

Public sector broadcasting in Australia: REDEFINING THE STATUS QUO

Huw Evans examines the SBS TV papers and finds them lacking in political realism and failing to come to grips with the marketplace of commercial television

At its outset, 1988 promised to be a turning point for Australia's sector broadcasters. The Review of National Broadcasting Policy by the Department of Communications was thought to contain all the ingredients needed to induce long-overdue and convulsive change in the ABC and SBS - a view reinforced by the ferocious public brawl which ensued between the ABC and the Minister, Senator Gareth Evans. Unfortunately, short of some as yet unheralded further convulsion, the sound and fury of those encounters may, I fear, count for all too little in the end. (1)

The ABC's answer to the Government's reform proposals has been exquisitely inscrutable. Armed with a triennial funding guarantee extracted from the Minister, the Corporation has devised plans for streamlining its operations to achieve virtually all its present functions within the limits of its budget - a practice wholly unremarkable elsewhere but which still bears the whiff of novelty in some public sector organisations. More resources will be channelled away from administration and into production; accommodation will be rationalised; sub-contracting of programs will increase; staff numbers will diminish.

The quid pro quo for absorbing this pain internally is a demand by the ABC that it continue to provide a "comprehensive" service without advertising or sponsorship.

Acceptable though such an outcome would be to many, it has the potential in a relatively short space of time to create problems for the ABC far more serious than those from which it is trying to escape. It comes down to this: defining the future of the ABC in terms of the past and present rather than the possible and the necessary will deprive it of the very thing it most needs to survive - a dynamic of flexibility. Nothing is more likely to secure the ABC's demise than clinging to the status quo.

The Government's recently released options for the future of SBS-TV are proving no less controversial. By one of those curious political coincidences, SBS-TV has tumbled into the melting pot amidst a prickly debate over the Fitzgerald Committee's report on Immigration, especially its observations about

community attitudes to "multiculturalism". The Opposition's headlong plunge into this seething brew has added still more piquancy to it.

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The risks of social divisiveness resulting from such a debate are high; yet it is probably not inappropriate, in the wake of our bicentennial self-congratulation that we should attempt to pin down what we mean by terms like "multiculturalism", "cultural identity" and "national identity". Until now, as Stephen Castles has observed nicely in another context, there may have been a political consensus that multiculturalism was a good thing, but there was never a consensus about what it actually was. (2)

Whatever it was, SBS-TV has tended to view multiculturalism principally through the prism of ethnicity. This has unquestionably limited the capacity of the service to other than a marginal degree of inter-cultural exchange with what might be termed "mainstream" Australia. There is a compelling case for accepting the view expressed by the former Director of the Institute of Multicultural Affairs (now an Office of the Prime Minister's Department) Dr Peter Sheldrake:

"Academic examination of culture suggests that identity, and the cultural basis for this, comes from a person's simultaneous membership of several overlapping but different groups. Each person in society belongs to groups characterised on the basis of ethnicity, gender, class, occupation, geography, etc. An approach to multiculturalism which ignores these groups, and their contribution to identity, will be both inadequate and ineffective." (3)

Not surprisingly, the Departmental Review papers approach the question of a multicultural "charter" for SBS-TV extremely gingerly. It leaves little doubt that SBS-TV's

longer term viability will be determined by its capacity to attract a larger audience by broadening the appeal of its programs. However this objective is all but contradicted by the insistence that SBS-TV's role be confined to one of complementing the existing broadcasting system.

Messiest of all are the funding proposals. The Review papers are quick to point to the implicit contracts between Parliament and each of the national broadcasters resulting from their respective legislated Charters. In the ABC papers this idea is extended to recognise that if Charter objectives are endorsed in legislation, Government and the Parliament should then, logically, guarantee funds for those purposes.

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However, after citing a consultants' estimate of \$73.0-million as the minimum program expenditure required, i.e., expenditure over and above administrative and operating costs, the SBS-TV papers propose a mixed funding mechanism which offers not the slightest prospect of securing the required funds. Moreover, the proposal to accept advertising is so structured as to invite an almost inevitable nexus between program content and audience size.

Indeed, the element least in evidence in the SBS-TV papers is political realism. Whatever options the Government ultimately distills into its reform legislation will need to withstand all the lobbying efforts of the ethnic communities, commercial networks, parties, party factions, and other sectional interests. The Australian Democrats have already signalled their opposition to advertising. The Opposition is whipping up a storm over multiculturalism. The Minister will need

more than luck. Without a watertight, pre-negotiated political consensus, legislation designed to effect even modest structural change to the SBS will founder in the Parliament. The odds probably favour a deadlock and consignment of the issue once again to the "too-hard" basket.

The resulting status quo would, however, be a precarious one indeed. Amalgamation of the SBS with the ABC would no doubt re-emerge at some point as an option. Alternatively, SBS TV could find its role curtailed exclusively to "ethnic", non-English, foreign-purchased programming without sub-titles, receiving commensurately reduced levels of budget funding. Its multicultural function - achieving some degree of inter-cultural exchange between cultural sub-groups and Australian society as a whole - might cease altogether.

On balance, the probability seems to be that while the overall scale of public sector broadcasting may decrease marginally and its efficiency improve, the broad status quo is likely to persist in the short term, in spite of the policy review.

And therein lies the problem. Far from acting to position our public sector broadcasting utilities strategically for long-term usefulness, our reform focus has confined the agenda to the refurbishment of existing structures and practices. We should not presuppose that these national broadcasters will be durable. The evidence for such assumption grows daily more wobbly.

Three powerful, interacting dynamics of change are reshaping the nature of modern media: technology, market realignments and new perceptions of culture and identity.

Australia, among developed nations, came late to many of the media opportunities made possible by new technology. Domestic satellite distribution has yet to be fully exploited. The use of cable technology for delivery of television services has been eschewed by successive Governments. Even the licensing of new radio services - with the exception of the "Public" (Community) stations - has proceeded, until recent weeks, at an almost glacial pace.

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(The important exception has been the video-cassette which, although not a "broadcast" medium in the conventional sense, now enjoys an extraordinary market-penetration

in Australia of almost 55% of all households.)
This highly conservative approach to the development of Australian media outlets has suited the established commercial oligopoly and the ABC almost equally well, protecting profits for the former and ensuring an adequate social and political constituency for the latter. Indeed, commercial operators have generally supported an ongoing role for the ABC, recognising its capacity to satisfy some of the "special interest" expectations traditionally judged less profitable than mainstream program tastes and thus assisting the case against the licensing of new commercial competitors.

In television particularly, this comfortable closed shop has acted to produce a sameness of program genres and scheduling across the spectrum. Paradoxically, the relatively high degree of program regulation imposed by Government "in the public interest" has, by requiring commercial broadcasters to comply with certain minimum content criteria, in some ways exacerbated the problem.

Nevertheless, there is some evidence to suggest that commercial television is at last becoming interested in exploiting some quite profitable "special interest" audiences. This trend is well established in metropolitan commercial radio where most licensees deliberately seek to capture specific market "demographics" through formats appealing directly to particular groups or tastes. Print has always sought to serve particular readerships; the range of newspapers, magazines and journals available today is bewildering in its diversity and continues to grow.

Yet at the Government level it remains the prevailing policy assumption that commercial TV can and should only address "popular" audiences and leave special interests to the ABC and SBS.

The assumption is naive and contradicts each of the three dynamics of change cited above.

No technological impediment exists to prevent a significant increase in the number of television outlets in Australia. A single UHF frequency is currently available in most markets. This is now being contemplated as a vehicle for a PAY-TV service. Ample transponder capacity is planned by AUSSAT for Direct Broadcasting by Satellite (DBS). Microwave frequencies are also available. Telecom is moving inexorably to complete the trunk links of an exciting, national fibre-optic cable network which, given expanded access to individual homes in major population centres would permit a quantum increase in the potential number of channels.

Increased sophistication in audience interests and demand for programming which meets particular needs and tastes will create new media markets for these new technologies to serve.

The most important dynamic of all is the emergence in Australia of a much more self-confident and complex sense of national cultural identity. That this should occur at the same time as the globalisation of popular culture and its extensive reflection on television will provide particular challenges to the resilience of this newly emerged self-confidence as well as to the Australian television production industry.

The commitment of public funds to the process of broadcasting in Australia has historically been justified on a number of grounds. Most if not all of these were transplanted from the United Kingdom and derived from the experience of the BBC. The intention was to embody, in broadcasting, a "public sphere" to sustain the democratic policy, nourish the cultural life of the nation and act as a kind of counterweight to the private sector.

The question for the future lies not in the general desirability of these objectives but in the means by which they are to be achieved. What is being challenged is the assumption that these "public sphere" objectives automatically require the existence of a public utility engaging directly in the production and transmission of radio and television programs.

As increasing number of radio and television services are made available by new technology and realigned markets, a more appropriate response will be to achieve the greatest possible number of these policy objectives through more precise forms of private sector radio and television licenses according to particular as opposed to comprehensive criteria will make it possible for Government to vacate significant areas of the current media landscape and deregulate others. In any event, an increase in the number of private sector broadcasters is likely to call increasingly into question the disposal of public funds to achieve similar objectives.

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Such a regime would greatly encourage the development of consumer sovereignty in media. The "pay-per-view" precept, so imaginatively addressed by the recent Peacock Committee of Review on Financing the BBC, attaches comfortably and probably inevitably to a system of greater media diversity, enabling Government to determine far more precisely the extent, nature and application

its regulatory and assistance strategies. The consumer would benefit from both a quantitative and qualitative increase in program choice as well as from greater precision in program pricing. (4)

Measured against this sort of scenario the ABC's resistance to structural and functional change has been quaintly anachronistic. Its position has been to seek to maintain, enhance or expand the output of its existing services. Nowhere does it tackle the question of its future role nor its likely relative position in the totality of Australian media, concentrating instead on achieving improved efficiency.

Not that the need for streamlining should be understated. Operational and administrative sloppiness have, more than anything else, been responsible over the past decade for the declining quality of the ABC's output. The problem is that by the time this new, lean, efficient ABC is achieved (and its own proposed reforms will take, on the ABC's best estimate, at least five years) the rest of the industry will have changed so radically that the ABC will, in relative terms, have almost stood still.

Unfortunately, in their various attempts to restructure or revitalise the Australian electronic media, successive Governments have tended to approach the problem on a sectoral basis. Seldom have policies or changes adequately reflected the complex inter-relationships between public and private sectors or the sub-componentry of each.

The latest Department Review is consistent with that approach. At the time of its preparation Government assistance to the film industry was being reviewed by another Department. Television constitutes far and away the most important single market for Australian film - itself heavily assisted through State and Federal budgets. The issue appears to have counted for little in the development of policies for the National Broadcaster.

Similarly, the development of Public (Community) Broadcasting is virtually ignored in the Departmental Review papers released so far. Yet test transmissions are now being undertaken in Melbourne and Sydney by Public TV groups and a substantial number of radio licences have already been granted to local community-based operators. Is it seriously assumed that there is no potential policy conflict between these sectors?

The point is that publicly-funded broadcasting (i.e. the ABC and SBS) can only ever be justified on the basis of its usefulness to the society that bears its cost. When any of its roles and functions are fulfilled by other broadcasters its level of usefulness is correspondingly diminished. As new technology, shifts in markets and changes in culture generate a proliferation of new electronic media outlets,

the public sector will need to find new and very specific roles to survive. If, as seems to be its intention, it clings, however efficiently, to the status quo, it will effectively engineer its own irrelevance and demise.

Notes:

- (1) Department of Transport & Communications. Review of National Broadcasting Policy Discussion Papers: Australian Broadcasting Service; Consultants' Reports - SBS Television 1988
- (2) Castles, Stephen "A New Agenda in Multiculturalism", Clearing House on

Migration Issues, Melbourne, June 1987, p.4

- (3) Sheldrake, Peter. Multiculturalism - Policy Considerations; address to Committee of Review, Migrant and Multicultural Programs and Services Seminar, 1986
- (4) H.M.S.O. London. Report on the Committee on Financing the BBC July 1986

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Friends of the ABC

Our culture and national identity: The ABC of it

Long-time friend of the ABC, Leila Cumming considers the Review of National Broadcasting Policy has dire consequences for the future of the public service broadcaster

The main proposal in the recent Review of National Broadcasting Policy by Gareth Evans is to drastically reduce the size of the ABC and to make it a 'complementary broadcaster'. That is, a broadcaster providing only those types of programs which other broadcasters do not provide and limiting its broadcasting to certain carefully defined types of program. This policy goes completely against the 65 year history of the ABC.

Funding of the ABC has always been predominantly by the Commonwealth Government. Funds have been cut since 1976, with considerable staff losses, and 9000 more are to go in the next five years. At the same time the ABC will pay about \$30m from its funding for the satellite. Funding in 1986/7 was \$325.6m and the total revenue was \$43.6m.

Senator Evans, in an address 'Guaranteeing the ABC's Future' describes its Charter as containing 'confusion and general lack of direction' and claims that 'The Charter should be an explicit contract with the Parliament' but instead is 'a mixture of high sounding rhetoric and generalised directives which between them, give little or no guidance to the ABC as to what it should be actually doing...'

Concern about the need for clear interpretation of the Charter had already been expressed by the previous Board of Directors and in 1985 they published *The Role of a National Broadcaster in Contemporary Australia* giving such an interpretation. They added a warning, however, that 'An appropriate philosophy for a public service broadcaster such as the ABC must not be didactic in ways that unduly restrict the passions, artistic freedom or creativity of its staff and'... the ABC's philosophy must also provide an ethos - an atmosphere or sense of purpose - to encapsulate the organisation's commitment to the community it serves'.

The proposals in more detail

Under the new Evans Policy the programs to which the ABC would be confined are defined narrowly so as to allow only one interpretation and would be the ABC's Charter responsibilities - the things it must do. These include news and current affairs as a priority, drama, the arts, children, educational, information and political matter. These areas would be funded primarily from the Budget within the context of 'agreed multi-year Plans'