

ABC/SBS Review Submission Related to News and Current Affairs 2008

John Barker, PhD

jedbarker@iinet.net.au

I must declare up-front that I am eternally grateful to the ABC. Growing up in the South-West countryside in the 1950s as the son of a farm labourer and shearer, there were very few clues to the wider possibilities in life that might involve objectivity and a diversity of informed opinion. All- pervasive religious, racial, sexual and cultural prejudices were fuelled by alcohol, violence and isolation. ABC radio provided most of the civilising “clues”, through news, drama, school programs and children's after-school programs. From that improbable background and with those clues, I won a series of scholarships, gained a PhD in physics and an information management diploma, and made significant public social, cultural and economic contributions. Without the ABC, I doubt that I would have escaped from that web of prejudice.

To me, the big clues were the ideas of *objective reporting* and *diversified informed opinion*. It seems to be a different world today, with so many aural and visual media providing 24/7 information and opinion. The challenges, now, are to determine what information is objective and which opinions are informed. Even from the time-rich status of retirement and with the analytical tools of science and information management, I find it a challenge to determine “the truth” from all that I see and hear. What chance is there for the average time-poor working person who does not have such analytical armoury in this intensive decision-demanding environment? Very little, it seems, gauging from their growing losses from the global economic crisis.

The ABC/SBS still stands head and shoulders above the media-crowd. I listen to RN about 4 hours each day, ABC/SBSTV news and current affairs about 2 hours, NewsRadio while driving, ABCFM in the background while on the computer and the ABC NewsJustIn window is always open on my screen. It provides a high-quality and diverse output. However, it appears that

due to reasons that seem to vary from direct-financial to indirect-political, its ability to provide objective reporting and diverse informed opinion is being severely limited, if not compromised. Increasingly, “news” is from syndicated sources used by all media and “opinion” is from people with sectional interests- particularly commercial and political interests. The basic problem is one of *omission*, not *commission*- it is what these commentators do *not* say- which is anything that would be detrimental to their employers' corporation. Of course there is a place for sectional opinion- but it must be clearly seen as such and be distinguished from presentations that endeavour to analyse facts and opinions to provide a credible synthesis. It takes money to obtain quality human resources, but above all, it takes a *will* to do this in the face so much fragmentation of time and intellect. The fortunate few are retreating to subscription-based expert opinion.

Blogging (written and verbal) is seen as an antidote to the possible biases of purported experts. But most bloggers display prejudices redolent of the countryside of my youth. And while, in a democracy, all are entitled to their opinion, they add to the need for *informed* opinion while crowding out the possibility of it being seen or heard. Blog-sites have become another form of cheap reality-media, based on the assumption that the collective, democratic truth will be an emergent property of a deluge of individual prejudices. It is as futile to contribute informed opinion to most of ABC's blogs as it is to lecture about negotiating skills in a pub-brawl. I am sure that this is *not* Mark Scott's vision of the “village square”.

Having said this, what are my suggestions. Here are a few:

- Do not use “experts” and “professionals” from other commercial interests to provide basic information, particularly economists from banks and journalists from newspapers. These

people are paid by their companies to- first and foremost- maximise *their* shareholder's value. Wealth, as Nobel Laureate Joseph Stiglitz has explained, is derived from *information asymmetries*- in other words, by *not* revealing *inconvenient truths*. The ABC/SBS must either employ more in-house analysts and/or make greater use of academics. Very few “think tanks” are

independent. If expertise is not available, its lack should be identified and recommendations made to government to provide resources to address the need.

- More resources are required to provide analysis of the contributions from participants and bloggers in the “village square”. (For example Mark Scott's 2020 Unleashed” has at least 10 large screens-full of responses). Some examples of this can be seen in *The New York Times*, where (occasionally) opinion editors respond to representative opinions from bloggers. Again, this takes time and money, but it is essential if the outcome is to be *informed* opinion.

In summary, in this “post-modernist” era, where every point of view is claimed to be equally valid, we are in danger of losing the capacity to synthesise individual ideas and opinions into useful collective action. The ABC/SBS is a vast catchment for, and sponsor of, creativity. While the net needs to be cast widely, internal standards of information integrity need to be improved and resources allocated to help the sifting and synthesis of the “catch”.

I dread to think of Australia of my grandchildren regressing to the state of uninformed opinion and unbridled prejudice from which I was saved by the ABC a half-century ago.