

background briefing

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Made for each other

Mark Scott, managing director of the ABC, recently announced a raft of new services on ABC Online, his aspirations for the ABC digital channels, the setting up of digital radio and much more - despite the failure of the ABC to win any additional funding in the May budget.

So far as we know, he has received little encouragement from Kevin Rudd and communications minister Stephen Conroy, who have kept mum on anything to do with the ABC, both before and after the election. Except, that is, for their commitment to legislate for a method of appointing the ABC board along the lines that we have been advocating for many years, for which we applaud them.

Yet the aspirations of the PM and Mark Scott square up together quite harmoniously. In his vision for education and health, and for public consultation, the government has in the ABC a vehicle capable of informing, educating and involving the community in public debate. In fact without a trusted public broadcaster the PM's vision would be hobbled.

In Scott's submission to the 2020 summit he talks about the 'Australianness' of the ABC; the universality in its reach, free to all Australians; its localism and capacity to be the 'town square' for local communities and in times of crisis to be a lifeline of survival information. He writes of the ABC 'as a partner in the digital education revolution, providing the platform and content to underpin a national curriculum, working with schools, universities, and government agencies'.

'By reaching all Australians, with a presence on all major delivery platforms, and a comprehensive range of news and quality, trusted programming, the ABC ensures all Australians can participate in the national debate, and is integral to the development of a population with wide-ranging intellectual and creative curiosity.'

Over to you, Mr Rudd!

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In 2020 an invigorated, multi-channel, multi-platform ABC will be an essential guarantee that a comprehensive range of quality Australian content continues to be seen and heard by all Australians. In a world of limitless content choice the ABC will stand for Australian stories, reliable news and information, and diverse, innovative and quality content for audiences everywhere.

Just try to imagine Australia without a national broadcaster. You can imagine an Australia, but not this Australia. The character of this Australia owes much to the ABC; no other institution reaches as many Australians, or touches so many so profoundly. The national broadcaster not only helps fashion Australian life, it is also a deeply personal part of innumerable individual lives.

Mark Scott SMH 30jun07



Many views - one ABC.

Have the Friends of the ABC lost their teeth?

Darce Cassidy

Shortly after the election of the Howard government, the ABC, and its friends, faced a great challenge.

Despite an election promise to maintain ABC funding, the government cut ABC funding by 12%. By the start of the 21st century a new Managing Director, Jonathan Shier, was wreaking havoc internally. The ABC was suffering from a double whammy, a hostile Managing Director and a crippling lack of funds.

They were dark days. As the then national spokesperson for Friends of the ABC I summarised our immediate aims the Spring 2001 edition of our quarterly newsletter, *Background Briefing*. They were:

- Restoration of ABC funding to its 1995-6 level, plus funding for the ABC to fully participate in the digital environment.
- Advertising to be prohibited on ABC Online.
- An end to the stacking of the ABC board.
- Replacing Jonathan Shier

It didn't look likely at the time, but we have won on most of these issues.

Today the Shier regime is no more than a bad dream. He left under a black cloud.

Today government funding of the ABC is well above its 1995-6 levels. Adjusted for inflation government funding has risen from \$747.1 million in 1995-6 to \$802.5 million in 2006-7. (Source: Commonwealth Parliamentary Library).

While we rarely saw eye to eye with Richard Alston when he was Minister for Communications, a delegation of FABC representatives from South Australia, Victoria and the Australian Capital territory had a positive response from the Coalition's Backbench Communications Committee. National Party members, and Liberals from regional areas, knew how important the ABC was in their communities.

While all FABC organisations were part of this long drawn out funding campaign, Garry Cook, the former President of FABC NSW deserves special mention. Gary played a key role in getting the Get Up organisation to partner with us in a petition to the government. Seventy thousand signatures sent a powerful message to Canberra.

Did these changes come about because the coalition government wanted to be rid of Jonathan Shier, or because that government wanted to give the ABC more money? Clearly not. They happened because of public pressure, and the Friends of the ABC played a crucial role in the creation of that public pressure.

Today Friends of the ABC policy on the method of appointment to the ABC board is official government policy. Our early efforts to persuade Labor to adopt a system based on the Nolan Rules in the U.K. failed. Labor initially gave us a blunt no, but we persevered, and after years of persistence managed to persuade the Labor Party's new Shadow Minister for Communications to adopt our policy.

The Rudd government has also adopted our policy that there should be a staff elected director on the ABC board.

These are real and substantial gains, but we have had only partial success with ABC Online. The Act has not been

amended to prohibit advertising on ABC web sites. Moreover, while the main ABC web sites are advertisement free, subsidiary sites, like the Countdown site, are running advertisements.

Funding is still a major issue. The ABC is better funded that it was in 1995-6, the last year that Labor was in power, but by any reasonable measure the ABC is still under resourced. The ABC struggles to survive financially. This year another round of redundancies is likely.

Advertising and other commercial influences have the potential to distort the ABC's priorities. The growth of advertising on the SBS, with advertisements now interrupting programs, is an ominous precedent.

How then are we equipped to meet these challenges? While we are separate organisations in the different states and territories, we co-operate together. We also co-operate with Save Our SBS.

Every state and territory organisation now has its own web site. Moreover our National Resource Centre website contains more than 170 separate documents. They range from letters to the editor and media releases through to detailed submissions to parliamentary inquiries. Included are 18 complete editions of our national journal, *Background Briefing*.

The NSW and Victorian organisations, which are of course our largest, each produce their own regular newsletters. From Adelaide Joan Laing edits *Background Briefing*, a regular newsletter shared by FABC groups in Western Australia, South Australia, the ACT and Queensland.

We lost no time in meeting with the new Minister, Stephen Conroy. A delegation comprising Jill Greenwell (ACT), Mal Hewett (NSW) and Alan Knight (QLD) had a positive meeting early in the year. While it was a positive meeting in most respects, there was no good news on budget issues. The government is concerned about the sub-prime crisis. Our focus therefore will be on the next funding triennium, which begins in 2009.

FABC (ACT and Region) has maintained the contacts our Parliamentary Lobby Group has established with Federal politicians interested in communications policy. In the last year they have been in contact with members of the Senate Committee on Communications issues Stephen Conroy, Dana Wortley (ALP), Bob Brown, Rachel Siewert, (Greens), Lyn Allison (Democrats) before the Senate Estimates hearings last October and in May this year. Issues they have lobbied them on include aspects of the ABC's 2006 budget, fears about advertising, the end of ABC talking book production, the new ABC editorial guidelines.

What are the major issues for the next few years? At this stage I think the major issue is ABC3, the proposed kids channel. This is closely linked to funding.

This should be a popular issue with the public. It is literally a motherhood issue. The Howard government promised to fund it, but Labor has been silent so far. I believe we are well placed to make this a major public issue over the next twelve months as we move towards the start of the next funding triennium.

Scott delivers Aunty's Medicine

Two weeks ago Scott announced an array of new ABC services. It was mostly a case of slicing and dicing existing content in new ways, but the announcement was nevertheless convincing evidence of Auntie moving with the technological times.

Yesterday came the medicine. New technology saves money. The broadcasting industry is going through what newspapers did twenty years ago, when technology eliminated hundreds of printers' jobs. In London agency reporters tell their stories direct to robot cameras, operating their own auto queues with their feet. The same has been happening for years here in Australia at Sky News.

Auntie is moving with the times here too, and as a result there will be an unspecified number of redundancies at the ABC in production staff due to the automation of television studios. This pill was wrapped up in a bigger pill with the announcement of a new way of counting that will reveal - probably for the first time - the true cost of making television in house at the ABC. This will enable comparisons with contracting out. Meanwhile ABC staff will be encouraged to market any spare capacity to outsiders.

While Scott says the ABC remains committed to a mixed model with some in house production, the long term implications are both profound, tough on ABC staff, and probably inevitable.

Adding to the predictable angst, Scott is being very short on specifics. We don't know how many redundancies there will be, when they will occur, how much money will be saved or how that money will be spent. As with all things to do with contracting out and efficiency, the devils and angels are likely to lurk in the yet to be announced detail.

Scott talked to Crikey yesterday evening and revealed a bit more of his thinking. Would the savings be spent on more reporters on the beat? He said he "aspired" to do this. Hmm.

How many redundancies? He wouldn't say, but he pointed out that "traditional old" production studios needed eight or nine people to operate, whereas the new ones being used in Sydney and Melbourne need only two or three. The precise numbers of redundancies will depend on how

many people are able and willing to be retrained and redeployed, he said, and this will be worked out in consultations about to begin.

As for the perennial outsourcing issue, Scott said that by outsourcing production, the ABC was able to do more with less. External production meant that other money, such as film commission funds, made Auntie's dollar go further. He claimed that over the last two years every \$1 million of ABC money spent on Australian content has resulted in \$3.4 million of material going to air.

This alone means that outsourcing will continue and grow. At the same time, it seems that the popular cheap and cheerful studio based programs like *New Inventors*, *Spicks and Specks* and *Talking Heads* will continue to be done in-house.

This is probably for two reasons. They wouldn't attract extra outside funding in any case, and the ABC is competitive in making them - as demonstrated by the fact that ABC staff are presently making *Good News Week* under contract for Channel Ten.

All this takes place in the larger context of the ABC's triennial funding submission, presently in preparation and due to be delivered to Government late this year. Scott freely admits he is preparing the ground - demonstrating that the ABC is using its present allocation to the max.

"If we want to ask for more money in the future, and we do, then we have to have a robust answer to the question of how we use the money we already get," he said.

What will he be asking for? "Too soon, too soon," he responds, but gives some headlines. More high quality Australian content in drama and documentary, more money for multi-channelling, and more opportunities to use the ABC's internet presence to deliver content - fitting hand in glove with the Rudd Government's emphasis on fast Broadband infrastructure.

Expect more over the next few months as Scott uses every forum, including Kevin Rudd's 2020 summit, to begin singing a new tune. To quote Abba "All the things I could do, if I had a little money. Money, money, money."

Margaret Simons *Crikey* 26mar08



Cartoon courtesy Kudelka

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Tied funding – an attack on independence

Prior to 2000 and the Shier regime¹, 'tied funding' was a concept foreign to the ABC and its Friends. Since then we have consistently argued against it. Following the Coalition's pre-election promise of \$82m special funding over four years for a children's digital channel, a promise not matched by Labor, it has come back into contention.

'Tied funding' is funding allocated by the government for a special purpose and generally for a limited period. For example, in 2001 the NII (National Interest Initiatives Programs, costing about \$71.2m) cut out in 2005, was extended for another three years (a further \$54.4m) and extended again in 2008 for only one more year. There was no guarantee of permanence despite the fact that the NII had funded several new regional radio stations, Canberra's weekend TV news, Classic FM's Keys to Music and some other innovations. The ABC was later delighted to receive an increase in the 2006 Triennial budget specifically for Australian content, for regional and local programs and for 'improving the ABC's capital asset base'. But the additional amount of \$29.4m for this cuts out in 2009.

For the first 68 years of its existence governments respected the independence of the public broadcaster in maintaining the right of the board to decide how its budget should be spent. When the Howard government introduced tied funding it breached the wall of ABC independence.

[Let me make it clear that we support making permanent the NII and other initiatives, and strongly believe that their funding should be incorporated into additional base funding. We are lobbying the Rudd government to do this.]

Before the last election John Howard promised to fund a dedicated children's digital channel with a grant of \$82m over four years. (This would have been the first ever allocation of funding for content on the digital channels.) Mr Rudd did not match this offer and we must wait for the next triennial budget in 2009 to find out how the Labor government intends to fund the ABC and whether the children's channel will go ahead.

Friends of the ABC supports the ABC's plan for a non-commercial Australian-made children's channel. In our view the plans and costings for the children's channel should be incorporated into the ABC's base funding.

But isn't this an example of tied funding? Are we being contradictory in giving it our support?

In reaching a consensus on this question we have made a distinction between tied funding and targeted funding. Broadly speaking, we use the term targeted funding to refer to the big-ticket items, such as funding for the running of ABC Online or providing funding for content on the digital channels (neither of which has been achieved, incidentally). We are totally against establishment of projects with a cut-out date, and argue strongly that funding that has been granted for any specific project should become rolled into the ABC's base funding.

So our position is that:

1. We support a children's channel.
2. We hope the government funds it.
3. We believe any such funding should be incorporated in additional operational base funding as part of the government-ABC triennial funding agreement.

Joan Laing

THE FIRST USE of this concept, as Ken Inglis writes in his history of the ABC (aptly named *Whose ABC?*), was in a letter from communications minister Richard Alston to the board, which was leaked to the press in late 2000. Alston proposed a number of areas to which funding should be directed.

Brian Johns, managing director at that time, 'said in a terse statement that the money requested for the next triennium must be spent as the ABC, not the government of the day, thought fit.'²

'Johns' monthly report to the board in February 2000 revealed that the episode had freshened up his own hostility to the minister for proposing, in his view, a form of "tied funding" inconsistent with the "arm's length relationship between the political process and the national public broadcaster", and widened his alienation from the chairman for inviting the board to trespass on territory which traditionally and properly, he argued, belonged to management.'²

Shier and the board eventually made a submission for \$37m in additional funding 'for programming and content initiatives of national significance ... better services for rural and regional Australia, more involvement in new media, enrichment of children's programs, and the production of interactive educational material for schools. This was an unusual request: a statutory authority supposedly in control of its own budget was asking for a measure of tied aid. "The Corporation," observed the *Australian's* Errol Simper, who had picked up anxiety among staff and Friends, "will only get the additional money if it uses it to do what Canberra believes should be done."²

On Budget night in May 2001 the ABC was given an extra \$71.2m over the next *four* years, well short of the \$37m requested for 2001-02.

'This act of clemency was widely and reasonably interpreted as intended to strengthen Shier's hand in his efforts to remake the ABC. ... This was tied aid, said the critics of the deal. ... Shier insisted that the board was entirely free to decide how the money would be spent, but in the event most of it would go to strengthen regional activities.'²

Thus the concept of tied funding was initiated by the managing director and board of the ABC on the urging of the communications minister, and taken to greater lengths in later budgets. A dangerous precedent had been set, with opposition from the staff-elected director on the board and many others within the ABC, as well as Friends of the ABC. The independence of the ABC had been severely compromised.

¹ Shier was managing director for only 23 months; he resigned after pressure from the board in October 01.

² Quotations from *Whose ABC? The Australian Broadcasting Corporation 1983-2006* written by Ken Inglis, pub. Black Inc.

Attack on the ABC's flanks

After a time of head-on attacks on the ABC, the strategy has changed a little. Attention has now turned to Australia's other public broadcaster, the Special Broadcasting Service. This threatens the integrity of both public broadcasters.

Advertising was introduced to the SBS by a Labor government in the 1990s. Initially, advertisements were low key, and confined to the space between the end of one program and the start of another.

But this was not to last. Advertisers prefer high key advertisements. They will pay more for a captive audience caught up in the middle of a program, than they would for a viewer who has finished watching a program.

The predictable consequence was that an aggressive new management, supported by a board that had little belief in public service broadcasting, would seek to make fundamental changes to the SBS.

This has now happened. Advertisements, once discreet, are now intrusive and interrupt programs. Programs in languages other than English have now to struggle for placement in prime time. SBS Managing Director Shaun Brown attempts to hide this fact by re-defining 'prime time'. According to Brown, prime time extends from 6.00 pm to midnight! However the official broadcasting regulator, the Australian

Communications and Media Authority (ACMA) defines prime time as between 6.00 pm and 10.00 pm.

SaveOurSBS was established last year to defend the public service values, and the multicultural focus, of the SBS. Recently we delivered a petition against advertising on the SBS to the Minister for Communications, Stephen Conroy. It had more than seven thousand signatures.

Conroy has made it clear that he is not happy with the decision to interrupt programs with advertisements. He has queried the legality of this practice, but so far has taken no action. However, in a recent Senate Estimates hearing he made some interesting remarks. Asked if he was happy that the SBS was acting in accordance with the law and its obligations, the Minister replied:

To address this matter next we would have to consider it within the SBS funding triennium. And that is the context in which we'll be considering the policy matters into the future.

Could it be that he plans to make the SBS Board an offer they can't refuse?

Darce Cassidy is a life member of Friends of the ABC and Secretary of SaveOurSBS



Am I crazy or is Conroy about to axe SBS ad breaks?

Passionate SBS supporter Errol Simper is almost optimistic about the possibility of the in-program ads being disallowed.

[S]hould you carefully consider what the Minister for Communications, Stephen Conroy, had to say to a recent Senate estimates committee hearing you might just possibly conclude the long campaign to stop in-program commercials on SBS television could yet be won.

There were two clues, at least on the scribe's interpretation of Conroy's words, that seemed to hint at an end to the abominable ads as Conroy came under persistent, skilful interrogation about the matter from the South Australian Liberal senator, Simon Birmingham, on May 26.

The first clue is that, despite numerous opportunities, Conroy calculatedly - even stubbornly - refrained from saying he was comfortable with the legal framework SBS has been using to screen the commercials. A second, intriguing, clue is that the minister seemed to pointedly decline to rule out a need to clarify legislation governing SBS operations.

..... Conroy: "The SBS board have always argued they believe what they were doing was consistent with their legal advice. I can confirm they still believe they're acting in accordance with their legal advice. The issue of triennial funding is coming up. So the first opportunity for us to address these issues is within the context of the review of SBS's triennial funding."

..... Yet you can't help wondering why a clear policy matter, whether the channel is to be allowed to continue to interrupt its programming, must be part of a funding discussion. Will Conroy say the ads must cease, in return for a little compensatory funding? If the minister is totally happy with SBS's legal advice, why not simply say so and be done with it?

..... A reasonable conclusion you could draw is that Conroy doesn't enjoy SBS's advertising regime any more than thousands of other viewers and has been thinking of how he can most sensibly render it extinct.

Errol Simper *The Australian* 5jun08

Towards a more democratic ABC

Mark Scott, managing director of the ABC, has ambitious plans for new services and channels which will exploit opportunities provided by the uptake of digital television and imaginative use of the internet.

The coming to fruition of these plans will of course depend on the Rudd government acknowledging the unique contribution that the ABC can make to a better educated and informed community, and providing the necessary funding.

But where will the ideas for the content, the programs, come from? Do we need more input from ABC audiences and potential audiences? How could public participation in the ABC be enhanced?

Comments below are from a speech/article by Tony Moore to the Centre for Policy Development in March 2008. Tony Moore was an ABC program maker between 1988 and 1997.

The ABC is grappling with how to transform itself from a paternalistic public broadcaster catering to a loyal if passive audience to a multi-channel narrow-caster, engaging diverse and conditional audiences that have an expectation that they will participate, or at least be consulted, in content creation.

While many innovators within the ABC are rising to this challenge, the wider public debate has been a sterile contest between those neo-liberals who loath a state broadcaster which they imagine to be a nest of radicals, and those social democrats and old-style conservatives who uncritically love an 'Aunty' that is no more.

Unfortunately, long opposition to the Howard Government's savage funding cuts, bullying of staff and stacking of the Board have led to a negative siege mentality that stops people who value the ABC from doing some hard thinking about how public broadcasting needs to change to remain relevant to emerging audiences with different, and in many ways more exacting, expectations of media.

It has been a criticism of the ABC in the past that management has played too prominent a role in selecting content. Remember how narrowly Kath and Kim scraped into the schedule.

There is the Advisory Council of course, which provides feedback, criticism and ideas to the Board. It is a mechanism by which the community communicates with ABC management. **But it is not widely known that the Advisory Council is appointed by the ABC board.**

[W]e have not heard much from the Advisory Council during the past decade of turmoil. The AC is unlikely to be a conduit for independent or dissenting advice unless it is elected or chosen under the Nolan Rules. It is also a cause of concern that the once vocal state-based Advisory Councils were abolished in 1989, ahead of the centralisation of production and commissioning in Sydney that began with the demise of the state-based 7.30 Reports. These valuable state community forums should be re-established as part of the Rudd Government's overhaul of the Board.

In the meantime, audiences are already managing to have an impact on their ABC via ABC Online.

The new Innovation division and forward-looking producers have taken advantage of the interactivity of the new medium, and viewers and listeners are now contributing ideas and comments through the ABC's forums and blogs. Just as listeners have done with radio talkback, audiences are becoming part of online content, contributing passionate and informed discussion alongside program makers and their 'talent'.

New media has also liberated the ABC from the tyranny of the ratings, allowing audience numbers and use patterns to be measured via pod- and vodcast downloads (17 million in 2007, with even more 'hits'). Lo and behold, as well as the favourite *The Chaser*, Radio National programs are actually popular, not just in Australia but internationally.

With the move into digital multi-channels I predict ABC Online will enable audiences to shape content still further, commenting on pilot programs and even offering up their own programs for comment, YouTube style, as children already do on the just-launched Roller mache site.

Where the ANAO lamented a tendency for Shier-era bureaucrats to manage up the pyramid to the Managing Director, the ABC's digital initiatives are orientating program makers in the other direction, towards their diverse audiences. This is a democratic and creative trend collapsing the barriers between consumers and producers, and it should be a priority for resourcing by the Rudd government which has pledged to ensure that the ABC is 'able to exploit the potential of new technology'.

Senator Conroy said in February that the ABC and SBS would be exempt from the one-off 2% efficiency cut intended for all Federal government agencies. This is good news, but will the ABC get a funding increase from the Rudd Government in the next budget? The ALP went to the election only promising 'adequate' funding of the ABC, and an increase seems unlikely in the coming belt-tightening budget, despite community expectations to the contrary. However, a targeted grant to assist the ABC to continue its ground breaking initiatives in digital narrowcasting would be money well spent by a government interested in innovation and 'democratic accountability'.

Through his Australia 2020 Summit, Kevin Rudd has signalled that the Government is open to new ideas and solutions, rather than the ideological orthodoxies that have dominated the agendas of right and left for the past decade. Applying this type of thinking, progressives should move beyond the culture wars and the funding fetish, and towards bigger ideas about a culturally democratic ABC.

Tony Moore

News is good for ABC

THE ABC's flagship radio current affairs programs — often the source of tension and controversy in the Howard years — have won overwhelming endorsement from a landmark report by an external expert. An audit of AM, PM and The World Today found they were almost 96% accurate.

ABC managing director Mark Scott said the report supported the ABC's goal of continually improving editorial standards. He emphasised the report was not initiated at the behest of Mr Howard's government.

The review, by an expert who reported to the ABC's director of editorial policies, Paul Chadwick, found 95.3% of items sampled from the three programs were either wholly or substantially accurate for plain facts and were 97.3% accurate on the context of the facts.

Denis Muller, an independent media research specialist and a former associate editor of *The Age*, devised a method to review a sample of 150 current affairs items from last October. "There is a very high standard of accuracy in the material broadcast by AM, The World Today and PM," he concluded.

Inaccuracies stemmed less from recklessness or incompetence than from deadline pressure and "the competitiveness that drives journalists to make the most - sometimes too much - out of their material".

In an appendix to the report, the head of the ABC's news division, John Cameron, contested the findings of inaccuracy in some instances, saying the journalists' news-gathering inquiries had found information that clarified or superseded the original documents.

The review comes against a backdrop of 11 years of tension and sometimes open hostility between the ABC and Mr Howard's government. Former communications minister Richard Alston complained unrelentingly about the Iraq war coverage in 2003 by the morning radio current affairs program AM, exhausting all the ABC's internal complaints mechanisms and, unhappy with the ABC's overall

exoneration of the program, appealed to the Australian Broadcasting Authority with only marginal success.

Mr Howard appointed three noted public critics of the ABC to its board, anthropologist Ron Brunton, News Limited columnist Janet Albrechtsen and historian Keith Windschuttle.

After Mr Scott began as managing director in mid-2006, he moved swiftly to lower the temperature of government-ABC relations, making his first major speech at the Sydney Institute, which is headed by long-time critic of the ABC Gerard Henderson, and in late 2006 appointed respected former journalist and lawyer Paul Chadwick as the first director of editorial policies.

Mr Scott said yesterday he was not providing specific briefings to the Rudd Labor Government on the continuing reviews of programs, policies and procedures.

"We are doing this ourselves as part of our self-regulation, and making the results available to all online.

"The ABC holds itself to the highest editorial standards of independence, fairness, accuracy and impartiality under the framework of our editorial policies," he said.

Matthew Ricketson *The Age* 26may08



Historic cartoon courtesy Michael Atchison

A must-see for the PM

The Hollowmen - a 6x30min political comedy/drama series - has today been commissioned by ABC TV. The series, produced by Working Dog, will be filmed in Melbourne and Canberra and will go into production in the next few weeks. It will soon be part of ABC1's highly successful Wednesday night lineup and will be repeated on ABC2.

The Hollowmen focuses on the workings of an internal think tank, set up by the Prime Minister, whose responsibility is long-term policy vision. The unit's task is to stop worrying about tomorrow's headlines, and to start worrying about next week's.

Kim Dalton, Director of Television said "ABC TV is pleased and proud to be working again with Working Dog, which is unquestionably one of the most successful TV comedy teams in Australia.

"ABC audiences still remember and talk about Frontline, and they are going to love The Hollowmen - a timely and very funny political satire," he said.

Michael Hirsh, Working Dog's Executive Producer said "We have been constantly talking to ABC TV over the years. The ABC has been very welcoming to our ideas and it's exciting to be working together on The Hollowmen." ABC MR

ABC shelves channel for children

The ABC has shelved plans to launch ABC3, a dedicated television channel for children and teenagers.

Labor had shown strong support for the children's channel and was widely expected to match or better the former Coalition government's promise during last year's election campaign of \$82 million over four years to fund the channel, buy programs and commission new programs.

But Labor sources told the *Herald* the policy was one of several put on ice mid-campaign. after the Reserve Bank increased interest rates and Kevin Rudd decided to make a virtue of spending less than John Howard.

The ABC has now decided it cannot go ahead with the channel until funding is secure.

The ABC would have to wait until the 2009 budget and argue for the children's channel funding as part of its three-year funding review, which is due next year.

The ABC has argued that the children's channel can tap into Mr Rudd's "education revolution" and provide "quality and trusted" entertainment and education.

DAB plus? Digital Audio Broadcasting to start in 2009

A new type of radio is due to be available in major capital cities early in 2009. Digital radio claims to have many advantages over analogue (AM and FM) radio, but so far there has been little public discussion and little public interest in DAB.

Perhaps this is because we have had digital radio, of a kind, for several years now. The ABC has been running Dig Radio, Dig Country and Dig Jazz for quite some time. While these are, in a sense, digital radio stations, people don't listen through a normal radio set. They listen through their TV if it has a built-in digital tuner, or an external set top box. They can also listen through a computer with an internet connection. This is often known as 'streaming audio' since the information comes over the internet in a continuous stream.

Another form of digital audio is known as podcasting. Once again, the ABC has been a leading podcaster in Australia. Podcasts allow you to download your favourite programs to your computer (or your Ipod) to listen to later. To avoid missing a program you can set your computer to automatically download the program so you can listen at a time that suits you. Radio National podcasts have been particularly popular.

You don't need a radio receiver for this kind of digital radio – just a computer or a digital TV.

DAB+ is different. You will need a special receiver to listen (although some new mobile phones may have a digital radio tuner built-in). Your ordinary clock radio or tranny won't work with digital. According to Commercial Radio Australia the cheaper receivers are likely to sell at around the \$150 mark. This means yet another electrical appliance in your home.

Initially DAB+ will be available in Sydney, Melbourne, Brisbane, Adelaide, Perth and Hobart. It is not clear when it will be available in Darwin and Canberra, and DAB+ may never be available in regional areas (Although DRM, Digital Radio Mondiale, a long distance technology similar to short wave, but with much better reception, may be a possibility for regional Australia).

So what are the advantages of DAB+ over AM and FM radio? Broadly these are:

- Better sound quality than FM radio is possible. But will you notice it in a car radio, with all the road noise. Will you notice it in a cheap clock radio with a small speaker?
- Much better sound quality than AM radio. As above. More space. As digital radio transmission is more efficient than analogue AM/FM, more stations can be broadcast within the same amount of spectrum. An important issue. There could be room for more diverse voices on the air, but only if there is the political will to open up the airwaves.
- Easier tuning. You don't need to remember a

frequency, but tune to station by name.

- The ability to transmit text and images along with the audio signal. Which means that you have to have a special radio to see the supplementary text and visual information.

While DAB has been available in Europe and Canada for quite a while now, takeup of the new medium seems to have stalled. Other internet related technologies may have sidelined it.

So has the ABC made the right decision in deciding to be part of DAB+? When the decision was first made, many years ago now, I thought the ABC was right to be involved. With the benefit of hindsight I am not so sure.

Like Paul Budde, a contributor to the Media Report on ABC Radio National, I think the most important feature of digital radio is not better sound quality, or added features such as text or images displayed via an LCD on your radio, but rather the more efficient use of the radio spectrum.

Perhaps DRM (Digital Radio Mondiale) has a bigger future in countries like Australia than DAB+.

Antony Funnell's Media Report on Radio National has a well informed discussion of the issues.

The transcript is available at:
<http://www.abc.net.au/rn/mediareport/stories/2008/2179290.htm>

Darce Cassidy

Digital radio funding

Regarding Digital Radio, the budget makes provision for the ABC to commence digital radio services in the first half of 2009. The additional funding will cover infrastructure and transmission costs, although no figures are included in the budget papers because it is subject to a competitive tender.

Would this constitute tied funding? Probably not, because it does not impact on program content, but rather it is a new technology (in Australia) which is being introduced as part of government policy. There were similar one-off grants from the government to the ABC for FM radio, and for colour TV.

The ABC is still considering what our initial digital radio services will comprise, but at the very least it will be the existing four national radio networks (triple j, Radio National, Newsradio and Classic FM) plus local radio, plus the three dig radio services. We do not yet have a target date to be on air, other than early 2009.

There is no plan for digital radio to replace analogue radio (AM and FM), unlike digital TV where the plan is to turn off analogue TV by the end of 2013.

The Arts & ABC TV

Coming to a digital cinema near you

A new strategic partnership between the Australia Council for the Arts and ABC TV will give Australians greater access to more of the Australian arts across ABC TV's expanding digital delivery platforms.

Under the partnership, the Australia Council for the Arts and ABC TV will develop a number of initiatives, spanning the breadth of arts genres and practice, in a range of formats, including live performance. ABC TV will present this arts programming across the schedules of ABC1, ABC2, ABC online, Second Life, internet channels, and through mobiles, vodcasts and user-generated content (UGC).

James Strong said: "Each year the Australia Council invests more than \$150 million in the creation of high quality works by Australian artists and arts organisations, and we are continually looking for ways to access new and bigger audiences for this work.

"This partnership with ABC TV will help us grow and diversify our support for Australian artists and give more Australians the opportunity to experience and enjoy Australia's arts in new and more accessible ways.

"ABC TV, through ABC2, the ABC's strong presence on the net, and its new internet channels, can provide a

digital platform for Australia's artists and arts organisations to reach audiences nationwide. It will also lead to artists and arts organisations exploring issues around rights' management and business models in the digital era," he said.

The ABC's Mark Scott said the national broadcaster looked forward to an enhanced engagement with Australia's creative communities. Through this groundbreaking venture, the ABC will be able to play a key role in supporting the creation and distribution of contemporary artwork via all its digital platforms.'

The first project in the partnership was the live broadcast of Graeme Murphy's *Swan Lake* on April 9th, performed by The Australian Ballet at Sydney Opera House. Screened live on ABC2, it was also beamed direct to the Australian Film Commission's digital cinemas around Australia and to Federation Square in Melbourne. Next is *My Favourite Australian*, an initiative with the National Portrait Gallery, which will see the production of film and video art portraits of much-loved Australians. In the pipeline are other musical, performance and digital art initiatives.

ABC Media Release 10apr08

The Gruen Transfer. How it all ads up.

"We've had 200 complaints," says Wil Anderson, host of the *The Gruen Transfer*. "We're the most complained-about show on TV even before being on-air."

The Gruen Transfer is a show about advertising - the very thing viewers turn to the ABC to avoid. The complaints have been about the mock ads aired on the ABC to promote the show. One was for an anti-ageing skin cream, which ends with the slogan, "If you buy this you'll have been born yesterday." And another for Gruen Bank: "We know you hate us and we hate you, too, [but] you need us and we know it."

"I can't say we haven't enjoyed putting the Gruen ads on," says Jon Casimir, who created the show with Andrew Denton. "I heard of people having a sense of disconnection, of turning to their partner and saying, 'Did I actually see what I thought I saw or am I going mad?'"

As with many effective ads, the Gruen promos are subversive, provocative and funny. Still attracting attention on YouTube, they encapsulate the spirit of the show, which amounts to a withering satire and expose of the advertising industry.

The show's name derives from Victor Gruen, an architect born in Vienna in 1903 who designed one of the US's first shopping malls. 'The Gruen Transfer' refers to the moment a person in a shopping mall becomes disoriented by lighting, music,

mirrors and so on and becomes more likely to make impulse purchases.

On the show, Anderson leads experts from the ad industry through a series of exercises, games and discussions. Regular panellists include advertisers Todd Sampson (of Leo Burnett) and Russel Howcroft (of George Patterson Y&R), who tackle issues such as the objectification of women or the marketing of unethical products.

If the show does its job properly, you may find yourself responding to ads differently. You may suddenly notice that almost every beer ad has four blokes, that men in underwear ads are 'double-bagged' (male models wear two pairs of undies) and that there are

differences between chocolate pitched at men and women.

Similarly, The Gruen Transfer tries to reveal the humanity of advertisers. It's a witty, nuanced account of an industry often dismissed as voracious and destructive.

And despite the complaints, the ABC is the perfect home for the show. "I don't think there's anywhere else the show could be," Casimir says. "No commercial network or entity would pick up a show that questions the commerce that drives the network. Can you imagine us getting stuck into four-wheel-drives when the next ad is for a 4WD?"

Sacha Molitorisz smh 26may08

Cartoon courtesy Michael Leunig

There comes a moment when all the cables, leads, battery chargers and power adaptors we have ever owned, gather together and assemble themselves around us and ask us the terrible question: "WHAT HAS HAPPENED TO YOUR LIFE?"



Can you hear the talk on your TV?

Letter to the editor

The excellent article about digital TV and set-top boxes [in the March Background Briefing] omitted what I think is a great plus for the set-top box – its ability (in most cases) to provide captions to us old guys that are hard of hearing. While the standard of captioning sometimes leaves a bit to be desired it is my preferred method of obtaining captions and is a better method than trying to use Teletext.

Vic Potticary SA

Mea culpa, Vic. Below is the piece I cut for reasons of space from the last newsletter. JL

Closed Captions

Closed Captions are text descriptions of the speech, music and sound effects of a TV program. These are created primarily for people who are hearing impaired, but can also be very useful in situations where sound is inaudible to other viewers.

Television programs broadcast in prime time (between 6pm and 10.30pm) and news and current affairs programs broadcast at any time are captioned in accordance with the Broadcasting Service Act (1983). Addresses to the nation and events of national significance are also transmitted with closed captioning and the ABC will endeavour to increase the amount of Closed Captioning for other programs as funds permit.

Historically, hearing impaired viewers needed an analogue receiver with teletext capability to see program captioning. However, they can now rely on digital decoders to provide the same capability, as all digital television equipment is required to have this facility (it is described as 'closed' as it is only visible if turned on by the viewer).

For more information go to the Reception Advice website on www.abc.net.au or ring 1300 13 9994.

My favourite scribe Errol Simper, in *The Australian* 20mar08, has something to add on this topic, writing about the background music on the series *Monarchy* and other documentaries.

Backing track not music to my ears

As the background music swells from within the set's plumbing, you must go to the lower volume. Either that or risk waking everyone else in the house and, very probably, a fair few of the neighbours.

The scribe isn't exaggerating. Not that you have to take his fallible word for it. He was thumbing through London's *The Times* a few weeks ago and serendipitously came upon a confirmatory letter to the editor from a Suffolk-based academic, one Peter Dickinson. Dickinson wrote: "Sir, When are television and radio producers going to realise it is not necessary to have intrusive wall-to-wall background music with absolutely everything? The first episode of *Monarchy*, *The Royal Family At Work*, was ruined by

constant and frequently inappropriate music obliterating what people were saying ... The program featured voices that resound with association and significance. They would have made far more impact if they had been allowed to speak on their own."

It isn't, as many would know, just background music that presents a television volume problem. Australian viewers have been busy replicating Dickinson's complaints while adding complaints of their own about increased volumes on promotions and commercials.

..... That indefatigable warrior on behalf of younger media consumers, Barbara Biggins, was moved last year to complain to the ABC about 'intrusive, pointless and very loud background music' in a British-made Catalyst series entitled *Don't Die Young*. A polite ABC reply informed Biggins (the chief executive for Young Media Australia, though she made her complaint as a private citizen) that modern television sets have tone-setting options 'which can accentuate or decrease bass and dialogue tone.' The missive continued: 'These settings can be adjusted to individual tastes. If you have a new television set and have not explored this option, the default factory setting may not be to your liking. A trial of the different sound settings may improve sound clarity without apparent increase in volume.'

Mmmm. It is, no doubt, well-meant advice. The only comment the technologically challenged scribe can offer about it is that his desperate search for some method of taming down the background music led him to just a single option. He eventually managed to discover how to shut down the set's stereo system in order to banish that horrible, hollow, echo/boom resonance. Beyond that, there appeared to be no remedy. ES

Perhaps not. But in extremis you could switch off the sound and switch on the closed captions!

Another problem: But I can't work my VCR!

Your editor is continually surprised by the number of people she meets who don't use their video recorder because they can't program it to record specific programs.

Well, I can't either and I use my VCR all the time. I have a stack of 300 minute cassettes which I use when I am going out for the evening, or want to watch a program on one channel and record on another or want to keep a copy of, or would rather settle down with a good book and watch a program at another time.

You just push it in and switch the record button. And there is the added advantage of cutting out the promos and switching off for a toilet break!

JL

John Clarke inducted into Logie Awards Hall of Fame

John Clarke is being recognised for his esteemed contribution to the Australian television industry, through work as performer, writer and director.

John was in fine comic form when informed of his win, saying, "I'm inclined to regard this as a youth encouragement award. I'm deeply grateful and will do what I can."

Since arriving here in 1977, the New Zealand-born comic has wooed the Australian public. He began with his trademark political satire "interviews" alongside comedian Bryan Dawe on ABC radio, then moved to *A Current Affair*, where they were a part of the program for many years.

John's collaborations over the years with Australia's leading performers – including Graham Kennedy, Max Gillies, Geoffrey Rush, Andrew Denton, Sam Neill and Gina Riley – have produced comedy gold, while his prolific writing career has spanned drama series *ANZACs* to acclaimed mockumentary *The Games*.



It's his unique ability to make us laugh at ourselves that's made John Clarke's talent such a valuable treasure. From his genesis as Fred Dagg to all his current guises, he is a truly worthy recipient of this prestigious award.

Logie Awards for the ABC



While Chris Lilley, the creator and star of *Summer Heights High*, won the Silver Logie for Most Popular Actor.

The ABC dominated the peer-voted outstanding awards - winning five: *Curtin* won Most Outstanding Drama Series, Miniseries or Telemovie; Lilley's *Summer Heights High* was named Most Outstanding Comedy and the *Choir Of Hard Knocks* claimed the Most Outstanding Factual Series Logie. "It's indeed a great honour to

stand here tonight and represent the choir," creator Jonathan Welsh said. He said the group still meets weekly to sing. "This belongs to them. They truly are the stars of this show and deserve this more than anybody."

Australian Story's program about Belinda Emmett picked up the Most Outstanding Public Affairs Report. The ABC also won Most Outstanding Documentary for *Constructing Australia: The Bridge*.

SINGERS OF RENOWN
Saturdays, 4pm repeated Sundays, 6am
Arranged and presented by John Cargher (left)

JOHN CARGHER
Sadly, last month we said farewell to John Cargher's popular program *Singers of Renown*. Earlier this year John had made the decision to retire from broadcasting, for health reasons. Listeners to Radio National will be able to hear some landmark editions of the show throughout May and June. These will include some of John's programs exploring the great operas, and his four-part series *A Century of Singers: 1901-2000*, which was first broadcast in December 2000 and features singers who have contributed to the art of singing over the past 100 years. Each program in the series covers a quarter of a century and showcases 10 singers – not always the most famous, but in the tradition of this program, each is worthy of renown. *Singers of Renown* reached its 42nd birthday in April this year. When John Cargher began broadcasting the program on 17 April 1966, it was intended to be a 13-week series on 3LO (now 774 ABC Melbourne). However, it was so popular that it was transferred to the ABC's national network 10 weeks later. John Cargher migrated from London to Melbourne in 1951 and managed Thomas's the record store. He was active in the local theatre scene, and became Managing Director of the National Theatre in St Kilda. Following a stint as a classical music presenter on commercial radio, John began broadcasting for the ABC in 1959 at the age of 40. Widely recognised for his contribution to Australia's cultural life, John Cargher's 42 years as arranger and presenter of *Singers of Renown* earned him the distinction of being the longest continuous program presenter in the ABC's history. All the music heard in his programs was from his private collection, which he built on the couple of hundred 78s he brought with him when he came to Australia.

John Cargher in 1974

From ABC magazine LIMELIGHT

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