



ABC - Facts, Figures and Fantasies

All sorts of fanciful claims have been made about the ABC by its critics. Some of the most fantastic are the claim that the ABC is simultaneously both left-wing and anti working class, or that only ten percent of the population use it when in fact nearly ninety percent use it each week.

This is designed for supporters of the ABC who want a handy reference that can distinguish between fact and fantasy.

Claim: The ABC is inefficient

“The ABC still has the feel of a workers’ collective rather than an efficiently run modern corporation” (The Australian Editorial 17 Feb 2001)
“...the ABC, a \$500 million-a-year Titanic”
(Andrew Bolt, Herald Sun 2 Nov 2000)

Response: The ABC is far more efficient than Australian commercial broadcasters, and significantly more efficient than the British Broadcasting Corporation and the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation.

Dr Glenn Withers, Professor of Public Policy at the Australian National University, has been a consultant for Kerry Stokes and for the ABC. He writes:

For instance, work done by the London office of McKinsey and Company has shown that, the taxpayer cost of under ten cents per capita a day for the ABC is much less than the 14.4 cents per day that the CBC (Canada) costs and the 33.4 cents per day paid for the BBC.

Equally, my own recent research seeking to benchmark the national broadcaster against commercial media finds that ABC cost per radio broadcasting hour is 40 percent that of the commercial radio sector, and that ABC cost per television station hour is 36 per cent that of commercial station cost. (Australian Financial Review, 22 March, 2000)

In its triennial funding submission the ABC

pointed out:

In 1997-98 the BBC consumed 0.68% of Total Government Budget, the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation 0.5% of Total Government Budget and the ABC only 0.38% of total government budget.

In other words the ABCs funding as a proportion of government expenditure is approximately half that of the BBC, and three quarters of that of the CBC. (Source Many Voices, One ABC - Funding the ABC for a Digital Future - A summary of the ABC Triennial Funding Submission)

Another benchmark is cost per station. Dr Glenn Withers writes:

If this calculation is done for the television networks, the comparative results for the ABC vs the commercial networks are as follows for 1998:

ABC	\$26.18m per station
Ten	\$46.39m per station
Seven	\$83.21m per station
Nine	\$88.59m per station

(Professor Glenn Withers: Report on National Public Broadcasting Benefit, January 2000. Commissioned by the ABC)

Claim: It is not realistic to compare the cost of the ABC with the cost of commercial stations. ABC programs don't attract nearly as many viewers/listeners as the commercials. What we do need to do is compare costs for each listener or viewer.

Response: The ABC, under its charter, is obliged to produce specialist and educational programs, which do not attract large audiences, as well as producing popular programs. The commercial channels have no such restriction. Despite this, ABC TV compares very well to commercial channels, and attracts more viewers per dollar of expenditure than both Channel Nine and Channel Seven, and slightly fewer per dollar than Channel 10.

Professor Glenn Withers has calculated the costs per rating point for 1998 as follows:

Channel Seven	\$28 million
Channel Nine	\$27.5 million
ABC	\$23.7 million
Channel Ten	\$21.7 million

(Report on National Public Broadcasting Benefit, January 2000)

Claim: Only 10% of Australians use the ABC

He (Senator Alston) said only about 10 per cent of Australians tuned in to the ABC and it would be hard to justify a funding boost unless ratings or audience reach improved, suggesting it dump some of its more esoteric programs.

"The ABC is funded by taxpayers; taxpayers expect value for money; the ABC ought to be concentrating on generating greater levels of audience reach," Sen Alston said. (Illawarra Mercury 20 November 2000)

Response: Nine out of ten Australians use the ABC each week. An independent survey conducted by Australian Nationwide Opinion Polls in 1990 found that 86% of Australians use an ABC service each week.

The survey concluded:

The ABC has a genuine broad appeal to the community. The great majority of Australians in all demographic groups and in all parts of the country listen to or watch the ABC for some period every week

In 1996 Bob Mansfield, the high profile businessman appointed by the Coalition to review the ABC reported:

ABC TV's five city audience reach was 69%

The unduplicated national weekly reach of ABC Radio was 6.38 million, or approximately 41% of the population aged 10 years and over. This report was addressed to Senator Alston as the responsible minister, but he appears not to have read it.

An AC Nielsen survey conducted at the end of 1998 found that 2.4% use the ABC website each week. (Source: Communications Law Centre, 1999)

How is it then, that people like Senator Alston can get it so wrong? The answer is that they use selective figures to start with, and then distort them.

There are two commonly accepted measures of audience size in the broadcasting industry - generally known as share and reach. If one channel has 100,000 thousand viewers who each watch for five hours a day it will have 500,000 viewer hours. If another has 200,000 viewers, but they only watch for one hour a day each, it will have 200,000 viewer hours. Despite the fact that the second channel has more viewers, it will score a lower share because its audience watches for a shorter time. Audience reach on the other hand (sometimes called the cumulative audience) usually measures how many people tune into a particular station each week, irrespective of how long they tune in for.

Because of the ABC's charter requirements to broadcast specialist and educational programs, as well as programs of broad appeal, ABC audiences tend to be more selective. They tune in and out. The ABC has to provide something for everybody, and succeeds pretty well in this aim, with nine out of ten Australians tuning in to the ABC each week. The fact is that nearly everyone uses the ABC regularly, but people of higher educational level and higher socio-economic status tend to tune in for longer times.

Both share and reach are legitimate measures, it is just that they measure different things. When reach is used as the yardstick, the ABC does very well. It also does quite well by the share measure, and people like Senator Alston are quite wrong, even by the share measure, when they say that only 10% of Australians use the ABC. ABC radio's share of audience nationally is around 25%, while ABC television scores about 15%

nationally.

**Claim: The ABC is middle-class welfare.
Mainly middle class elites use it.**

I'm concerned with the Corporation's dominance of broadcasting to the better-educated, higher income Australians who live mainly in our capital cities. Such people comprise a majority of the Corporation's ...share (Conservative columnist Michael Duffy speaking to a conference organised by the Institute of Public Affairs.)

*My concern is that working-class taxes are being spent in order that the middle classes can watch *The Vicar of Dibley* and *Ballykissangel* without ad breaks. I think there's an element of snobbery or social distinction in Australia according to whether you like English or American popular culture. Many middle-class people's sense of social identity comes in part from the fact that they like British shows rather than American ones. It's a mark of intellectual distinction.* (Michael Duffy, quoted in *The Age* 21 April 2001.)

What they (ABC supporters) demand is more money to do more of the same with the same people for a narrow and shrinking audience.

Taxpayers are not going to fork out more money for the ABC unless it caters more thoroughly and distinctively to their needs..... The ABC has increasingly catered to a well-to-do elite that has other options available to it and has the wherewithal to pursue these options (Mike Nahan, Executive Director, IPA, speaking to a conference organised by the Institute of Public Affairs)

Response: Nine out of ten Australians use the ABC each week. According to Australian Nationwide Opinion Polls “ The great majority of Australians in all demographic groups and in all parts of the country listen to or watch the ABC for some period every week”

However while nearly all Australians use the ABC regularly, better educated Australians use it more frequently.

The ABC is obliged to be many things under its charter. It must broadcast specialist programs, and also programs of wide appeal. It must broadcast programs that contribute to a sense of

national identity, while at the same time reflecting the cultural diversity of Australia. It must broadcast educational and informative programs, but also entertaining programs. It must encourage and promote musical, dramatic and other performing arts. It must broadcast innovative programs while at the same time taking account of restrictions and standards determined by the Australian Broadcasting Authority.

There are many worthwhile publicly funded activities that are used by less than 86% of the population. Do nine out of ten Australians attend publicly funded State schools? Do nine out of ten Australians go to the live theatre more than once or twice a year? Do nine out of ten Australians go to the opera or ballet more than once a year? Do nine out of ten Australians visit a museum or art gallery each week, or even each month?

Responding to Michael Duffy, Lecturer in Media Studies at RMIT, Lee Burton, is quoted by the *Age* as follows:

It's quite demeaning to talk about programs on the ABC being a middle-class enclave when the diversity of the programs appeal to everybody,” What he is saying is that other Australians don't deserve these kinds of programs without the burden of commercials. (21 April 2001)

*Also responding to Duffy, *Age* journalist Peter Wilmoth compared the ABC's TV output to the BBC's for the same day:*

Putting aside Duffy's conclusion that the ABC's audience is primarily middle class because some staff who work at the ABC told him that, is the ABC held hostage to a middle-class desire for Dawn French?

Let's have a look at the schedules for last Monday evening for the ABC and BBC1 in the UK, remembering that the BBC is often talked about as the world's greatest public broadcaster.

*From 7.30pm on BBC1, we saw *Celebrity Ready*, *Steady Cook*, the news, the soap opera *East Enders*, the film *Godzilla*, match of the day soccer and, finally, the film *Any Which Way You Can*, starring Clint Eastwood and a monkey.*

On ABC TV from 7.30pm? The Australian-produced 7.30 Report, the BBC comedy series

One Foot in the Grave, the Australian current affairs show Four Corners, the patchy Australian comment program Littlemore, the Australian comedies BackBerner (the description "comedy" used loosely here), and The Fat, followed by more current affairs with Lateline.

A mix of disciplines. Just like the ABC. Some programs you love to love, others you love to hate. Your taxes at work.

Spot the quality broadcaster "

ABC

6pm: Life Force

6:30pm: As Time Goes By

7pm: News

7:30pm: The 7.30 Report

8pm: One Foot in the Grave

8:30pm: Four Corners

9:15pm: Littlemore

9:30pm: BackBerner

10pm: The Fat

10:30pm: Lateline

11pm: Janus

11:55pm: Unfinished Business

12:25am: Jake's Progress

1:25am: Eagle's Wing (movie)

3:10am: Smash & Grab (movie)

BBC1

5:55pm: Who Framed Roger Rabbit (movie)

7:30pm: Celebrity Ready Steady Cook

8pm: News

8:15pm: EastEnders

8:45pm: Godzilla (movie)

10:55pm: Match of the Day

2am: News

BBC2

6pm: Ultimate Wild Paradise

9pm: Never Mind the Buzzcocks

9:30pm: The Truth About Cats and Dogs (movie)

11pm: Tommy Boy (movie)

12:30am: BBC Learning Zone"

Claim: The ABC is biased

In reality it (the ABC) is a workers' collective run by a clique of ageing baby boomers, who hire and fire in their own image and likeness and who cater to people with similar views, interests and prejudices (Michael Nahan, Executive Director, IPA, The Australian, 39 November 2000)

.....the product of the ABC is biased and biased as a result of this staff capture. (Michael Warby, Fellow of the Institute of Public Affairs in paper titled Whose ABC?: The ABC, Staff Capture and the Obstacles to Accountability delivered in Melbourne, 29 September 1999)

This is yet another example of the ABC's inherent inability to report the facts in a fair and impartial manner rather than run their own agenda (Lynton Crosby, Federal Director of the Liberal Party in a letter of complaint to the ABC. The letter was reported by Anne Davies in the Sydney Morning Herald on 25 November 2000)

Response: While the Institute of Public Affairs (a right wing think tank) and some (but not all) members of the Liberal Party may think the ABC is biased, most coalition voters do not agree. In survey after survey, year after year, a clear majority of Australians have classified ABC radio and television as our most reliable and trustworthy electronic media.

A survey conducted by Newspoll and published in the Australian on 2001 found that:

* 80% of coalition voters thought that the ABC was doing a good job with news and entertainment

* 50% of coalition supporters thought the ABC should receive more money

A survey commissioned by the Australian Broadcasting Authority, conducted by Bond University and reported in the Australian on 3 May 2001 revealed that :

* Respondents considered Kerry O'Brien of the ABC's 7.30 report the most credible journalist, reporter, presenter of columnist across television, radio, newspaper and the Internet.

* ABC News topped the list as the most credible news and current affairs program, column or internet site

* Only 3% of respondents rated ABC programs in the 'least credible' category (1.6% rated the 7.30 Report least credible and 1.4% rated ABC news least credible.) By comparison Channel 9 News and Current Affairs programs rated a whopping 59.2% for lacking credibility. (A Current Affair 26.9%, 60 Minutes 18.7%, National Nine News 4.5%)

John Stirton, Associate Research Director of A.C. Nielsen Australia noted:

Many politicians may be surprised by Australians' perceptions of the media, especially those most vocal about the alleged bias of the ABC. Brian Johns, the departing managing director of the ABC, would be much encouraged by the fact that 70 per cent of Australians believe that ABC coverage of news and current affairs is more balanced than that provided by the commercial networks.

(The Age 20 March 2000)

Claim: The ABC is contemptible and untrustworthy. It has long been an open question which group or institution in Australian public life engages in behaviour most worthy of contempt.

Is it the ABC, paid for by the taxes of all Australians but which deigns to flatter the opinions only of a narrow slice (and to sneer at the opinions of a much larger slice), whose staff are currently whining that the Party of Menzies will not give it more public money when sneering at all Menzies stood for is the posture of choice for so many ABC staff: a spectacle an once unctuous and pathetic? (Michael Warby, Adelaide Review January 2000)

Warby then goes on to consider three other potential culprits: humanities and social sciences academia, the education unions, and the union movement in general. He does not pick a favourite culprit, but does place the ABC at the top of the list.

Response: The ABC has long been one of Australia's most admired and trusted institutions. A recent survey found that in terms of trustworthiness the ABC came second only to major charities like the Red Cross and the Salvation Army.

Paul McIntyre, writing in the Australian, reports:

The embattled ABC is the second most trustworthy organisation in the country, behind the big charities. It is furlongs ahead of sporting bodies, media companies, telecommunications brands, government departments, car makers, insurance firms, advertising agencies and, of course, banks.

Consumer research group Sweeney Research and

advertising agency Grey Worldwide undertook a survey in February 2000, asking respondents to rate between one and 10 the trustworthiness of 18 different industries and institutions. On top were charities with a mean rating of 8.06 out of ten. The ABC came next at 7.11.

There was resounding public ambivalence towards government departments and companies on telecommunications, mining, media, insurance, oil, advertising and banking. They all fell below the midway credibility marker of five. (The Australian, 14 December 2000)

Claim: The ABC is simultaneously left-wing and anti-working class.

One of the nastiest aspects of all this is the spectacle of tertiary-educated middle-class journalists and academics sneering at the concerns of working class Australians, selling whose interest down the river is basic to the Club Virtue status list: one of the more unlovely sights of contemporary Australia.

Thus, low-skilled Australians are expected to pay for newcomers (through welfare and public housing), adapt to them (via multiculturalism) and compete against them for jobs, but if they express any angst about this - especially, if they fail to express themselves with according to the finely-tuned nuances of the tertiary-educated - they are abused by those with much higher-incomes (who do not compete against immigrants) as racists. Indeed their own taxes will be used, via the ABC, to do so. (Why bother with balance when you can have virtue? Michael Warby's paper at the IPA Conference on the ABC, 31 March 2001 page 5) ..it (the ABC) had the most consistently pro-ALP headlines for its news items. Similarly, we found that ABC news coverage significantly favoured the Maritime Union of Australia in the Waterfront dispute.. (Michael Warby again, in the very same paper. This time, page 9)

Response: Both left wing and anti-working class at the same time? It must be their fiendish baby-boomer cunning.

Claim: The ABC has been slow to take up the debate over the effects of divorce on children.

The Australian reported on 17 May 2001 that publisher Michael Duffy had made this claim at a forum at the Paramatta Town Hall. When David Marr disputed this, claiming that Radio National

had been covering the issue 'for years', Duffy replied that the program had only covered the issue for the last few months.

Response: The Australian contacted Cathy Gollan, the producer of Life Matters. Her records revealed that the subject had been discussed 25 times since 1992.

Claim: Advertising will not compromise ABC programs.

Writing in the *Courier-Mail* (19/05/2001) Michael Duffy says that a study by a student at Macquarie University indicates that commercial pressures have had little or no influence on SBS programming. The implication of Duffy's article is that since advertising has not compromised the SBS, it would therefore not compromise the ABC. Duffy said that the student, John Field, concluded that while commercial pressures might have had some marginal influence, it is had to demonstrate this.

Response: The respected consultants, McKinsey and Company, in a study of 20 public broadcasters in four continents found that dependence on advertising leads to more populist and less distinctive programs.

According to the study:
Our survey shows clearly the potential dangers of this approach. We have found evidence that the higher the advertising figures as a proportion of total revenues, the less distinctive a public broadcaster is likely to be.....

Our analysis shows clearly than an increased dependence on advertising has led inexorably to a more populist and less distinctive schedule.
(Public Service Broadcasters Around the World, McKinsey and Company, 1999)