

The Australian public broadcasters, ABC and SBS, no longer have public purpose

By Maurice Newman, The Australian, 10 April 2017

With the quality and variety of media so cheap and accessible these days, why do we need two public broadcasters costing almost \$1.5 billion annually?

Why do we need even one?

Take SBS. Its establishment in 1975 is closely linked to the birth of multiculturalism in Australia. Today, it is the world's most linguistically diverse media entity, with running costs of almost \$400 million a year.

In their book, *Racism, Ethnicity and the Media*, Andrew Jakubowicz et al, write that, "the new broadcaster had ambitious goals — to reach an audience of huge cultural diversity. The development of 'ethnic' radio and 'multicultural' television was a byproduct of the shift away from the assimilation and integration models of Australian society."

While immigrants were still encouraged to learn English quickly, in the 1970s it became obvious that broadcasting in community languages would assist communities to gain access to government services, and provide a "cultural bridge to their new homeland".

This preference for "diversity" has contributed to the abridgement of free speech, identity - politics, a divided society, growing intolerance and, diminished national pride.

After 40 years and the best efforts of SBS, we can conclude that shifting to multiculturalism from assimilation and integration was a mistake.

In any event, today's technology has rendered the original SBS charter obsolete — a victim of digital disruption. Migrants can now stream content from their former homeland on demand and, in real time. Clearly \$400m a year is not required to assist "communities" to gain access to government services.

Looking for relevance and audiences, SBS has gained a reputation for voyeuristic TV and, recently entered into partnership with Viceland, a "global youth brand", "to bring some of the best available content from across the world, never before seen in Australia". Programs such as *Hate Thy Neighbour*, *Gay Conversion Therapy*, *Teen Exorcist*, *Gaycation*, *State of Undress* and, *Life After Food*, are featured.

While SBS employs more than 1200 people in attractive working conditions replete with dog creche, it is not for taxpayers to support these jobs by paying for content that is accessible online and has little to do with the charter.

SBS resembles a government agency that, having outlived its intended purpose, is charting a course of its own, even advocating against government policy.

SBS has a disproportionately high 13 per cent of staff identifying as LGBTI. It is a partner in the Sydney Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras. Its openly gay chief executive promotes marriage equality, permitting the company logo to be used in support. He refused to air an advertisement critical of same-sex-marriage.

The government watches this abuse of taxpayer privilege as it quietly considers merging SBS and National Indigenous TV with the ABC.

A merger could deliver significant operational efficiencies, cost reductions and capital returns. It should also mean that SBS advertising revenue, circa \$65m, would become available to the struggling commercial networks.

Yet even this consolidated entity will struggle to find a public purpose. Management and government may redefine the charter, but a billion-dollar-plus annual budget will be hard to justify.

Britain has already conducted this exercise and developed a new charter for the BBC. It calls for something “distinctively different” from commercial alternatives. If the market can provide, then public service media is not required. But how to measure “distinctiveness” when free-to-air, subscription and, online broadcasters, are so ubiquitous?

A declining share of TV and radio audiences suggests that any distinctiveness the ABC may have had is losing its appeal. Younger demographics are mostly getting their news and entertainment from established social media feeds. Any public broadcasting behemoth seeking to be distinctive now, or in the future, will probably struggle in this increasingly fickle, demanding and, crowded cyberspace.

Working to the ABC’s advantage is the undue political attention it receives from Canberra. It is understood that Malcolm Turnbull personally intervened in the appointment of chief executive Michelle Guthrie, normally the prerogative of the board. This has led to complaints about the selection process. The Prime Minister also pushed for his friend Justin Milne to become the new chairman. This interference is unhealthy and reinforces the impression that the political class views the ABC as a state, rather than an independent, broadcaster.

Despite the protestations of Milne, who says there is no bias to fix, the group-think that pervades the ABC leans distinctly left. A university survey records 41 per cent of its journalists vote Green. There’s a lack of editorial curiosity or disposition to surprise. Routinely, it supports fashionable “progressive” causes, like Islam, refugees, climate change and indigenous issues. It predictably condemns Israel, the Catholic Church, Tony Abbott, Pauline Hanson and Donald Trump. Free speech, free markets and rational economics get short shrift. Management is - focused on gender and ethnic diversity, but not thought. When the chairman says “roughly speaking 50 per cent of the audience will think (the ABC) is biased to the left ...”, you know there is no appetite for change.

The media, particularly the ABC and SBS, have played a significant role in easing the way for the left’s control of the economy’s commanding heights, those critical sectors that dominate economic activity — electricity generation, heavy manufacturing, mining, and transportation. Climate science has been shamelessly exploited to this end.

To the totalitarians, public broadcasters are valuable allies and they religiously court them through direct contact with producers, presenters and management and, via organisations like Friends of the ABC. They want government-sanctioned journalism, something the Gillard government tried to introduce through an Australian Human Rights Commission-type enforcer. Better luck next time there’s a Labor government.

The stark reality is that today's case for taxpayer-funded media is thin and getting thinner. We can no longer dismiss the improvements to our freedoms, budgets and national debate, the break-up and sale of our public broadcasters would deliver us.

Maurice Newman was chairman of the ABC between 2007 and 2011.