no country was Murdoch's stance on Iraq so influential as in Australia. For in no other country does Murdoch wield even remotely the same media power. Since 1987 Murdoch has owned the most important newspapers in Sydney and Melbourne – *The Daily Telegraph* and *Herald Sun* – and the only daily papers in Brisbane, Adelaide, Hobart and Darwin. He owns the sole general national daily, *The Australian*. His only serious competitor is Fairfax. For this situation, duopoly is too weak a word.'

'With virtually no discussion of foreign policy on commercial TV or radio, only the ABC and the Fairfax papers might have criticised the Bush-Howard foreign policy and presented an alternative vision for Australia. Yet this possibility was more theoretical than real. The ABC, at present, is in a defensive frame of mind. In the face of persistent allegations of left-wing bias its public affairs programs, with some exceptions, seem increasingly timid and to have lost their nerve.'

'A war of this kind, without the sanction of the United Nations, was always going to be difficult for John Howard's government to sell. Its task was made much easier than it might otherwise have been by the conspicuous support offered by the Murdoch press. From a mountain of potential evidence, three significant and concerted contributions stand out – the pre-invasion commentaries of *The Australian's* foreign editor Greg Sheridan and the *Herald Sun's* opinion columnist Andrew Bolt, and the post-invasion editorials of *The Australian*.'

'The Murdoch papers do not only influence their readers directly. They also help set the agenda each morning for one of the most potent forces in Australian politics – personality-driven commercial talkback radio. The Murdoch press, in short, now helps determine the way in which millions

of Australians interpret their world. And not only that. In contemporary Australia, a political party disagreeing with News Corporation on certain issues of fundamental ideological or material importance to it – like the invasion of Iraq, or the US–Australia Free Trade Agreement, or the cross-media ownership laws – runs a very real, and perhaps unacceptable, political risk.'



Robert Manne

'Nor is it at all obvious that the limit of his ambition and influence in Australia has been reached. Now that the Howard Government has control of the Senate it seems likely that Australia's media laws will be re-written and the cross-media restrictions effectively removed. If so it is likely that, with the blessing of the government, Murdoch will add one of Australia's three commercial TV networks to the newspaper chain he already owns. It is far from impossible that he will use that network in the same way he has used Fox News in the US – to push the political culture even further to the right.'

**Mourid Barghout, *I Saw Ramallah*, Bloomsbury, 2005.**

'When he asked me what I thought were the conditions for a successful broadcasting service, I said it has to keep its distance from the governing powers.'

**Extracts from David Edgar's review of *What are we telling the Nation?*, London Review of Books, July 7, 2005**

'No longer bound by the tyranny of the schedule, tomorrow's viewers will see TV as a library, in which they do the selecting. The digital revolution is democracy in action, breaking down mass conformity in order to liberate individual choice. Technology has set the viewers free.'

'...the idea of public service television has become tired and dusty, promoted by people 'out there' who believe that the whole purpose of public service television is not to change... In the multichannel digital universe of the future, the purpose of public service broadcasting is not the setting of the gold standard or the preservation of elite culture but the provision of choice.'

'The pernicious effect of assuming that we are first and foremost customers is not the rights it grants... but the rights it removes. In the case of local authorities, they include the right to have and express an interest in services which a person may not directly use. Market researchers note that far more people support the idea of regional, children's and arts programmes than actually watch them – people understand that they are paying for a service that goes beyond their own wants to address other people's needs.'

'Providing a service which meets people's needs as well as their wants, which seeks to expand as well as echo the experience of its users, which is prepared to jolt and disturb as well as confirm or sustain. which provides a site for public conversation and which acknowledges and articulates our collective as well as our individual affinities and identities, is a pretty good mission statement for a public realm communicator.'

'Excessive marketisation limits the collective innovation that comes from the free flow of information. In the market paradigm, it is assumed that competition will fuel innovation. Now we know that it is much harder to create an innovative environment and much easier to destroy it than anyone imagined.'

**Extracts from Eric Beecher in *Do Not Disturb: Is the Media Failing Australia?* edited by Robert Manne and published on 10 August, 2005 by Black Inc. \$29.95 and on 3 August by *New Matilda*.**

‘Something quite alarming is happening to serious journalism in Australia. A convergence of economic, technological and societal trends is conspiring to threaten mainstream quality media in an unprecedented way. If these trends continue, as I fear they will, there could be very little journalism of excellence left after another decade or two. And that would not only be a disaster for journalists, it would be a tragedy for Australian democracy.’

*Beecher goes on to list these trends; credibility, relevance, trivialisation, the migration of advertising revenue from newsprint to the Internet, ownership, commercialisation and technology.*

‘Although none of these trends on its own is likely to destroy quality journalism in Australia, their cumulative effect will eventually transform the media landscape. There are just too many negative pressures coming from too many directions for serious journalism to survive in its current form. As the commercial vice tightens on well-funded, high-grade journalism, media owners are responding with measures designed to maintain their profitability. The result will be fewer editorial resources, lower budgets, more reporters and editors pensioned off, news space carved back, fewer foreign bureaus, more shared and syndicated content, more “product placements” and “advertorial” material, and constant pressure on editorial departments to create “efficiencies” and do “more with less”. Anyone who has been involved in journalism for the past decade will attest that this is already an unstoppable reality.’

‘The underlying problem is that serious journalism in Australia has never been profitable in its own right... the bill for journalism on the ABC is picked up by the federal government, not directly by the consumers of that journalism. The continued existence of Australian quality journalism has always depended on subsidies, which has in turn always made that continued existence a shaky proposition.’

‘Not only is entertainment more profitable than journalism, it is also far more universal. Entertainment appeals to all age groups, all demographics, across all cultural boundaries. It may lack the political or intellectual potency of journalism, but it’s not in decline, it doesn’t have a credibility crisis, it doesn’t demand great mental effort from its audience, and it can run on movie screens, television screens, computer screens and telephone screens. The future of serious journalism is under threat in large part because it has been replaced by entertainment at the heart of the media power edifice.’

**Ross Warneke, *The Age*, July 18, 2005**

‘Free-to-air television has never been truly free. The average cost to Victorians of watching the ABC, SBS and the three commercial channels reached...more than \$100 per head in the first six months of 2005. The ABC and SBS were funded directly through taxes for about \$23 per head, although some of that amount financed the two broadcasters’ radio services as well as their TV channels.

Consumers indirectly paid an average of more than \$80 each to the three commercial channels between January and June through advertising costs built in to the goods and services they bought.’

**The Age, Editorial, July 23, 2005**

‘Mind-numbing “reality” shows are proliferating... there is a danger that soon the only locally produced programs, other than news and current affairs, will be banal time-fillers made on minimal budgets. To add insult to this, viewers endure far higher levels of advertising than is usual overseas... but the networks are not solely to blame. The Federal Government must bear responsibility for slashing funding to the national broadcaster and scrapping the Commercial Television Production Fund, set up by the Keating Government to “increase the amount, quality and diversity” of Australian television on commercial networks. It is time for the Government to act on its promise made long ago to replace the fund. It must also adequately fund the ABC. To allow the decline to continue could condemn generations of viewers to being treated like unthinking zombies.’

Sent to

## Letters Editor, *The Australian*;

but sadly unpublished,  
so with permission  
we reproduce here.

Your editorial on ABC drama content (May 20th) is ill advised and against the community’s interests.

You state that commercial television drama output is sufficient, obviating the need for the ABC to produce drama.

1. Your assumption that everyone is comfortable with having all their stories interrupted to be urged to buy something is concerning. The abuse of the viewers’ sensibilities, young and old, seems to escape you. You are apparently very attuned to “1984” and at ease with that. Many of us want a choice.

2. The free market provides what is monetarily profitable not what is just and equitable. That’s its job. Governments have additional obligations. Allowing a variety of views to be expressed through broadcast drama, news, current affairs and light entertainment is one of them.

3. Castrating the ABC is self-mutilation. Do editors and journalists at *The Australian* not welcome the perspective an alternative, public broadcaster can provide and the opportunities this gives for issues to be aired? The messenger is one of the most important elements in a fair and just society.

Many of us think the ABC and its drama output is an essential messenger even if it is uncomfortable for some of us at various times. Don’t kill it.

Yours sincerely,

Eugene Schlusser  
Charles ‘Bud’ Tingwell  
Mal Bryning  
Wendy Rawady

on behalf of members of the  
Producers & Directors Guild of Victoria  
(8 June 2005)

# Don't let Australia get Foxed !

**This is an edited version of a briefing paper prepared by Glenys Stradijot (FABC), Shane Elson and Andrew Lowenthal for the *Advance Australia Fair Conference* held in Melbourne, 30–31 July 2005.**

What happens to Australian media is not just another issue, it is one which impacts on every important social and political issue. The information the general public receives – indeed how many in the community think about a wide range of matters – is determined largely by information delivered to us through the media.

## **Commercial Media**

To understand the importance of the ABC and community broadcasting, it is important to contrast them with the role of commercial broadcasters in particular. Commercial broadcasters are companies that exist to earn the maximum profit possible for their owners.

The selection of programs, program content, depth and style, and the decision to broadcast or not to broadcast information is determined by the need of commercial broadcasters to sell advertising. To ensure advertisers get maximum exposure to potential customers, programs are selected to attract as large a target audience as possible. Content is also influenced by the need to promote, or at least take care not to offend, the interests of companies with which media outlets seek to do business.

Privately-owned media are frequently also a vehicle for furthering the interests of owners. Expression of an owner's political interests is rarely as overt as it was in 1995 when Kerry Packer appeared on his own Nine Network declaring that John Howard, then leader of the Liberal-National Party Opposition, would make a good Prime Minister. Nevertheless every major Murdoch-owned media outlet across the world supported the 2003 US-led invasion of Iraq.

The media's capacity to influence voters and the increasing concentration of media ownership into the hands of a smaller number of commercial owners, is resulting in commercial media owners having the power to influence elected governments.

And when the interests of powerful media owners and a political party in government are largely shared the media's important responsibility to scrutinise the actions of government is compromised.

Australia already has the highest concentration of media ownership in the western world. Murdoch controls 70% of our newspapers. Packer's Nine Network has an audience reach of up to 70%. They jointly own 50% of Foxtel and are dominant in online news services. For most in the community, diversity of news, opinions, information and entertainment is being lost as information is delivered to us through a widening range of outlets and mediums but emanating from a shrinking number of sources.

## **The ABC – Australia's Independent National Public Broadcaster**

The ABC is Australia's independent and comprehensive national public broadcast with a responsibility to promote Australian culture and to cater for a diversity of interests in the community. Its programming is not distorted by the need to attract commercial revenue.

The ABC regards its audience as citizens, not consumers. The ABC's charter requires it to inform, educate and entertain Australians, to reflect our cultural diversity, promote the arts and to contribute to a sense of national identity. In addition, as well as informing Australians abroad, Radio Australia (the ABC's overseas broadcasting service) encourages overseas awareness and an understanding of Australia.

The Howard Government's \$66 million (12%) cut to the ABC's triennial funding came on top of a steady decline in funding under governments of both major political persuasions. The ABC's operational funds have declined by almost 30% since 1985–86, out of proportion to any other major area of government expenditure.

The Government is dismantling the ABC by starving it of the funds it needs to fulfil its charter commitments. The quality of its programming across a range of areas is suffering. Increasingly, the Government is seeking to control the broadcaster by targeting funding. The Government and its supporters are attempting to intimidate and damage the ABC's credibility with allegations of bias.

The Government has stacked the board that governs the ABC. The broadcaster's commercial fundraising activities risk compromising its independence. It appears that some senior ABC managers naively believe that appeasing the Government will change the Government's attitude toward the ABC. Some are pushing the ABC to 'dumb down', in the belief that increased ratings will result in greater government support.

## **SBS – Australia's Ethnic Public Broadcaster**

The Special Broadcasting Service was established as a niche public broadcaster to reflect Australia's multicultural society. It is required to provide multilingual and multicultural radio and television services that: inform, educate and entertain all Australians in their preferred languages; increase awareness and appreciation of ethnic diversity and its contribution to Australia; contribute to the communications needs, the retention and continuing development of language and other cultural skills of Australia's multicultural society.

There is a concern that in the future the Government may attempt to amalgamate SBS and the ABC, with the risk that SBS's uniqueness as an ethnic broadcaster will be even further diminished.

## **Community Radio and TV**

When people are asked why they listen to/watch community broadcasting, the two most often cited responses are: "diversity/specialisation" and "local". In short, people hear and see people who they identify with. That is, our communities recognise that diverse opinions, lifestyles and practices are part and parcel of what makes up their 'local' social environment.

An important strength of community media, therefore, is its deep connection to the community it springs from. But this strength can also be a weakness. Those with the 'get up and go' to spearhead the establishment of community services sometimes continue to dominate them. And, this has resulted in some stations, particularly in regional and sub metro areas, largely reflecting a narrower range of views which are already well catered for in the commercial media. While there are significant exceptions, genuine alternative

# From the President

programming is more likely to be found in the major metropolitan stations. These stations include 2SER in Sydney, 3CR in Melbourne, 5UV in Adelaide, 4ZZZ in Brisbane and ethnic radio 3ZZZ in Melbourne.

The community broadcasting sector is well served with a national satellite service which allows the distribution of programming content. This service provides a number of alternative programs to about 220 community radio stations that are part of its network. Although community TV is still finding its feet, people who are actively engaged in a range of important issues are already providing content for that medium. Within the metropolitan cities, community TV offers an alternative source of information and news that differs from mainstream services.

## Internet based media

The use of the internet to cheaply produce and distribute alternative sources of opinions and news is another medium for community broadcasting. Forums which have opened new spaces for people to debate current affairs, present alternative voices have mushroomed in recent years, responding to the increased control and commercialisation of the mainstream media, and the increasing availability of the technology (specifically access to the internet), especially in Australia. *Crikey* is a voice in the media debate, and *New Matilda* is trying to expand this niche under commercial and political pressures.

*Indymedia* is a global network of sites, which are open to anyone to publish, unedited, their own articles.

*Indymedia* has become very effective for participants in protest movements to tell their stories and the stories of their causes, both of which will rarely make it into the commercial and mainstream media.

## Morag Fraser, at Victoria University, 11 July 2005:

'[The ABC] is something cherished by many. It is unusual, home-grown and rich. We'd be fools to let it wither. It could not be reconstructed.'

## Vale Alan Ashbolt, 1921–2005

It's only after spending about a decade sitting alongside Alan Ashbolt on the Australian Society of Authors' Committee of Management, and reading of his recent death, that I've learned the range of his achievements.

It started with the stage. In 1946 Peter Finch and he co-founded a theatre – The Mercury, in Sydney – and during the 1950s he reviewed for the *Sydney Morning Herald*.

His career with the ABC, spanning the years 1954–1977, made him an elder of the broadcasting world. He worked as talks & documentary producer, as foreign correspondent & head of special projects.

His books, *An American Experience* (1966) and *An Australian Experience: Words from the Vietnam Years* (1974), are extended commentaries on those societies – the topics include racism, nationalism, imperialism, public scandals, organised crime, economic and foreign policy.

By the time I knew him, in the late 1980s, he was 'retired'. However, he put his experience at the service of the ASA in the Committee's campaigns, and especially in conducting the yearly negotiations of ABC rates for authors and speakers. His was an insistent voice for rights – the right to speak out, the rights of creators to be adequately rewarded, and the right of all Australians to an independent ABC in the terms of its

Charter. Alan Ashbolt's was a fine contribution, both as a radio man and as a defender of the values of public broadcasting.

## Melbourne Writers' Week

The final Town Hall session of Melbourne Writers' Week, was frankly a call – which might be conceived as the beginning of open campaigning – for a Bill of Rights. The speakers were international human rights author, campaigner and jurist Geoffrey Robertson QC, Irish lawyer Brendan Kilty SC, and Melbourne human rights activist Julian Burnside QC.

I wouldn't blame anyone for sighing – 'Another Cause!' But no, a naming of all that's wrong with the body politic is not a problem for anyone who, like us, wants to see public rights realised.

Just as the speakers pointed to existing documents codifying the human rights some governments like ours regard as disposable – the United Nations Charter, the European Bill of Rights and various other Bills of Rights (among Australian states and territories, ACT has one!) – we have the ABC Charter. We want its integrity assured; we want its terms adhered to, and funded, with the benefits accessible to all. The climate in which a Bill of Rights is mentioned must be one where our concerns are on the agenda and where our view of the importance of the public broadcaster can prevail.

— Judith Rodriguez



**President** Judith Rodriguez

**Vice-President** Jack Clancy

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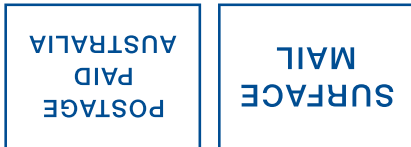
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## Viewpoint Dr Frank Pederick

Years ago in conversation with a politically conservative colleague I became aware that he did not simply dislike the ABC but had a gut-wrenching hatred of the organisation. I don't think he was alone among conservatives. As they have consolidated their power at federal level, this hatred has been given visible form in funding restrictions, appointments to the ABC Board, and the infamous inquiry into bias instigated by then-Senator Alston for example.

Recently, I began to wonder whether Australia was exporting some of these ideas to the USA because action being taken by President Bush's nominees against the Public Broadcasting Service (PBS) and National Public Radio (NPR) seemed to be mirroring measures taken to curtail the ABC here. Although there are 348 loosely associated stations, in ratings, PBS is a minnow compared to the major TV networks and must also compete with cable and satellite services. Much the same could be said for NPR which has 700, more closely co-ordinated, local radio stations. Nevertheless, the Bush administration has seen fit to increase control over operations.

PBS and NPR are overseen by the Corporation for Public Broadcasting, (CPR); its board all Presidential appointees. 'Congress created CPB in 1967 as a private non-profit corporation...

to promote non-commercial public telecommunications.'

CPB is the largest single source of Federal funding for public television and radio programming. However, the main source of revenue for public television stations is donations by individual viewers and institutions.

Tension was created by the enabling legislation that made it clear that non-commercial television and radio in America, even though supported by Federal funds, must be absolutely free from any Federal Government interference beyond the mandate in the legislation. However, the system remains vulnerable to political pressure. Kenneth Tomlinson, Chairman of the CPB in Nov 04 in Baltimore, told PBS officials: 'They should make sure their programming better reflected the Republican mandate.' Tomlinson said that his comment was in jest.

Public broadcasting has been criticised by both conservatives and liberals and on programme content and quality. Some have sought to remove funding claiming programmes now available via cable and satellite make it superfluous. Proponents insist the service should provide universal access, particularly to poor & rural viewers and that many of the cable and satellite productions are of low quality. Some public broadcasting executives seek to decide on the merit of programmes on the basis

of ratings. Some major award winning programmes do not rate well, and other executives seek to base programming on the role envisaged in the Act.

Mr. Tomlinson has maintained that his goal at CPB is to strengthen public broadcasting by restoring "balance" and stamping out "liberal bias." Frank Rich writing in the *New York Times* (26 Jun 2005) says: 'Mr. Tomlinson's real, not-so-hidden, agenda is to enforce a conservative bias or, more specifically, a Bush bias. To this end, he has not only turned CPB into a full-service employment program for (Republican) apparatchiks...' but also devised a show 'devoted to a single newspaper's editorial page, that of the zealously pro-Bush *Wall Street Journal*.' And this Rich says without comparable liberal balance.

According to *Current*, a paper about TV and radio in the USA, the present struggle in public broadcasting differs from the past. 'Now the intent is not to kill off PBS & NPR but to castrate them by quietly annexing their news and public affairs operations to the larger state propaganda machine'.

Sound all too familiar?

**In previous incarnations, Frank Pederick was a RAAF telecommunications engineer and later a chiropractor. He currently builds dry stone walls and sculpture.**