

The ABC's Special Responsibility

"The ABC's special responsibility is to persuade those who do not think of themselves as wanting to extend their interests - or as being capable of doing so - that they too can enjoy the best, that is to say the programs which have a claim to permanence, as well as those which are ephemeral", Professor Leonie Kramer said recently.

The Commission's Chairman made this comment in an address, "The ABC: Survival Into the '80s", to ACLA in Melbourne on Friday, 25 June 1982. Here is an edited version of that talk:

Not long after the birth of the ABC, A.D. Hope in his poem "Australia", described Australians as "the ultimate men"

Whose boast is not: 'We live', but
'we survive'

A type who will inhabit the dying
earth.

The distinction between survival and living is worth pondering, as is the fact that my title refers to the former and not the latter. Though I did not invent the form of words in the title, I agreed to it because it seems to represent a *not uncommon* sentiment about the ABC's present and possible future situation. It proposes an organisation under threat; it suggests a struggle for mere existence and an uncertain future.

Some simple facts, and some well publicised assertions, have encouraged these gloomy speculations.

Physical conditions, especially in Sydney and Melbourne, fragment the ABC's operations. In both cities 'The ABC' is in fact many ABC cells. If one worked in any one of these, it would take a quite exceptional blend of faith and imagination to develop a sense of a total organisation, working with a common purpose as a national broadcasting service.

The Government has shown that it is now aware of and sympathetic to these problems, and anxious to find solutions to them. We have survived with them, and now look forward to

living without them. To the facts I've summarised, the Dix Committee added assertions about the ABC's decline, its unresponsiveness to change, its sluggishness, its poor morale, and so on. I have frequently questioned these assertions, because they are sweeping, undocumented, and themselves based upon assumptions about the nature and meaning of change which should not go unchallenged.

One factor which defines the difference between survival and living is the level of funds made available to the ABC. On this matter there seems to me to be considerable misunderstanding. Since the abolition of licence fees in 1973, the ABC has been totally dependent upon annual government allocations for its income. Alone of the national broadcasting systems in the English-speaking world, the ABC has no other source of funds. The BBC, BCNZ, SABC and CBC are funded by, in varying proportions, licence fees, advertising and merchandising.

NHK is unique in being funded (to the extent of 98% of its income) by licence fees, and is thus independent of both government and commercial interests.

And even these organisations are concerned at the widening gap between the level of resources and costs, especially the costs of television.

It therefore seems to me unlikely that any government will be able, in

the immediate future, to fund the ABC to a level at which it can make high quality large-scale TV programs as a regular part of its output. It will have to continue to make co-financing and co-production arrangements, and, I would hope, attract corporate underwriting.

So far I have been talking about the mechanics of survival. Our mechanical ingenuity might well enable us to survive, but will not justify our survival. So I suggest that we need to ask the question: 'Why should the ABC survive?' or, to put it even more bluntly, 'Does the ABC deserve to survive?'

Early this year, Robert J. Chitester, president of a public TV station in Pennsylvania wrote an article in the New York Times on 'Public TV without Government Funding'.

I was struck by one point he made. "What public television must do is make appealing and therefore popular the more complex forms of artistic endeavour and intellectual inquiry." Underlying this statement is an implicit position about the duty of public television, and a concept of audience. Both repay exploration, as does the connection between broadcasting output and its audience.

The ABC is the victim of myth-making. To some it is Aunty, who is presumably not as young as she used to be, but essentially a benign figure. Her dress might be a little unfashionable, but she is well-meaning, kindly, perhaps somewhat staid.

How does one interpret this metaphor? At one level it is simply an expression of attachment to the familiar; at another a comment on the ABC's commitment to certain standards of broadcasting and a relatively benign criticism of its supposed failure to keep up with the times. Those who think of the ABC as Aunty represent, I would suggest, that section of the audience which is likely to resist radical changes in programming.

On the whole, audiences are conservative, in the sense that they

become accustomed to certain kinds of programs and to particular time slots. Listening and viewing are habits and any disturbance to them can create a reaction quite disproportionate to the nature of the change. I am not critical of audience habits; on the contrary, I think that the ABC must be sensitive to them, for they reflect the stable needs of our audience. Reasonable notice should be given of major changes, so that listeners and viewers can adjust to the idea of difference in advance. None of us would like to find the whole house rearranged each night when we arrived home from work.

Other sections of the audience have different expectations. The ABC, they will say, should be the instrument of change; it should be provocative, daring, radical and controversial. It should be a critic of society, a detonator of old mythologies, an uncomfortable and discomfiting conscience, reminding public and political figures of their duties and sniffing out their shortcomings.

This set of attitudes also represents a legitimate cluster of expectations. For it is the business of the ABC to be searching in its examination of ideas, constructively critical in its analysis of the problems of the day and public issues, and adventurous and inventive in its programming.

The ABC should, however, have a view of itself which, starting from its legal responsibilities under the Act, recognises the need to balance, as far as is possible, its duty to provide for the relatively stable and continuing needs of its audience, and its equal duty to be a step ahead, not so much of its competitors, as of orthodox thinking about both the possible subject matter and methods of programming. This means it should constantly be looking for new ideas, thinking of new programs to make and inventing new ways of presenting them.

Perhaps because broadcasting is relatively new, it is not yet absolutely clear that it is an art.

Certainly, because its output is ephemeral, it seems to be disqualified from the kind of permanence we associate with painting, literature, music and other arts. The products of broadcasting are rarely recalled.

In fact, the ABC should, as part of its output, make programs whose immediate appeal might be small, but which will, in time, become part of a repertoire of memorable contributions to the art of broadcasting.

This brings me back to Robert Chitester and I appropriate his words in order to say that the ABC should, in addition to all its other activities in news, entertainment, sport and so on, "make appealing and therefore popular the more complex forms of artistic endeavour and intellectual inquiry".

The ABC cannot make this attempt if it is constrained by any simple notion of its audience. There is a real sense in which an audience is a fiction. It does not exist; it has to be created.

Program makers, like teachers, must constantly be devising new ways of making the arts and ideas comprehensible, accessible, and exciting, thereby enlarging the audience, however slowly.

The ABC's formal contributions to education are a significant part of its endeavour; but its contribution through its general programming might well, in the end, be even more valuable.

In the '80s and towards 2,000, it seems to me that the ABC has more, not less, to do; and that we should be therefore talking not of whether we survive, but of why we are indispensable.

If people will work even shorter hours, and more might, by choice or necessity, not work at all, there will be an urgent need for the ABC to expand its efforts to provide a diversity of programs to assist people to enjoy their leisure time, and to provide nourishment for the mind and imagination. It must ignore the dismal prophecies of those who think that it has lost its way and

the criticism of those who talk about mass entertainment with that peculiar brand of insensitivity which seems to afflict the disciples of populism.

Chitester remarks that "The same need attracts viewers to soap opera and patrons to the Met". That seems to me to be misconception of an important idea. It would be much nearer the truth to say that the same people can be attracted to serious programs and to light entertainment and frequently are. There is no need to worry about people who range over the whole spectrum of entertainment, choosing according to mood and inclination.

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If one has this concept of an audience, then the standard argument about ratings is very thin indeed. For it attaches importance only to numbers, not to active engagement; it addresses 'the mass' whose interests are assumed, not the individuals whose interests can be cultivated.

The ABC is not 'elitist' (whatever you take that to mean); it is interested in quality. It does not talk about mass audiences, because it knows its audience is composed of individuals. There is a great difference between the drive for mass appeal and the recognition of common interests. It is the difference between prescription and the provision of opportunities.

The ABC moves into the '80s with a will to live, because in its efforts to effect a balance between the expected and the unexpected, the light and the serious, the ephemeral and the permanent, it has the whole of man's intellectual history on its side.