

This is an appendix to attachment 7 of the ABC's submission to the Productivity Commission and should be read in conjunction with it

ABC Digital Broadcasting Content Strategy

Introduction

The converging technologies of broadcasting, computing and telecommunications are changing the way we live, learn, work and play. These industries are the engine of much of the world's economic growth and will continue to transform our lives.

The introduction of digital television will make this change real for many Australians. As television offers many of the interactive functions of computers the distinctions between computers and television will blur. The traditional divisions between print, radio, television and online will also become less relevant as content becomes a digital stream of ones and zeroes available on a screen.

A platform for the digital future

The Australian broadcasting industry is about to undergo great change. Decisions taken this year about digital broadcasting will shape the industry for a generation.

The first decade of the new millennium will be a time of tremendous change. Audiences will be able to choose between high definition television, multiple channels of standard definition wide-screen television, digital radio with text and images and datacast information that may include text, images, audio and video. Traditional programming will develop in many new ways to increase flexibility, range, interactivity and depth.

Just as the ABC played an important role in the introduction of radio, television and online, it is poised to make a major contribution in the new digital era.

The introduction of digital television promises profound changes to the nature of broadcasting. Digital broadcasting will not just mean more television. It will change relationships with audiences as viewers are given more choices and greater control over what they watch and when. It also will offer unprecedented opportunities for content innovation.

By applying digital technology to the production, distribution and reception of television the quality of pictures and sound will increase, viewers will be able to choose to receive additional programs and services and opportunities to use television for two-way exchanges will grow.

All Australians will be able to enter the information age.

For television there is considerable uncertainty about which digital service will have the greatest appeal. Will it be high definition television with its wide screen cinema quality pictures and CD quality sound; or multiple channels offering more programs; or enhanced programs that enable viewers to receive additional information? Some industry analysts¹ even suggest that the interactive capacity of digital television, that enables viewers to use their television to respond to programs, to shop, bank and study at home, may have the greatest appeal.

By requiring periods of high definition television, allowing the national public broadcasters to provide multiple channels and establishing rules for interactive datacasting, the Australian government has created a platform that will enable all these applications to be tested in a mixed economy of public and private sector broadcasters. As Australia will be among the first countries to convert to digital broadcasting this mixed approach may ensure that Australians are at the forefront of innovations in digital broadcasting. It should also ensure that Australian industry and citizens become active participants in the global information economy.

The ABC expects to have a presence in all of these areas. Its established capacity for innovation and creative responses to changing technologies will help ensure that all Australians have the widest possible choice and the industry is able to achieve its potential.

The Place of the ABC

Public investment in the ABC over more than six decades has resulted in a broadcasting infrastructure that is an important national resource. The ABC's development of technical and programming expertise and production talent has contributed to the overall development of the industry. ABC programs and services on radio, television and online are distinctive, highly valued and respected by audiences throughout Australia and internationally.

The digital media environment will provide new opportunities for the ABC to ensure even greater public benefit from this long-term investment by Australian taxpayers. The ABC

will be the springboard to the information society for many Australians. Digital broadcasting will enable audiences to have more access to a wider range and depth of services. As a result the ABC will be able to more fully meet its Charter obligations through the converging mediums of digital television, digital radio, online and multimedia services.

There is an important role for national public broadcasting at this time of great change in the development of a digital environment. The ABC's explicitly Australian, innovative, comprehensive and non commercial focus will be particularly important to give Australian audiences a sense of place in the global information village.

It is one of the paradoxes of the global information age that at a time of unprecedented international programming the need for local content is greater than ever. Local programming resonates with audiences, draws them into the new services and helps them make sense of the world. Yet local can no longer be defined solely by geography, it is also the networks and communities of interest that span the globe.

The ABC has a different role to the commercial sector, and helps ensure programming diversity is available to all Australians. While operating in the same market as the commercial industry it is motivated by different objectives, and its success is measured differently. The ABC is driven by a Charter, the commercial sector by the need to maximise audiences, revenue and return to shareholders.

As a truly national broadcaster the ABC inclusively reflects the full diversity of Australia and enables informed public debates. It further supports democratic citizenship by giving voice to local issues and communities of interest. By providing a national platform for new ideas in science, the arts, the economy and social research it helps increase the confidence and competence of all Australians. Through innovative and creative programs it increases Australia's cultural capital. In a media world of abundance it provides a reliable guide.

Gateway to the Information Age

The ABC is poised to play a crucial role in the development of the information society in this country. By developing relevant and accessible content, the ABC will be a gateway to the riches of the information age for many citizens.

The ABC intends to use the expanded capacity of the digital spectrum to achieve these objectives:

¹ PricewaterhouseCoopers, Digital television'99, Navigating the transition in the US, December 1998

- Mainstream networks will anchor the ABC and underpin the quality, specialist authority and broad appeal of the national public broadcaster;
- The combination of enhanced programs and multi-channel program streams will increase the convenience, local relevance and reach of programs. Specialist programming, defined both by genre and content, will be able to better reach target audiences at optimal time slots; and

- Datacasting will enable viewers to respond, delve more deeply into programs by selecting additional background or archival materials, and pursue particular interests from the full range of ABC local and national programs. Multimedia content will complement radio and television broadcasting with timely, cost effective content available to all.

Transition to digital broadcasting

The new media environment will be shaped by globalism, convergence and intense competition for audiences as the number of outlets grow. As choice increases it is likely that audiences will fragment to some extent.

Changes in employment patterns and lifestyles will also affect programming decisions, particularly notions of prime time. Flexibility is likely to become more important as audiences expect programs to be available at their convenience and with a degree of interactivity. As a result program-makers and broadcasters will begin to think differently about audiences, programming and notions of identity as they creatively adapt to the digital environment.

The ABC is well placed to make a successful transition to digital. Its programming priorities and audience accountability seem well suited to the media environment anticipated in the digital era.

- The ABC has removed the organisational barriers between radio and television production. It has introduced an online service and has also begun to introduce digital production equipment. These developments will prepare ABC staff and audiences for cross media production;
- The ABC's network television schedule, with one-off programs and short series, means that audiences tend to choose programs more deliberately. That selective style of viewing is likely to become more pervasive in future;
- ABC radio networks have established unrivalled depth and range of understanding and expertise in relating to particular communities of interest and geographic areas. This expertise will be able to find new audiences as it links with specialised television units to develop programming for television and datacasting;
- The ABC's 58 broadcast centres are able to gather news, information and stories from around the country and make them available to local and national audiences; and

- ABC Online has developed a reputation for the range and depth of its services and is recognised as a network of national stature, reaching more than 1.5 million people each week.

By marrying these resources and skills with the tools of digital broadcasting the ABC will be able to more fully reflect the diversity of this country in its schedule. At a time of rapid change the ABC is well placed to describe, explain and explore what it means to be Australian in the new millennium.

One of the opportunities of the global information age for the ABC will be its role to originate and schedule content that is local - defined both by geography and community of interest. Giving expression to a wide range of local interests, at a time of proliferating international programs, will be central.

The ABC is committed to the development of services all around Australia. While the ABC works with limited funding, it will spread services and activities across the nation to expand the scope for commissioning and producing state based and regionally relevant programs.

Content strategy for digital broadcasting in the 21st century

The ABC's digital content strategy is based on the expectation that it will offer high definition television, enhanced services, multiple channels and datacasting. To do this it will draw on and develop its strong production base in radio, television and online services.

The distinctive strengths of the national broadcaster incorporate the depth and range of its content resources- including news and analysis, science, health, arts, children's, youth, education and music - and specialist production genres - including drama, comedy, documentaries and current affairs.

The ABC will develop the schedule of its simulcast and digital channels in a way that maintains faith with audiences by building on their high expectations of the quality and range of ABC programs². Incremental changes, including high definition and enhanced programs, will demonstrate the exciting scope and potential of the new environment.

By developing a 'whole of output' view of commissioning, scheduling and network marketing, ABC programs will become more widely available. A cross-media approach to program making will assume that content - whether it is gathered initially for radio, television or online - may have an extended life across different mediums. Local radio content, for instance, may find a national online audience.

² Newspoll survey results 1999, ABC press release, February 11, 1998

As a part of its inclusive vision of the digital age, it is imperative that the ABC has the capacity to offer multiple channels:

- so it can better meet the needs of all Australians and fulfil its Charter responsibilities;
- to provide new, non-commercial options for audiences;
- to ensure the information needs for all Australians, including those living beyond the capital cities, are met;
- to test the impact of multi-channelling for the industry;
- to provide opportunities for talented program makers and producers to explore the technical and creative possibilities; and
- to develop and provide outlets for original Australian content at a time of unprecedented global programming.

ABC Network Television: an enriched quality service

ABC Network Television will continue to provide a comprehensive national service. This channel will be simulcast in digital and analog. The quality and impact of the viewing experience will be improved by the broadcast of high definition television programs and by other program enhancements that add additional layers of depth.

This simulcast channel will offer high quality news, current affairs and original Australian content. It will be the home of first-run, high impact productions and acquisitions, including drama, documentaries and creative performances.

The ABC's use of high definition television will probably be different to the commercials, which are likely to use it for movies and sport in prime time. The ABC seeks to serve many different audiences which are not concentrated solely in evening prime time. For instance the ABC may usefully broadcast children's programs in high definition.

Digital choice: multi-channels and datacasting

The ABC's technology planning has been designed to enable simultaneous transmission of the network channel and two other program streams when not broadcasting high definition television. These streams will be available in wide screen standard digital format, similar in quality to current analog television.

Digital broadcasting will enable the ABC to ensure that audiences have greater:

Localism - by targeting local audiences with programs and services that meet particular needs and interests and developing cross media production in all states and territories. ABC regional services is revitalising state based television production to meet local audience needs.

Through multi-channelling, enhanced services and datacasting the national public broadcaster will contribute to:

Community conversations - by using available air time and less exacting production standards, the ABC will be at the forefront of inclusive community conversations and debates. It may include extended coverage of important public events, major conferences, significant speeches, press conferences and forums on issues of public interest.

Public process - which may include extended coverage of parliamentary sessions, important committee hearings and inquiries potentially at both Commonwealth and State level.

Lifelong learning - by linking broadcasting, online and datacasting capacity to develop learning opportunities from a broad range of program styles and genres. The ABC will take a leading role, in collaboration with other institutions, to help Australians develop the knowledge and skills required for life and work in the new century.

Specialisation - by drawing on and developing the depth and range of specialist knowledge, the ABC will make new information available to audiences. To make specialist knowledge accessible to general audiences innovative production will be encouraged.

Convenience and access - by time shifting programs so they are available in more than one time slot. By using content across several mediums more people will be able to receive it.

The ABC has identified two specific content initiatives which will be pursued in developing digital choice on television.

Information Stream

The ABC has a unique capacity to cover stories both from metropolitan and regional Australia as well as overseas. Multi-channelling and datacasting create new opportunities to use this rich resource. In the new digital environment the ABC will be able to blend news, features and raw information, rescheduling existing content and drawing on archival resources.

As a result the information choices available to audiences can be expanded beyond existing news and current affairs programs. This may include a text stream drawn from ABC News Online; local and regional bulletins; repeats of popular current affairs programs, live coverage of public processes and major events; extended interviews and community forums.

This innovative, high impact programming can be mounted at relatively low cost.

The Learning Stream

In an environment of digital choice the ABC will be able to offer a wider range of educational programs, from accredited school and university courses to self-directed learning based on documentaries, series and one off programs. This may include time-switched programs already broadcast on network television, archival programs, enhanced and interactive options.

The range of likely programs and services is wide ranging, for instance a student may download additional curricula material, or draw on ABC Online reports to research items for *Behind The News*, or a teacher may access archival footage for use in class. This stream will link a range of programs to create opportunities for deeper exploration and learning.

2.5. Conclusion

The ABC has a major role to play in the transformation of Australian society that is occurring as a result of the convergence of broadcasting, telecommunications and computing. This convergence will change the way we live, work, learn and play. It will also change the way we see ourselves and the world.

Digital television will be the gateway to the information age for many Australians. As a trusted institution the ABC has a special role to play in this new era. In the global media village, characterised by an abundance of programs, channels and services, the ABC will have a particular role to protect and develop Australian cultural and social identity. Its inclusive approach, commitment to independence and accountability as well as its respect for the diversity of Australia means it is well placed to fulfil this mission. Its national range means it is able to describe Australians to themselves, provide timely and relevant news, information, entertainment and drama at a time of great change.

By providing high definition television, multiple channels, program enhancements and datacasting services the ABC will help make the benefits of the technological and social transformation that is underway available to all Australians. Its well developed resources ensure that it is well placed to provide relevant, reliable and accessible content.

The ABC's commitment to accountability, its inclusive respect for diversity and determination to remain at the forefront of technological and creative innovation will be central to Australia's participation in the information age.

As the digital age increases audience choice, offers more opportunities for participation and provides more convenience and access, Australian taxpayers will benefit from their long term investment in the ABC. As the new era of digital broadcasting begins the ABC has a great deal to offer the nation.

