

Outdated Aunty needs new act

by: *Nick Cater*

From: [*The Australian*](#)

October 08, 2013 12:00AM

NEVER mind the quality, feel the width. ABC 1, 2, 3, News 24, podcasts, digital radio, Facebook and Twitter. Like the Soviet Union's mining poster boy Aleksei Stakhanov, ABC boss Mark Scott just can't shovel the stuff out fast enough.

The Stakhanovite cult was briefly regarded as the salvation of the moribund Soviet economy in the 1930s. Local functionaries were encouraged to push for ever more ambitious targets until the glut of poor quality size 12 boots became too large to ignore.

For the majority of Australians who support public investment in broadcasting, the ABC's abject failure to make the transition to the digital era without putting quality ahead of quantity is a matter of serious national concern.

For all its conspicuous adoption of new gadgetry, there is an uneasy sense that the ABC is making rather a hash of it, or maybe that should be "hashtag" for the ABC's obsession with the narcissistic web-based communications tool known as Twitter is little short of ridiculous.

A stray Tweet with a crass and offensive sexual reference to the Prime Minister, published on the ABC's Q&A website last month, was merely the small change of corporate indiscretion.

Whose head might roll, we wonder, for allowing such a foul and potentially libellous slur to be attached to the corporation's website? Nobody's, apparently, for the message, like thousands of others every week, is published automatically with an obscenity filter that does not seem to work particularly well.

The ABC's anti-Semite filtration system needs a good overhaul too, judging from the recent complaint from the Executive Council of Australian Jewry about anti-Jewish comments the corporation published on Facebook.

Whether online, offline, or beamed profanely into our living rooms, no mistake the ABC makes seems to be anybody's fault. Even the managing director thought a digitally faked picture of a respected political columnist in a compromising position with a dog was tasteless and undergraduate. But what can he do about it? Nothing, for he is merely the corporation's editor-in-chief.

Commercial publishers and broadcasters have learned the hard way that defamation lawyers feast on unmediated social media comments. Not so the ABC, which appears happy to put taxpayers' funds at risk for no conceivable public purpose.

Twitter is an open public forum, available free to anyone who signs up. It is mystifying why the corporation should feel inspired to rebroadcast its monotonous chat, save for the thrill of living dangerously.

Meanwhile, the ABC's traditional TV audience is falling away steadily. The corporation's annual Newspoll survey found the proportion of people aged over 50 who thought that the ABC was doing a very good job has fallen for the past few years.

Slightly less than a third of Australians are classified as "light/non-users" of ABC TV and almost half are "light/non-users" of ABC radio. "Light/non-users" are those who claim to watch "zero" hours.

In 2001, when television networks first adopted the OzTAM black box audience measurement system, the ABC's one and only TV channel had a reach of 73.9 per cent - that is to say slightly less than three-quarters of all available viewers tuned in to the ABC for five minutes of consecutive viewing in any given week. In 2012, the reach of the flagship ABC 1 channel was somewhat less than half of the available audience - 46.2 per cent.

Arguably a fair comparison these days would be the aggregate weekly reach of all ABC TV channels so as to capture, for example, those who chose to watch the repeat of the British fly-on-the-wall documentary *Misbehaving Mums to Be* on ABC2 on Saturday night.

The grand total for metropolitan areas is still less than 60 per cent. Some four out of 10 Australians could not be fagged with giving ABC TV five minutes of their time in any given week.

The corporation's annual report last year was full of excuses about changing technology, multiple channels, broadband internet and the rest. Yet in Britain, where public broadcasting faces the same challenges, the BBC's reach is 86 per cent, despite the higher measurement threshold of 15 minutes continuous viewing.

It is little wonder that older audiences are falling away since the ABC is being driven by the cult of youth. *Triple J* has become the symbolic training ground and the model for the corporation's entire output.

So what of the online audience? The market is developing, but the indications appear to be that the ABC's dedicated online community is relatively small, reaching barely one in seven Australians.

The particular political and cultural proclivities many complain about in the ABC are real enough, but bias is merely a symptom of an agency that muddles along without a clearly articulated sense of purpose, under management that seldom acknowledges failings, let alone assumes any responsibility to correct them.

The noble aspiration set by the ABC's former chairman Richard Boyer, as a broadcaster that "may stand solid and serene in the middle of our national life" has suffered a setback from which it will be difficult to recover.

The case for a major review of the ABC's operations, leading inevitably to amendments to the ABC Act, is unanswerable.

The last substantial review, headed by Alexander Dix, was commissioned more than 30 years ago by Malcolm Fraser's government, long before the internet in an era of just five analog TV channels.

Understandably the ABC will be nervous, perhaps even hostile, about a review commissioned by a Coalition government, which is why Malcolm Turnbull as Communications Minister is the best person to call it.

A growing number of those on the unsentimental Right would like to see the ABC sold off, but that would be a mistake.

Despite its transparent failings, the ABC largely retains public trust and is a significant national institution with a history and a reputation worth defending.

It will need to be rebuilt from the bottom up, however, if it is to operate in the public interest in the digital age.

The extent of its responsibilities, and the limits of what it should attempt to do, must first be prescribed by parliament, in amendments to the ABC's 81-year-old act.

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Neville 5ptsFeatured

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We all know the ABC cheer squad for the Labor/Greens, but Abbott as already said he has no intentions of instigating a review. Just a cut back to their original charter will do Tony.

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Greg 5ptsFeatured

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The Government's first priority should be to put the ABC up for privatization as quickly as possible and allow up to 50% foreign equity. Don't beat about the bush - do it now!

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Hi Nick, Very timely article. It is distressing to me that the ABC has sunk so low in recent times. As you point out very clearly, the ABC has become lost in the cyberverse and this philosophy needs radical rethinking.

However the inherent bias in the ABC is now so entrenched I do not think it should continue to be fully supported by taxpayer funding. Maybe splitting its activities so that the nation gets a national broadcasting service that is non-prejudicial and factual is funded by taxpayers and the remainder is up for other funding

including advertising. The ABC should not be allowed to continue the political farce that it has become over the past 6 years.

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Anne 5ptsFeatured

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Yes I agree with the article and most of the comments here about the ABC - it definitely needs an overhaul. I find it interesting that an organisation such as PBS Newshour (in the US) which is entirely funded by private donations, makes our ABC look totally amateurish. I particularly applaud Newshour journalist's interviewing style, whereby they actually let the person they are interviewing answer the question (without interjecting or trying to talk over the top). They ask intelligent questions (and often probing ones) without any hint of aggression or rudeness. It's a pity we can't have something similar here in Australia.

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dave 5ptsFeatured

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As the ALP goes through the charade of selecting a leader from their massed ranks of group thinkers and followers I'm once again struck by just how similarly structured is their media wing, the ABC. Who knows, if the collective really allowed management to manage by extending their gene-pool with a few independent thinkers then many of us would start to regard them with renewed respect.... they may even once again be trusted to moderate pre-election debates.

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Dave 5ptsFeatured

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Just as the Coalition constantly urged the Rudd-Gillard-Rudd Labor government to order a cost-benefit-analysis of the totally unnecessary taxpayer-funded NBN, there should be a very thorough and wide-ranging cost-benefit analysis of the ABC, and in fact all taxpayer-funded media organisations, including SBS and Imparja. It would be very surprising if the taxpayer was found to be receiving anything near adequate "benefit" for the billion plus they spend on this unnecessary state-owned media organisation.

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Bruce 5ptsFeatured

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Thank you Nick, but I believe that the ABC has proven itself to be an irreparable and unaffordable burden on the vast majority of taxpayers. The correct solution for a courageous government, is to privatise immediately, if not, sooner.

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Rodney 5ptsFeatured

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hear hear, right on man,

rod qld

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Kathryn 5ptsFeatured

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Once again, a great article Nick. The ABC has a place and it is usually very good at good quality drama, such as Miss Fisher, which is currently screening. The money spent on the ABC would be better directed to creating Australian drama. I understand that a recent BBC distribution deal will mean that BBC programs will be screened on Foxtel and not the ABC. ABC News 24 should be scrapped as it is not value for money - they are never the first with news and spend a lot of time with commentary. News should be news and not commentary and it should be factual reporting. If they are unable to do that then they do not deserve our funding.

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I was once an ABC devotee but alas now fall into the light/non-user category. Totally sick of the leftist, warmist, propagandist and elitist views that are constantly peddled by all and sundry. Sell it off and see whether it survives as a viable organisation in the real world funded by shareholders rather than the long-suffering taxpayers. Finally Tony Jones and Barry Cassidy and their ilk need to go and new presenters employed who can actually display a degree of objectivity even if they are left wing ideologues to their bootstraps.

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For 18 years as I raised my children 702 was a stimulating start to my day, sure there was always a slant but the conversations were intelligent. Alas no more. Now the host can't help regularly jumping into discussions between guests to support the commentator representing the left and I often think I've turned on Radio National by mistake as all she seems interested in is Climate change and Multiculturalism to the exclusion of anything else. The last straw was the appalling spin and blatant anti Liberal focus in the election lead up across all of the current affairs. The sneer and sarcastic body language and passive aggressive digs on Lateline, Q and A and ABC breakfast have alienated me, they have become unwatchable. I enjoy current affairs and would love to watch The Drum but again it seems the ABC is unable to find hosts who can facilitate healthy discussions without infusing it with their emotive bias.

I am truly sad that the ABC I listened to on my grandparents farm and grew up thinking of as a voice of dignity and quality and a news source to be respected, now thinks a perverted comedy skit depicting sex with an animal can be justified in anyway. I still love the drama and children programmes but for now I feel it's no longer my ABC and I miss it and if a way can be found to clean it up and restore to a place of balance and integrity I'd really like it back.

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Robyne 5ptsFeatured

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Apart from the already mentioned problems with the ABC, a great number of their journalists staff seem to have very few journalistic skills and seem completely incapable of correctly structuring a sentence. I will scream if once again I hear one of them say, when referring to a previously named person and his/her friend/colleague etc. in this way: Him and his partner did it's HE/SHE you idiots. Maybe they should send their journalists back to primary school to learn basic English.

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Pat. 5ptsFeatured

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@Robyne One of the many grammatical errors in use by journalists and newsreaders all day, every day, is their inability to know that collective nouns are followed by single verbs. Examples: government IS, not are, the team IS, not are, the family is, not are, etc.

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Julie 5ptsFeatured

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I WILL put in a good word for ABC Jazz on digital radio. Have that grinding on in the background for most of the day. Very few announcements and not even any news!

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Ivan 5ptsFeatured

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G'day Nick,

I am in full agreement with your comments, and with most of the criticisms of the other readers.

I rarely watch ABC TV, and whenever I accidentally watch a few minutes of one of the many "Panel" style of program while awaiting something interesting to begin, I am astounded at the juvenile nature of the content; the

self-satisfied demeanour of the "panelists"; the paucity of any semblance of "professionalism" in a journalist sense, and in summary, just how pathetic these programs are in terms of entertainment value!

The ABC seems to employ a lot of unfunny and uninteresting people who must appeal to a few minor demographics. I would love to see an analysis by a TV industry private sector Programming person rating all ABC programs in terms of which would be likely to succeed on commercial TV.

Beyond the wonderful Miss Fisher murder mysteries, New Tricks and Midsommer Murders, I can't see much. The news, 7:30 report and even Foreign correspondent have deteriorated and are no longer seen in my home.

Keep it up Nick. Great analytical journalism

Ivan Watt

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Gerald 5ptsFeatured

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"Despite its transparent failings, the ABC largely retains public trust and is a significant national institution with a history and a reputation worth defending."

In general that statement maybe true Nick, but in terms of news, comment, political affairs and programs like Q&A, it patently is not, and the answer is not to hire more rightists to balance, that does not achieve anything, the answer is to change the culture, if absolutely necessary by firing and hiring those whose allegiance is to rationality not ideology, and who can ask the hard questions of both sides of the political spectrum, not just one, which after all is the medias purported role in society - not to be Goebbels type propagandists.

If any Media body should be aspiring to that lofty and perhaps realistically unachievable goal in terms of perfection, it should be a taxpayer funded one.

The alternate option is to keep it the way it is and sell off either the current affairs news division so it is privately owned and everyone (including so importantly those overseas) knows that these are not mainstream Australian opinions being aired but private opinions.

The three obvious candidates are the Union movement, the ACTU and the ALP or some consortium of the 3 who are currently getting their propaganda aired at all Australian taxpayers expense.

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It will need to be rebuilt from the bottom up- but at what political and financial peril can reconfiguring the hydra headed beast be undertaken while simultaneously feeding it from the public trough.

This beast needs to be wounded severely enough to make it focus on survival rather than revenge. Chop away some of the revenue and create another SBS, with one digital TV station and one radio station; perhaps give it a rural focus, broadcast from satellite. Make the Parliamentary and News Network completely independent.

Remake ABC-FM into a subscription service

Expect much less of one aging Aunty, and rename the harpie; take the A out of ABC, then the pink tinge will be less important. If Aunty is just one of a few partially publically funded broadcasters, each competing for extra funding from non-government sources, then the left bias would probably be self correcting. Each of these bodies could contribute some time to radio Australia but with diversity of opinion. In a pluralist society, we no longer need such a domineering voracious single minded beast filling our backyard. A few smaller pets will do, even if they look closer in appearance to the market supplied animals.

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Robyne 5ptsFeatured

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I listen to News 24 in the mornings and evenings. I was so annoyed this morning when Virginia (can't remember last name), interviewed Anthony Albanese for a half an hour and was feeding him. I am so tired of their bias. I will probably be another who will not tune into ABC anything. Please ABC get rid of Scott, he is allowing the journalists to do whatever they please. We need commonsense here.

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Adele 5ptsFeatured

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@Robyne Yes I agree about Virginia Trioli. Awful in the mornings and so unashamedly biased.

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David 5ptsFeatured

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@Robyne She interviewed him for half an hour? Really?

What a shining example of the fevered exaggerations and overblown rhetoric of nearly all the comments I see here.

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Chris P 5ptsFeatured

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Nick, the ABC sheltered workshop doesn't just fail to cater to the vast majority of Australians, it routinely and continually ridicules, denigrates and belittles us. You can hardly turn the ABC on these days without there being some loudmouth comedian taking the mick out of outer-suburban or regional people. It's TV and radio for, of and by the inner city latte crowd. And in the last few years the ABC has thrown off any pretense of political neutrality. It seems to have figured that its days are numbered so it had better promote the Green Left for all it's worth while it still can. The ABC is dedicated to the political views of about a third of the country, but it is funded by all of us. That is fundamentally unfair. It's also very unlikely we can change that culture, because journalism is overwhelmingly left-wing, and the ABC state funding naturally attracts the left side of that group. They will ALWAYS be angling for and figuring out ways to push a far-left perspective. You'd need almost as many objective supervisors as there are journalists! The only answer is privatisation, and they can either be subscription or advertising funded. If Tony Abbott achieves just one thing more than his big 3 as PM, I hope that it's ending the outrageous abuse of taxpayer funds by the ABC collective. It's time for them to get off the public teat and make their own way.

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Denis 5ptsFeatured

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@Chris P I agree....make the ABC pay per view and it'll be dead in a week because the only people who like to watch it are those who expect to be given everything for free.

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Helen 5ptsFeatured

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I absolutely agree except for one thing. I think that it should be privatised. It is well past deserving more, especially after I read the reply to my official complaint about what they did to a journalist recently. They even had the hide to mention that he is a critic of the ABC, as if that justified their behaviour!

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Alex 5ptsFeatured

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Radio National seems to have a new co-office these days - the Brookings Institute. Guess that will be even more popular after Ms Gillard joins them. If it isn't the Brookings Institute, it is the Washington Post. I put it down to the notion that the RN producers and presenters are political myopics.

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Dave 5ptsFeatured

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@Alex Amanda Vanstone being the only exception.

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Kenneth 5ptsFeatured

2 days ago

In our house the ABC is known as Pravda.

We watch Al Jazeera for world news as the ABC doesn't cover world news apart from the most obvious news items usually 24 hours later than any other agency. They have lost the plot! Get rid of the lefties and put some real news people back into the organisation. If you can't shake the rats out - close it down and start a new ABC with news not opinion!!

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Dave 5ptsFeatured

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@Kenneth Better still sell it off and legislate so that no federal government can ever again establish any media organisation. And whilst at it, legislate also that no government can ever establish a telecommunications company such as the totally unnecessary and scandalously expensive NBN.

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Elmar 5ptsFeatured

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What appears to be lost in the debate is this: To my limited understanding the ABC had been set up as a politically neutral organisation whose job it is to inform its shareholders, us taxpayers, about the plans, views and consequences of all sides of life, particularly our local, state and federal politics. Sadly, it appears that some on the left of centre mis-interpret this neutrality as having to be a counter-balance to strong conservative media such as the Australian etc. Such counter-balance is absolutely not the job of the ABC, sure it should report and comment on it, but the counter-balance should be from other non-taxpayer funded media outlets such as Fairfax' Age etc.

If this political balance of staff and views within the ABC's operations can not be restored then my (not so serious ;o) suggestion is to donate the whole of the ABC to the ALP and/or Greens. As the Left is demonstrably inept to conduct organisations economically responsible, the ABC would go under in no time but the redundancy payouts would not be the taxpayers burden.

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Chris 5ptsFeatured

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I've notice that SBS are almost entirely sourcing their international news from AL Jazera Network of late. As for the ABC, I am a regular viewer but the quality programs a few and far between, Foreign Correspondant is a shadow of its former self. Leigh Sales is so so on 7.30 Report, 4 Corners is hit and miss, The Insiders in a running joke. The BBC Drama series seem to be getting thin on the ground.

In Perth, 720 is the best AM station by far, although competition is non existant, with 6PR a dieing station.

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Robyne 5ptsFeatured

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@Chris Totally agree. It looks like they are too busy using the enormous amount of taxpayers money to grow instead of showing quality programs. If this was a private business they would be in the bankruptcy court by now.

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Nicholas 5ptsFeatured

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@Chris EVEN 720 is patchy. Will some one please tell them Pete Rowthorn is not funny?

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Reg 5ptsFeatured

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I for one cannot agree that the ABC or SBS should be kept and selling it off would not be a mistake. The terms of the privatisation could well have a couple of clauses in the National Interest sphere. Regardless it is in the best interest of our Nation and funding ability for an immediate review of every aspect with the aim to have many amendments to the 81 act.

The makeup and selection of the board is an area of review as well. The role and more particularly the responsibility of the Chairman must be clearly set out.

Lastly the number of outlets and the types of current affairs programs and their make up is a bone of contention to those few who now care to watch them. In fact this is an area where most of the once viewers dislike the most.

Blatant politicisation is contemptible and doing it with our funds makes the bias even worse.

Big shake up and marching order to some is the least that should occur. Let's not have a minister like the Chairman just allowing things to happen without doing anything.

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Dagworth 5ptsFeatured

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...the indications appear to be that the ABC's dedicated online community is relatively small'.

Why? Because most of those interested have probably given up. Try if you will posting a comment in response to an article by Jonathan Green, former editor of The Drum. Anything remotely critical of the leftist propaganda that Green emits in an endless stream is likely to suffer instant deletion. Indeed, it would be interesting to obtain a numerical record of posts made and not published in response to Green's bromides. Surely the ABC would not be embarrassed to disclose that information.

Integrity is not a strong point at the ABC. Recently the ABC has defended non-publication of entirely inoffensive comment on the basis that it may have breached Australian Press Council guidelines. Guess what, as a publicly owned statutory body the ABC is not accountable to the APC.

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Pamela 5ptsFeatured

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As the ABC is taxpayer funded it should take care to be more even handed in TV and Radio programs they present such as eg Q&A, The Drum and Insiders etc.

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Mark 5ptsFeatured

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Sorry, just cant agree with your comment "ABC largely retains public trust" - heavily biased political partisanship is there for all to see and hear. Poor old Aunty has well and truly blotted her copybook on this one.

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Ian 5ptsFeatured

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I would hazard a guess that ABC ratings would be even worse if they had to carry the handicap of advertising, like their competitors. The ONLY reason I ever still listen to 774 is because it is advertising free, and even that is a chore with Faine et al being borderline more annoying than adds.

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Hamish 5ptsFeatured

2 days ago

We have not listened to the ABC since Kerry O'Brien had the most disgraceful tirade I have ever witnessed on TV (He thankfully disappeared from the 7.30 Report shortly afterwards) . SBS is not far behind. Disgusted with the quality of the ABC's reporting,we then turned to Sky News hoping to get a more balanced view of Australian and overseas news. That worked quite well until the last year when it too slowly became ABC like with its blatantly biased programs. We expect balance in media reporting, facts rather than partisan interpretation (political or otherwise). We now watch channel 9 or 7 for the brief domestic news (very brief) and switch to the BBC, Al Jazeera or CNN to really know what is going on. It's time for the ABC, publicly funded,to be overhauled to become the nation's reporter on domestic and overseas news without interpretation based on their political leanings. Just give us the facts. I think the average Australian is intelligent enough to form his/her own opinions from unbiased facts otherwise the ABC is a disgrace when compared with overseas stations.

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Robyne 5ptsFeatured

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@Hamish Absolutely agree. I would love to go back to the old days when people like journalists were trained on the job. I have had some dealings with journalists and their arrogance is so obvious. They have a habit of not listening to the obvious.

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Gloria 5ptsFeatured

2 days ago

Well put Nick. I watched 'Insiders' on Sunday and was so happy that Malcolm Turnbull put Barry Cassidy in his place when asked about the ALP Leadership. Malcolm's reply was 'You would know more about that Barry than me'. I appalled Malcolm from my home.

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Pat. 5ptsFeatured

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@Gloria Me too!

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Roel 5ptsFeatured

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Why is it that columnists from this newspaper are the first, rightly, to defend 'free speech' and freedom of the press, but as soon as another vehicle comes along with views which may seem contrary - yet merely provides balance as it is supposed to do - to that newspaper's own agenda, they want to kill it? Crushing of 'dissenting' voice - now THAT sounds like something that would happen in the Soviet Union...

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Dennis 5ptsFeatured

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@Roel I'm forced to pay for the ABC, I Voluntarily subscribe to the Australian - that's why

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Jane 5ptsFeatured

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@Roel It is not the job of the ABN Roel, to counteract the Australian Newspaper or indeed any other news source. It is there to provide quality programming and balanced reporting of it's own at taxpayer expense.

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Because it not just another vehicle - it is a taxpayer funded one. If it was a private organisation it would be quite within its rights to express opinions, but its not - it should not be in the opinion business it should be in the broadcasting of facts business.

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Robyne 5ptsFeatured

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@Roel You are kidding aren't you.

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Dave 5ptsFeatured

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@Roel It would not matter how biased the ABC was if it had to operate in the marketplace without taxpayer funding - with only the advertisers, guided by the ratings of the viewers determining the success or failure of the organisation.

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Denis 5ptsFeatured

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@Roel Spoken like a true lefty, overly emotive and totally missing the point.

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@Denis @RoelBut why do you all feel the ABC is biased or unbalanced? It is perfectly balanced and is doing its job, the job that we pay it to do. It ain't broke and don't need fixin'. No emotion there, Denis.

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Robert 5ptsFeatured

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@Roel Roel do you work for the ABC ? Your comment that the ABC "ain't broke" is exactly the response I get when I complain about blatant bias. Amazing !

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The underlying problem is that the ABC is a government funded instrumentality and unlike commercial entities does not have to perform to generate cash flow. ABC funding is not tied to key performance indicators such as market share and it can spend lavishly on programs directed towards a small target audience that in no way represents the Australian mainstream. This is a worry as the ABC is the national broadcaster and in the overseas role it is seen as the vehicle for Australian Government policy. From personal experience, and fortunately perhaps, the overseas broadcast is absolute rubbish with a vanishingly small audience, even amongst expats. One can only think that the decision of the last government to twice overturn tender evaluation results and hand overseas broadcasting to the ABC confirmed the impression that ABC stands for the ALP Broadcasting Commission. Governments of both stripes go on about achieving value for taxpayers money. The current ABC is a perfect example of failure in this respect and funding should be made conditional on performance.