

## DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH

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**Submission to the Productivity Commission Broadcasting Inquiry:**

I would like to offer this brief summary of concerns I wish to discuss with the members of the Broadcasting Inquiry. I thank them for the opportunity to meet with them during their visit to Brisbane on Thursday, May 20.

My research area is the Australian media, in particular its social and cultural function, and my most recent work has been devoted to the history of television news and current affairs in Australia. I am the editor of the longest-running and most respected media journal in Australia, *Media International Australia incorporating Culture & Policy*, which publishes contributions from the academy and from industry on media policy issues. I am the co-editor (with Professor Stuart Cunningham) of the standard university textbook on the Australian media industries, *The Media in Australia*, and I have completed contract research for the ABC, the Australia Council and Australian Consolidated Press. There are several issues I would welcome the opportunity to raise with the Commission.

- The first issue emerges from research I performed during the Mansfield Review of the ABC. I was contracted by the Australian Key Centre for Cultural and Media Policy on behalf of the ABC to provide an independent detailed analysis of the service provision in radio and television news and current affairs in the Brisbane market, comparing the services offered by the ABC and the leading commercial outlets. During this research, I uncovered significantly negative effects proceeding from the deregulation of radio, in particular, on the provision of news and current affairs on radio; there was literally no current affairs programming on commercial



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radio at all and most commercial stations did not run an independent news service. It is more difficult to come up with such definitive indicators in television, however. Nevertheless, the effects of competition can also be seen to have eroded commercial television's capacity to operate its news and current affairs programs so as to privilege the provision of information over the delivery of entertainment. Likewise, the implicit obligation to demonstrate their competitiveness with the commercial networks has influenced the ABC's news coverage to trend in the same direction. There is considerable evidence to support the view that the current regulatory and commercial environments for radio and television do not serve the information needs of the Australian community as a priority, and related evidence that the Australian community in turn is turning away from broadcast media sources for their information overall.

- The second issue is even more cultural in its implication, but it is generated by the level of competition which has entered the media markets progressively since the de facto establishment of the national networks in the late 1980s. With news and current affairs programming operating as flagships for each channel's ratings strategies and as key components of the network identities, competition in this territory has been especially fierce. The manipulation of exclusivity, the use of chequebook journalism and other symptoms of 'tabloidisation', and the corporate tie-ins with outlets in other media sectors, have encouraged the use of commercially promotable but ethically questionable techniques in newsgathering or in the development of current affairs stories. Hidden cameras and other forms of entrapment have produced several instances where the subjects of these stories have suffered personal and professional damage well beyond what the community should accept. The systems of redress available for citizens who wish to complain about being placed in this situation are completely inadequate: they are lengthy and bureaucratic procedures without any punitive force. Corrections or apologies are not carried in equivalent positions of prominence in broadcasting or the press, and the complaint procedure ensures that correction (if any) will occur many months (usually years) after the damage has been done. Neither the media outlets nor the ABA is the appropriate location for overseeing this kind of function; there needs to be an independent body with the power to require speedy retraction and correction to protect Australian citizens from media organisations who do not observe their responsibilities adequately.
- Finally, given the pervasiveness of commercial objectives across the public sphere, and given the untrammelled access media owners enjoy when they wish to put their case to the public, it is often hard to remember what is the point of regulating or inhibiting the commercial operation of the media at all. It is worth restating the point that the broadcasting media are operating with what is a national and scarce resource – the Australian airwaves. Given that permission to do this is not freely given, but is subject to license effectively in perpetuity, the media are also operating in a highly protected commercial environment. Given that each individual does so in place of someone else (that is, it is a scarce resource and once each channel is allocated, no-one else can choose to start up in competition), they are obligated to the community to use this privileged commercial position in ways which develop the national interest, conceived at its broadest. Implicit in this obligation is some minimal national interest restriction on broadcasters' capacity to devote their corporate strategies singlemindedly towards the pursuit of profit for their shareholders. Implicit too is the assumption that their being entrusted with a national resource, in an environment where that

virtually guarantees a profitable enterprise, obliges them to balance their own commercial interests against their responsibilities as a national service. This principle, it seems to me, requires restating and reaffirming in the current climate.



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