



SUBMISSION TO
'ABC and SBS: TOWARDS A DIGITAL FUTURE'
A review of the future role of the national broadcasters

by

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Background

The Desert Knowledge Cooperative Research Centre is a partnership of 28 agencies; government departments, non-government organisations, and universities whose research focuses on the people and communities of the remote arid regions. We are an interdisciplinary organisation whose work covers four States and the Northern Territory, and we deal with a sizeable proportion of the three per cent of Australians who live on 70 per cent of the land mass – the areas that the rest of the nation knows as ‘remote’.

Our research is about making life sustainable for desert people and desert communities and promoting sustainable livelihoods in thriving desert region economies. We also look at how we can promote effective governance and equitable access to services for remote settlements, particularly remote Aboriginal communities. Our program involves a great deal of scientific and technical research, which ranges from environmental research to appropriate housing and infrastructure design. At the same time, we apply social science insights into what makes communities work and how we can develop appropriate and sustainable local-level economic activity to support these communities.

Aboriginal people are significant contributors to our research program and we work extensively with people in remote Aboriginal communities on projects researching sustainable housing, water use, infrastructure and business development, as well as, natural resource management. Their knowledge is integral to our research, and valuing Aboriginal intellectual property is embedded in our practice and philosophy.

In the future we expect to focus our research effort on fewer areas, two of which are highly relevant to public broadcasting:

- *Smart Settlements*, which will develop integrated solutions for the housing, water, energy, communications and waste challenges facing desert communities of all types, but especially the 900 Aboriginal outstations and settlements, pastoral stations and regions in the economic ‘catchment’ of large mining enterprises.
- *Sharing Knowledge*, which will take an original approach to overcoming one of the desert’s greatest challenges: how to deliver quality education, learning and practical skills to all communities fairly and well across a vast area.

The traditional view of deserts is that they are deficit-ridden, and people use terms such as ‘miles from anywhere’, ‘the back of beyond’ and so on to conceptualise their mental model of deserts. Yet desert Australia functions differently from more settled regions, not better or worse. Low levels of human and financial capital investment in desert regions can limit livelihood options, which can reinforce the sparseness of desert populations.

Support from external agencies, which includes publicly-funded broadcasting agencies such as the Australian Broadcasting Corporation and the Special Broadcasting Service will continue to be a significant factor in the future viability and sustainability of desert settlements.

The Discussion Paper

The *Objectives of National Broadcasting*, as outlined in the Discussion Paper, are highly relevant to the diverse peoples of remote Australia.

- *Universality* underpins the right to equity of access to services that all Australians should enjoy, regardless of where and how they live
- *Localism* is a critical element in desert living
- *Australian content* is reflected in the make-up of desert peoples, from the unique and ancient Aboriginal cultures and languages to the mix of cultures of modern multi-cultural Australia
- *Comprehensive and diverse programming* reflects a need of this small, sparse, but highly diverse population for relevant and representative programming
- *Diversity of news and information* continues to be a critical element in informed public debate, no less so in remote Australia
- *Education* is critical to developing human capital in the desert and, as we note above, is one of the key elements in our existing and future research program
- *Innovation and quality* are – and have always been – important elements in sustainable desert living.

The Questions

The role of national broadcasting

We endorse the remarks in the Final Report of the Australia 2020 Summit, that ‘public broadcasting should be funded so it can deliver to all Australians, wherever they live, free of charge’. We recognise that it is not that easy. Nonetheless, equity of access remains one of the objectives of public broadcasting. Both the ABC and SBS need to consider how they can continue to deliver ‘comprehensive broadcasting services’ to the people of remote Australia. Pay television is not a serious option for the many Aboriginal people whose incomes place them below the poverty line.

It has to be said that the ABC and SBS have serviced Aboriginal Australia well, both in providing services and in delivering content that is sensitive to Aboriginal needs. Both public broadcasters, however, need to engage remote Australia and Aboriginal people in particular in a negotiation of how, in the words of the 2020 Summit once more; they can be ‘a hub of the national conversation – the national ‘town hall’ ’ for the three per cent of Australia’s population who live on 70 per cent of the land mass.

Harnessing new technologies to deliver services

We believe it is important to note that the remote regions of Australia face some difficulty on the adoption of digital platforms. We represent the two per cent of Australian homes and businesses that will be unable to access the Australian Government’s National Broadband Network. Even with next-best technology, broadband delivery of existing and new content, on both national broadcasters is likely to remain out of reach for most desert people.

While we endorse the ‘role of national broadcasters as early adopters of new technologies and program formats’, we nevertheless are compelled to point out that this raises issues of equity of access. Further discussion of these issues is warranted and we think it is particularly important to discuss the digital future at greater length with Aboriginal peoples and Torres Strait Islanders, to develop mutually satisfactory solutions.

Negotiation is also critical to determine effective use of and access to archival material. Much of the material is likely to contain images and voices of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander people who are now deceased and their use may cause distress or offence, as both public broadcasters are well aware. A proper process of negotiation should relieve any anxiety – on both sides – over the fate of archival material.

Informing and entertaining Australians

Public broadcasters have an important role to play in promoting Australia's cultural identity, and it is fair to say that they have, to date, achieved appropriate recognition and promotion of the diversity contained within that identity. This role can and must continue into the digital future and in the new media. It is important for all Australians that we see who we are – our diverse identities and aspirations – reflected back to us through public broadcasting.

The public broadcasters also have a significant role to play in bringing all Australians up-to-date news and current affairs, a role which reinforces, for remote area Australians, that they are members of the broader Australian family. The place of local news is an important factor, and digital service should enhance these services if they are to work to the benefit of all. At present, news services offered by the ABC particularly, are without parallel in remote Australia. This is especially important where the ABC picks up local content and beams it across Australia. Local remote ABC offices are invaluable assets in getting rural and remote issues to the world.

Good children's programming is a critical element in broadcasting, and it is highly appropriate for the ABC and SBS to play a leading role in programming for children. If there are to be separate children's channels, there should nevertheless be some programming on the main television channels, as well, if programming is to remain 'comprehensive and diverse'. It is important for the national identity that children's programming reflects and celebrates Australia's cultural diversity.

If achieving clarity over broad programming directions and priorities requires some amendment of the respective charters of the national broadcasters, then this should be done.

Education, skills and productivity

There is certainly a role for national broadcasting in education and training, and it may well be appropriate for the broadcasters to widen their current role. Precisely how this is to be achieved in the diverse contexts of remote Australia would require careful negotiation with education and training providers and consumers alike. The principle, however, is sound. If questions of equitable access for remote Australia can be resolved, national broadcasting could provide important support for efforts to improve outcomes in literacy and numeracy for both adults and children.

There may well be scope for a national digital education channel, and it would certainly be appropriate for remote Australia if people had full access to the 'add-ons': the streaming videos and other features that round out the experience, which within current technical limitations may only be available to urban areas and regions with greater population densities. Another issue is whether the content of such a national channel would meet regional needs and, specifically, remote area needs. Some investigation and discussion of overseas models would be useful.

Social inclusion and cultural diversity

Broadcasting is already of particular significance as a medium for transmissions in the languages of Aboriginal people, many of which have passed, or are in the process of passing from regular use. It supports local efforts to keep languages and cultures alive. Once again, however, delivery of relevant programming for many remote areas may be incomplete in that the full range of digital services on high-speed broadband is unlikely to be available to potential users. In that respect, migrant groups in urban centres may have better access to the full potential of digital media.

But inclusion and diversity are broader than language maintenance and broader than having relevant local content, such as news and current affairs, although they are important. The principles of social inclusion allow for – and perhaps demand – investment in people who, for whatever reasons, may be marginalised in society. They underpin the rights of people to be appropriately represented in the media generally, their cultures treated respectfully, and their sensitivities respected. Inclusion means that broadcast content deals equitably and fairly with issues that are important to them; and it means that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, as well as migrants, need opportunities to be part of the delivery of new broadcasting technology – as artists, designers and technicians.

The ABC and SBS have a justifiably high reputation for delivering content that is developed by, and for Aboriginal people and Torres Strait Islanders, as well as, to inform non-Indigenous audiences. National Indigenous Television should continue to supplement the Indigenous Programming units in the public broadcasters as a vehicle for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander film-makers, actors, writers and cinematographers. That means there needs to be improved dialogue between the parties to make the most of the relationship. Their efforts may need to be better integrated and look towards the potential for effective collaboration. Our research, however, tells us that effectiveness does not necessarily always mean the most efficient. It is difficult, therefore, to offer an opinion on whether there is a way to integrate the three separate services in a way that is both efficient and effective.

Presenting Australia to the world

Overseas services are a critical element in the way nations present themselves to their neighbours abroad. Given that the services are publicly funded, there needs to be some negotiation of the space in which broadcasting imperatives and Australia's foreign policy objectives meet – or not, as the case may be – to support editorial and operational independence. As with any funded service, measuring and evaluating its impact and effectiveness is critical, and overseas broadcasting is no exception. Due weight in any evaluation needs to be given to the intangibles that make broadcasting so effective: the ways in which people perceive Australia and our way of life through broadcasts, for instance.

Efficient delivery of services

It is difficult to comment as an outsider on the more technical and administrative considerations of this question. They require detailed and intimate knowledge of the way broadcasters work. Reiterating our earlier observation, that effectiveness and efficiency do not automatically go hand-in-hand, we believe the current branding of the two public broadcasters raises different expectations in the consumer and these need to be respected and accommodated. Whichever of the 'certain parts' of their operations are likely to be combined; streamlining may not necessarily improve their effectiveness. We would approach any user pays system with caution because it would tend to exclude people on low incomes. Large numbers of Aboriginal people may not be able to access programs in a particular medium even if they have the technology to do so. This would appear to be inconsistent with both the *Objectives* and the recommendation on public broadcasting from the Australia 2020 Summit.