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June 21, 2018

Mr Robert Kerr, Chairman
Competitive Neutrality Inquiry
Department of Communications and the Arts
GPO Box 2154
CANBERRA ACT 2610
competitiveneutralityinquiry@communications.gov.au

Dear Mr Kerr,

The current inquiry into a perceived breach of competitive neutrality by the ABC/SBS seems to me to be missing the point about the great value and national importance of having publicly funded and independent public broadcasters. At a time when people are bombarded with “fake news” and spurious information via the internet, eg Twitter, there is all the more reason for the government to protect, support and fund our ABC and SBS. The digital age has brought many challenges to commercial media but the ABC is not the culprit in their falling audiences, rather it is the growth of multi-million dollar international organisations such as Facebook and Google.

Launched on July 1, 1932 the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (formerly Commission) was modelled on the BBC whose founder, John Reith, stated that “public broadcasting [is] radically different from commercial broadcasting because it [is] characterised by a dominant sense of responsibility to the community, a diversity and quality in program content, a universality of access through serving minority as well as majority interests, together with freedom from commercial pressure through public funding, and freedom from political pressure through independent oversight that is ... accountable primarily to the public.”¹

In recent years investigations have questioned the independence of the ABC largely with little proof. The ABC is the most trusted news source in the country. It is the service people turn to in times of crisis (floods, bushfires, etc) because it has national and especially regional coverage. It broadcasts Parliamentary proceedings which no other broadcaster is willing to do in a competitive market.

Under its charter the ABC must present its programs with balance and fairness, political programmes must give equal weight to opposing points of view and there are regular checks to ensure that balance, equity and diversity requirements are met. The ABC serves as a political conscience. Programmes such as *Four Corners* and *Media Watch* have earned the hatred of commercial broadcasters, even though *Media Watch* often focusses on failings in ABC broadcasts. The ABC practices ethical self-criticism which commercial broadcasters refuse to do.

¹ Quoted by Paul Collins *No longer eight cents a day* <https://johnmenadue.com/paul-collins-no-longer-eight-cents-a-day/>

The ABC also has an investigative responsibility as recent exposures of the alarming treatment of young offenders at the Don Dale Youth Detention Centre, the appalling abuse of young people by clergy and members of other institutions whose duty was to protect them, international scandals such as the Panama papers, corruption at all levels and in both the public and private sectors, and funding for One Nation's leader Pauline Hanson for the 2016 Senate election.

Not so the commercial broadcasters. In recent years the sensationalising of news has dominated commercial 'news' programs such as that of Sydney broadcaster Alan Jones, who was accused of inciting the Cronulla race riots and who recommended on air the ..."throwing out to sea in a chaff bag" of former Prime Minister Julia Gillard. The broadcasting of advertorials is another way in which commercial broadcasters corrupt the truth.

In an address to the American Chamber of Commerce in Australia, in July, 2013 former ABC Managing Director Mark Scott cited the popularity of the ABC² as shown in a Newspol survey:

- Just under 75% of Australians use the ABC TV, radio and online each week
- 78% of Australians state that the ABC does a good job of being balanced and even-handed
- and another survey by Essential Poll found that the ABC is the most trusted Australian institution, even more trusted than the High Court, the RBA and charitable organisations
- 85% of people claim that the ABC performs a valuable role.

In a recent IPA publication "*Against Public Broadcasting*" the authors state that the most compelling argument against privatising the ABC is public opinion.

In his 2013 address Mark Scott also stated that innovations by the ABC, such as IView and commercial partnerships with media companies such as Fairfax have benefitted audiences. They have created markets for both public and private sector media. Scott also says that when regulations which required commercial radio stations to invest in news were removed "the ABC became the only broadcaster making the big investment in radio news and current affairs". Clearly in this context competitive neutrality becomes a nonsense.

In an increasingly complex world it is fundamentally important that all Australian citizens are well informed and have equal access to news broadcasting in whatever platform they choose in order that our democracy and our way of life flourish. That is why the ABC must remain independent and publicly funded.

Yours sincerely
Karyn Green

² <http://about.abc.net.au/speeches/the-abc-in-the-media-ecosystem/>