

**From:** Maurice Wilkinson <[REDACTED]>  
**Sent:** Thursday, 21 June 2018 5:09 PM  
**To:** Competitive Neutrality Inquiry  
**Subject:** Inquiry into the competitive neutrality of the national broadcasters

Dear Sir and Madams

Please find below my submission to the inquiry into the competitive neutrality of the national broadcasters

#### Competitive neutrality

Question 13: From your perspective do the national broadcasters seek a balance between competing in the market and complementing the market? Is that balance the same for traditional broadcasting and for new digital platforms?

Question 14: Do you have comment on these guiding principles?

It is timely to consider how the ABC and SBS operate within the market and the basis on which they are competing with the private sector.

#### ABC

In relation to the ABC, this is a puzzling statement. It is as though we are asking whether the cow has an undue competitive advantage over the dog. I will never seek to source my milk from the dog, or seek loyalty and companionship from the cow. The functions and purposes are entirely different. If you constrain my access to the cow, or remove it entirely, I still will not source my milk from the dog; he has none.

Similarly with the ABC TV and the commercial stations, and ABC Radio and the shock jocks, I see no competition; they provide entirely different "products" for different "markets". The ABC is an essential pillar of our democracy, informing the public and holding governments and oppositions to account. It also provides quality drama that may or may not be commercially "viable", and services to children and minority groups that have no chance of airing on commercial channels. The commercial TV channels and the radio shock jocks provide light entertainment designed to attract audiences to watch advertisements and therefore sell products and services.

I watch footy, tennis and cricket on commercial stations (because that's where they are), and everything else on ABC and SBS. If the ABC and SBS ceased to exist, the commercial TV stations and the shock jocks would not get an additional minute of my attention; I would merely read more books. This is not to say I would not be hugely disadvantaged by constraining or removing ABC and SBS broadcasting; merely that commercial providers could provide absolutely nothing to attempt to fill the yawning gap the demise of ABC and SBS would entail. This is a common viewing and listening profile among my acquaintances, and I am sure it is very common in the general population of ABC and SBS viewers and listeners. The problem for the commercial TV channels is not that the ABC is squeezing their audiences, but that their audience base is shrinking as more people, particularly young people, desert broadcasting in favour of other media platforms.

So the ABC does not "compete" for audience share; it has an entirely different role, as set out in its charter. The names of the "products" are sometimes similar, but in reality, "A Current Affair" and "Today Tonight" audiences would benefit nothing for the demise of "Seven Thirty". There is a world of difference between news and current affairs, and "pop" news and current affairs as practiced by the commercial stations.

Nor does the ABC compete directly for the advertising dollar, despite strenuous efforts by right-wing politicians to require it to do so. There is one area, however, where the ABC appears to be now in competition with the commercials. Bright young things who appear to know very little are progressively replacing seasoned, intelligent and educated

presenters on ABC TV and Radio. However, there seems to be no shortage of bright young things who appear to know very little. If there is any such shortage, I would be entirely in favour of restrictions on the ABC's appointment of them, so that the ABC would have to retain and re-engage the seasoned, intelligent and educated presenters who have gained our trust and appreciation over the years.

So, apart from the competition for bright young things who appear to know very little, the ABC poses no competitive threat to the commercial TV stations and radio shock jocks. However, it could in the future pose such a threat, albeit briefly. All that is required to turn the ABC into a competitor is some or all of the following:

1. Continuation of Federal Government policy to bully the ABC into meek compliance, through spurious complaints about coverage and content, and unnecessary inquiries such as this current one
2. Maintenance of the already introduced revenue cuts, to deprive the ABC of investigative journalist resources
3. Continuation of appointments of persons with views inimical to the role of a public broadcaster to the selection panel, the Board, and Senior Management, ensuring the inexorable dumbing down and emasculation of the ABC
4. Privatisation

The effect of some, or all, of these current strategies and policies will be to turn the ABC into a carbon copy of a commercial provider. Since these are the strategies and policies of the present government, this would be the expected outcome if the present Federal Government were to be re-elected. Fortunately, that seems unlikely. However, if this outcome were to come to pass, the ABC would almost immediately lose all of its current audience, and without an audience would wither and die, and therefore be no competitive threat to anyone.

### SBS

SBS is in a different category, being part-way down the dumbing-down process that inevitably results from the introduction of advertising. In terms of audience share, I can only assume that SBS 2 (now called Viceland) does compete with the commercials, as the content bears little relation to what the SBS was set up to provide. Clearly, SBS also competes for the advertising dollar.

All that is required to correct this is to remove advertising from SBS and fund it properly to do its job, then replace the current management with people in tune with the original vision for the SBS, so that it can return to its former glories, while removing its challenge for advertising revenue from commercial stations with which it should have nothing in common.

### Recommendations:

1. Restrain the ABC from replacing seasoned, intelligent and educated presenters with bright young things who appear to know very little
2. Reverse the current strategies for the ABC (set out in points 1 – 4 above)
3. Remove advertising from SBS
4. Fund SBS properly to do its job
5. Replace the current SBS management with people in tune with the original vision for the SBS

Yours sincerely

Maurice Wilkinson

