

# Reinvention—It's as Simple as ABC

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**T**HE ABC is important to Australia, it is highly regarded, and it represents a clear, inclusive way to bring our continental community together to celebrate our unique culture. But it is difficult to do that while you are still living in the past and resistant to change.

The ABC is the pre-eminent broadcasting organization in the country, with extensive electronic resources that its commercial counterparts can only dream about. And with the advent of digital broadcast and telecast initiatives, it has the ability to develop, promote and sustain vast quantities of information and entertainment.

But to achieve this, the ABC should put aside traditional thinking, pull down the barriers and develop its resources further, form real partnerships and alliances with other local media and production companies, and welcome them into the ABC as equal partners.

Expelling external influences from the corridors of the ABC, such as the third force of the unions, is essential if the ABC is to inject conducive and creative democracy.

The ABC has a well-deserved reputation as a breeding ground for creative ideas and for people to flow into the commercial sector. While it should encourage more people to join the ABC, the Corporation also needs to abolish restrictive employment policies, establish a succession plan and a revolving-door policy that allows smooth entry and exit for people intent on careers in television and radio.

Although much attention is given to the perception of political bias in

the ABC, the only groups that have a direct influence on the independence in the organization, in my opinion, are the unions. No other group, not even the governments of the day, can stride into the ABC, use the ABC's airwaves, or participate in the selection of staff. I doubt that people in this country would know who the Commonwealth and Public Sector Union (CPSU) was if it weren't for the ABC.

Much of the senior management of the ABC has come from the union ranks of the national broadcaster, and evolution has seen the unions come

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to dominate ABC management. While the two unions—the Media and Arts Alliance, representing journalists, and the CPSU, representing everyone else—have a stranglehold over staff in Sydney and Melbourne, they do not have the numbers elsewhere in the ABC. However if a national vote is taken in Sydney and Melbourne, staff can close down the ABC across the country.

The ABC needs to develop policies that embrace the community, not

itself. Properly funded and regular research that looks at the needs of people from remote areas is equally important as research on city-based audiences.

While people in the ABC see themselves as guardians of culture, the real equity of the organization is the audience dotted around the country, and its shareholders are the people yet to use the service more regularly.

An Advisory Board of external industry professionals could assist the new managing director in shaping the future of the ABC.

The ABC needs to develop strategies that bring the warring factions in the organization together, once and for all, to deliver programs in a rational manner and ensure that they are implemented.

'One ABC', a tactical retreat into a homogeneous, indefinable bureaucracy, was Brian Johns' idea. With the Government at the time eager to cut the ABC by \$50 million, it was thought that an amorphous ABC would be difficult to dismember, and that sacking 25 per cent of the ABC's management was a pathway for Brian Johns to sell the idea internally. By the time Johns left the ABC, management had been replaced and expanded, and the ABC was saddled with a \$7 million stress-leave bill. It left an additional tier of management that Jonathan Shier removed, albeit at a reported cost of \$25 million.

Radio is radio; television is television; and everything else supports both those divisions, including Enterprises and Content Management. The latter are not the main game. Both ABC Television and ABC Radio need to go down separate paths and develop

programs based on what audiences want. There should, however, be a mechanism for the divisions to come together in areas of mutual benefit. But, despite the public face, both divisions loathe each other.

When the ABC embarked on the second regional radio network in the early 1990s, it took Radio National and ABC Classic FM and posted them on transmitters throughout the country, with RN getting the lion's share. Today, Radio National is transmitted on 230 transmitters and Classic FM on 71. But at a cost of probably \$23 million a year in maintenance costs on the transmitters and about \$20 million in program costs, it is a little indulgent, considering that the audience in many of these locations doesn't even listen to the service.

The ratings of Radio National are just over one per cent and Classic FM just over two per cent.

Many of the Radio National programs would, in fact, make great television programs. With program development research complete, based on merit, selected RN programs could easily make the transition to ABC Television. This gives rise to the question: why doesn't RN simply become a production unit and pass the transmitters they occupy to other, more popular stations in the ABC stable?

On the other hand, the little-known but fastest growing ABC radio service is NewsRadio. Originally it was conceived and developed by the widely respected Dr Ian Wolfe, the then head of News and Current Affairs for ABC Radio. Wolfe begged and borrowed to get the real-time national news station up and running. Sharing Parliamentary broadcasting frequencies in metropolitan areas only, NewsRadio already commands twice the ratings of RN and Classic FM, costs less than one-tenth of the budget of Radio National, and continues to grow. Sacked by Jonathan Shier in 2000, Wolfe was asked to return to the ABC to set up ABC Television's Asia-Pacific news and current affairs. ABC NewsRadio could

move to many of the RN transmitters and provide real-time news coverage across the continent.

It is a proven media strategy that the more local the content, the greater the chance of attracting an audience. Years of audience data show that news and current affairs programs are the principal reason that people are drawn

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to ABC Radio. Increasing news coverage at a local and State level would prove to be a cornerstone to audience growth.

And while some defenders of the traditions of the ABC may say that the ABC is not about ratings, it is about spending the public purse and performance, and the independent ratings agencies are in a better position to measure and report that performance.

Programming control of the national stations should be vested in the States—right down to regional stations. It would mean, however, breaking down the traditional fiefdoms within the ABC in Sydney and Melbourne and effectively transferring the responsibility and, importantly, the budgets, to the States.

There has been a lot of debate about ABC TV's 7.30 *Report*, and it is here that the ABC is most vulnerable to the claims of bias. The ABC should re-establish State-based nightly current affairs programs. The move would provide a local television voice for local issues at a time when regional commercial television ser-

vices are cutting back their news services in country Australia. And before anyone says that it is too expensive and can't be done, the States have the resources and more flexible work practices to achieve this.

As the organization's principal medium, ABC Television is also the principal gateway to other services. However, ABC Television operates on a different budget level to the rest of the organization and is expensive to run—it could learn a lot from the ABC's Radio Division in cost-effective program output.

Like its commercial counterparts, ABC TV can separate its commercial activity from editorial content and still benefit from potential revenue. The SBS has been doing this for some time with success, and with little or no comment from critics as to the impact on its editorial integrity. The ABC Enterprises division has for some time peppered the airwaves with product-specific advertising. No one has complained and it hasn't affected the independence of its news programs.

In a global market, the rest of the country is moving towards innovation and alliances. While the private sector is now establishing strategic innovation partnerships with government and educational institutions, the ABC should also be considering this as an option.

The ABC is at the crossroads, and with the appointment of the next managing director, it will have but one chance to carve out its place in the future. What that future holds will depend on his or her ability to quickly achieve the respect of the staff of the country's largest media employer, and continue the reform process, while recognizing that audiences are the ABC's principal equity.

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