

The ABC - Critical to Good Governance & Democracy

Friends of the ABC - Qld, Tas, Vic & WA

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The importance of the media's role as the Fourth Estate - scrutinising the operations of government - is well recognised.

The ABC, in particular, plays an important role in educating the public on civic rights and responsibilities, informing the community on, and scrutinising the operations of governments and other powerful bodies, including the media itself.¹ Australia's *independent* and *comprehensive* national public broadcaster is also as a positive influence on other media outlets².

The ABC can do more if it is adequately funded. But if the ABC continues to be inadequately resourced and slips from being a strong presence, Australian democracy will be weakened.

Why the ABC must be strengthened:

1. The accuracy and depth of information of media outlets arises in significant part from the competition that diversity of media ownership generates. Diversity is also a counter to media owners that use their media outlets to promote the political or corporate interests of themselves or their advertisers. Yet Australia has little mainstream media diversity left.³
2. The ABC is unique in the Australian media landscape - independent in spirit and at law. Uncompromised by commercial or political influence, the ABC can report without fear or favour and serve the public interest. Its high standards are well-recognised.⁴ For many Australians, the ABC is the only credible news source.
3. The ABC has a charter that requires it to address the needs of its audience as citizens, not consumers. Unlike commercial broadcasters, ABC content is not determined by the need to sell advertising space. The ABC has a clear responsibility to inform and educate, and strict editorial policies to which it must adhere.
4. Through multiple radio and television networks and online, the ABC reaches all Australians. It provides quality information without direct cost. Its significance grows when access to other forms of information and education are limited by cost, geographical location, disability or other factors.
5. Transparency and scrutiny of government is as essential at the local level as any other part of Australian life. Local councils are responsible for important matters. Actions of other levels of government can impact on local communities differently. Concentration of media ownership in Australia has resulted in the serious loss of local media. Only the ABC, with a responsibility to provide local broadcasting, can be relied upon to maintain what little is left of genuinely local media in Australia.
6. The ABC will become more important as digital technology results in the expansion of niche media outlets. Matters to do with governance are not exciting content for many in the community. Without the ABC - as a quality and comprehensive broadcaster and a provider of important civic information across its range of services and platforms - many in the community may not be exposed to important information outside their specific areas of interest. This will have serious consequences for governance and the social fabric of our society.

There is also the danger that the fragmentation of advertising revenue across more media outlets will result in existing free-to-air media broadcasting more cheap programming and/or the type of programming that maximizes audiences (eg. entertainment, sensation and reports on celebrities) at the expense of quality information, in-depth news and analysis.

Increased capital investment in Australian media looks to be having a similar impact on the content of traditional, quality broadsheet newspapers - the result of journalism jobs being slashed and content geared to broaden readership in pursuit of maximizing profits.

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¹ This occurs through ABC daily news and current affairs, national and local direct-to-air programming, documentaries and programs like *Background Briefing* and *Four Corners*. The comedy-drama *Grass Roots* provided a humorous insight in to the workings of local government.

² Public broadcasters set standards for other broadcasters. McKinsey & Co found that public service broadcasters can and do act as regulators of the television industry as a whole, providing the public broadcaster is in a position of strength in terms of its audience share. In the words of Michael Grade, former managing director of Channel 4 in the UK, "The BBC keeps us all honest."
Public Service Broadcasters Around the World, McKinsey and Co, 1999. A summary of McKinsey's study is contained in the article 'Keeping Baywatch at Bay', *The McKinsey Quarterly*: 1999 No.4, pp.18-27 at www.mckinseyquarterly.com

³ Diversity in traditional media forms is still important. TV, radio and newspapers remain the most important sources of news and information in Australia, and the online sites most accessed for news content are linked to major traditional media.

⁴ Newspan surveys regularly reveal that over 80% of Australians believe the ABC provides a valuable service (*current survey available at <http://abc.net.au/corp/>*). ABC staff and programs are regular recipients of media and other prestigious awards.