

Universality

To survive the ABC must provide both popular programs and specialist material

There has been a deal of concern recently at the perceived dumbing down of ABC local radio. As a listener I share this view – on my local station, 774 Melbourne, I find little worth listening to apart from Jon Faine and the national news and current affairs output. In particular I miss the lively discussion of local Victorian affairs that used to be broadcast in the 4-6 pm slot on weekdays.

But as a Friend of the ABC I think that it is vital that the ABC is for everyone, that it caters for a broad range of tastes and interests, on radio, on television and on the internet.

Indeed I agree with a recent UNESCO publication ([Public Service Broadcasting: a best practices sourcebook](#)), which argued that this is part of the very definition of public broadcasting.

Universality: Public broadcasting must be accessible to every citizen throughout the country. This is a deeply egalitarian and democratic goal to the extent that it puts all citizens on the same footing, whatever their social status or income. It forces the public broadcaster to address the entire population and seek to be “used” by the largest possible number.

(<http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0014/001415/141584E.pdf>)

The ABC has been reasonably successful in meeting this goal. With the recent announcement that News Radio will be extended to an additional 70 regional areas all of the ABC's radio services will be available to all but the most isolated communities. Similarly the ABC's main TV service is also widely available. However ABC2, the digital TV channel, is only available to people with digital TV (or set top box) – still a minority. ABC Online, while accessible to all with a computer and an internet connection, still falls short of universal availability.

But being used by the “largest possible number” means more than being within reach of a transmitter. While the ABC again does reasonably well here, and while the great majority of Australians use the ABC regularly, some use it a lot less than others. In particular it seems that people in the fifteen to forty age bracket, and poorer people, turn to the ABC both less often, and also for shorter periods of time.

An ANOP survey conducted in 1990 found that 86% of Australians used an ABC service each week. However the current ABC Annual Report puts this figure at 73%. By comparison the BBC has a combined (radio and TV) reach of 93%. This reflects the fact that the BBC is better funded, and that it enjoyed a monopoly in its early years.

(<http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm200405/cmselect/cmcomeds/82/8205.htm>)

It is difficult to know if the ABC's apparent decline in audience is due to the use of different methodologies in the surveys, or other factors, such as a decline in the use of free to air radio and television following the growth of Pay TV, the internet and computer games.

However if there has been a decline this could be a worrying trend for the ABC. While the ABC has made effective use of the internet, and has a popular and highly regarded web site, only 65% of Australian households have internet access. (DCITA Information Economy

Index 2006). It is likely from these figures that a consequence of the “digital divide” is that many of those who are low users of the ABC's free broadcast outlets also have limited internet access.

The public impression is that the ABC has low audiences. The enemies of the ABC seek to exploit this perception.

Mike Nahan, then Executive Director of the Institute of Public Affairs wrote:

Taxpayers are not going to fork-out more money for the ABC, unless it caters more thoroughly and distinctively to their needs. ABC funding has been declining in real terms steadily since 1984 under both Labor and Coalition Governments and the reason is clear. The ABC has increasingly catered to a well-to-do elite who have other options available to them and have the wherewithal to pursue these options. In other words, it is middle-class welfare. Its budget has been cut accordingly.

Senator Richard Alston put it even more baldly when he said that 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.(Illawarra Mercury, 20 November, 2000).

With a weekly reach of 73%, and a monthly reach that is likely to be greater than that, the allegation that the ABC is “middle class welfare” is clearly false. However if the ABC's reach in the traditional media falls, and if the ABC's reach in new media fails to grow, that allegation might become true.

In a multi-channel environment, many of the traditional arguments in support of public service broadcasting come under challenge, including the argument that public service broadcasting is necessary to ensure diversity. Critics point to the diversity in book and magazine publishing, most of which operates under commercial principles. (See *my Fifty Seven Channels and Nothin' on* for a more detailed discussion of this issue)

Whatever the truth of that claim, a key justification for a public service broadcaster like the ABC is that it offers near universal availability and broad appeal, contributing to a public sphere where citizens can converse with one another.

Technological change, and the fragmentation of audiences that may accompany it, coupled with loss of broad appeal (either through budget constraints or through a primarily upmarket policy direction) could lead to the ABC failing the test of universality.

This could lead to loss of popular support (including electoral support). It could also lead to a loss of relevance as a forum for discussion and debate, because significant sectors stop using the ABC.

Such a double whammy could finish the ABC.

Darce Cassidy, May 2007