

# Public Broadcasting in the Digital Age

**Mark Scott, Managing Director, ABC**

I'd like to thank the CBA for the invitation to speak to you today. I've left behind an Australia that is in the midst of some momentous days. Debate in the Federal Parliament on a \$42 billion stimulus package to contend with the global financial crisis has been delayed in the aftermath of the worst bush fires in our history in the South. There has been severe flooding in the North of the country. More than more than 180 people have died, over 750 houses have gone, and half a million acres of land have been burned. While the final count of lives and property lost is still to come, the bonds of grief and support for fellow Australians were evident immediately. It is a tribute to how vital our sense of community remains today that as the news broke, people right across the nation - far beyond the burnt or flooded towns - began volunteering their time, their homes, their funds and their support to all those who have been affected. Australians expect the ABC, as the national public broadcaster, to play a vital role as an emergency broadcaster in these situations. It's our job, but I'm pleased to be able to say that the job has not just been done tirelessly, but done driven as much by that shared spirit of humanity as by professionalism. At a time when people were depending upon the ABC more than ever, our staff were determined to be there for them. Finally, the most significant funding bid by the ABC for a generation is now under consideration by Government. These are difficult days, demanding times in public broadcasting, and the digital age will see the demands made on all of us as public broadcasters both escalate and change, which raises a number of questions.

## **What will the digital age mean for public broadcasters?**

The digital age will introduce new demands, new challenges. I believe that the long established principles of public broadcasting will endure. The great changes will be felt in our practices.

That's applicable to the ABC's work in Australia, and our international work as well, and our key presence in the Pacific region through Australia Network, Radio Australia and the ABC's various special international projects.

## **What are the practices that will change?**

Since analog equipment is less manufactured, less replaced, and less supported and serviced today that at any time in the past, ours is inevitably a future driven by digital technology. I'd like to talk a little about the ABC's experience with digital, since the challenges and opportunities we contend with today will inevitably be faced by Pacific public broadcasters tomorrow. Even for those broadcasters whose infrastructure remains predominantly analog. The ABC could be considered a guinea pig for the digital age. Patterns of change from this revolution affecting our work and our public purpose are emerging. Not all of the

effects have yet been felt. As Zhou Enlai said when asked about the effects of the French revolution, it's still too early to tell. Technology is leading to the provision of more choice in profitable and popular content which naturally, often seems imitative and rarely seems innovative. At the same time, in public interest content, less choice is becoming the prevailing pattern. Digital technology is also changing behaviour, gradually rewriting the relationship between broadcasters and the audience, as new technologies allow far greater involvement and contribution from audiences. "Citizen journalism" was merely one of the first forms this expression has taken. And as the interests of the public shift, the public broadcaster is obliged to adapt itself to meet and satisfy those interests. Despite digital ushering in a new age of plenty, the public broadcasting principles we are all familiar remain relevant, and are in fact acquiring new importance for the public broadcasting identity. The public broadcaster's reputation, built on its adherence to permanent values and principles, will distinguish it in the market, underwriting its prosperity in the digital age.

### **So what are the principals that will underpin future public service broadcasting?**

Editorial independence from both commercial and political influence will continue to be the source for trust in and reputation of the public broadcaster. I acknowledge that in some of the smaller communities served by many Pacific broadcasters where journalists have strong personal connections, independent journalism is more difficult to practice, requires far more courage.

Despite this, independent journalism continues to be practised, undoubtedly helped along by PINA's (Pacific Island News Association) work in promoting and defending freedom of expression in the region. Impartiality and integrity in our journalism also support that public trust upon which the public broadcaster's reputation depends. In our case, the ABC Act of 1983 sets out certain duties of our Board of Directors relating to ABC content. The Act asks the Board to maintain the independence and integrity of the Corporation to ensure that the gathering and presentation by the Corporation of news and information is accurate and impartial. In turn, the Board creates and presides over a set of ABC Editorial Policies, applicable to all our content, based on key values of honesty, fairness, independence and respect. The primary purpose of these policies is to ensure and encourage the best quality work throughout the ABC.

But there are a number of other goals they achieve while protecting quality. The policies, with their insistence on independence, mark the ABC as a distinctive public presence in the Australian marketplace. While commercial media can, like the national daily newspaper The Australian, elect to distinguish themselves in the market by aligning with certain points of view, the ABC does not. The Editorial Policies also assist in making the ABC more accountable to the public - a set of values the Australian people can hold the ABC to, and measure it against. No other media organisation in the nation offers this degree of public accountability, or gets in return, the degree of public acknowledgement about the quality of

its content. Universality is another principle of enduring and increasing importance to the public broadcaster. While digital radio and television allows us more space for more content providers and competition, what we are finding is that this leads not to plenty for all, but plenty for few. Subscription or pay television has made enormous leaps in Australia, introducing pioneering digital technology – but this does come at a price, and its impact is confined to their customer base, limited to one in four Australian households. The subscription model works especially well for options and privileges in life – opera and theatre for example – but less well for necessities. It works beautifully for consumers, less well for citizens. It is by its nature, not suitable as an instrument of public policy.

It is up to the public broadcasters, working to the principle of universality – making content that is available to all, and to all for free – to provide services that underpin democratic life, and information that makes participation and decision making more meaningful. It is also up to the public broadcasters to, uniquely, promote a sense of national identity and community, by telling our own stories in dramas and documentaries, by reflecting our thinking and making sure our cultural expression is given the widest possible representation.

### **What new ways are we connecting with audiences?**

We have found that digital has led to constant redefinition and innovation of both public broadcasting content and distribution of that content. There are so many new means of getting content out – whether it be a desktop application like ABCNow, which allows anyone sitting at a computer to access the best of ABC TV, Radio and Online or through podcasts and vodcasts of programs, or perhaps the ABC's iView, which is the first Australian internet television service. Behind all this is a motive to reach more Australians, in more ways, and more often – and through whatever device they choose. Digital technology has granted us a means by which the ABC dividend – the public dividend – can be shared more widely. As you would expect in an organisation that has been part of Australian life for over 75 years, many in our audience are very attached to the ABC they know well, that's been part of their lives in the same way for a long time.

Not every innovation in digital technology meets immediate acceptance, let alone acclaim. This attachment to traditional media of television and radio is a universal dilemma for public broadcasters. But while these media may have acquired the status of tradition by now, the traditional media were once trailblazing media. In 1932 in Australia, just 6% of the population had radio licences. ABC Radio was then created. In 1956, less than 2% of Australians had a television, ABC Television began. In 1995, when the bold start-up ABC Online came into being, internet use was not even measured by Australian Bureau of Statistics. As public broadcasters it has always been our responsibility to innovate. We need to continue getting in early. To keep up, not catch up with where audiences are wanting our content to be available.

Digital media continually presents more opportunities to augment and improve how we present content. In current affairs programming, the ABC's Four Corners program for instance, we were able to set up broadband/web specials that used the online space for additional information, background material that was not possible in a TV time slot. We provide full, unedited interviews that feature in the tv program. This allows the audience to better evaluate the choices made in the raw material, and makes program makers more accountable against the ABC's impartiality and balance benchmarks.

Digital media is allowing us to bring more voices into the conversation – at local and national levels. We no longer simply broadcast at people but host the conversation and stimulate public debate on issues our audiences decide are of interest to them. That's true not just of radio and online – the natural fora for this kind of activity. We've also been able to take advantage of new means of engaging with audiences through digital media in a TV program called Q&A – where politicians and other public figures respond to questions derived exclusively from audiences via SMS, online, and audience questions through uploaded video. We have requested funding from Government to begin a digital Children's television service. At a time when the debate around the issue of connections between children's television content, junk food advertising and childhood obesity has never been greater, we believe a commercial free children's television channel is a public policy solution with some appeal. We're also using the extra capacity of digital television to provide more specialist ABC channels, including one dedicated to continuous news and civics programming, which we expect to act as a fillip to public debate and discussion. More involvement in democratic life. The extra capacity within digital radio will be used to offer new specialist services targeting specific communities of interest that are currently underserved. Digital media will also grant public broadcasters with strong connections through local radio to leverage those connections in the online space, to create within it a virtual "town hall", and a hub of creativity that will be the home for locally-generated broadband content and activity. The expectation of the public broadcaster is that it will use digital media to improve all its services – more ABC video and audio material – but they also want to see more of their own content up there in the public space provided by the ABC. It's an expectation we're determined to meet at home, and we want to exploit the same opportunities on the international front.

Australia and the Region International Broadcasting is part of the ABC's Charter and mission. It also has high priority for Government, as confirmed by my discussions with the Australian Prime Minister, Foreign Minister and Trade Minister last week. There are three related aspects to our international work today - Australia Network, Radio Australia – now in its 70th year, a long-term partner to public broadcasters in the Pacific – and our International Projects work, often done in partnership with Australian government aid agencies. I'll quickly take you through some of our ambitions for each of these.

With Australia Network we plan to increase subtitling in Vietnamese, Indonesian and Mandarin: research reveals subtitles potentially double or treble audiences extend Australia Network on free to air television in the Pacific. (Audience research has found that in Honiara, where AN is currently available via FTA, 81% of audience had watched in over the past week) and extend the Australia Network footprint beyond SE Asia and the Pacific with Radio Australia, our aim is to extend reach throughout the Pacific of countries covered by the Local FM network (currently there are 14 24 hour Local FM broadcasters covering the Pacific). We've recently made new arrangements for Cambodia. provide more programming in other languages eg. Burmese, Korean, and extending reach to these audiences through short-wave network and by combining the strengths of Australia Network and Radio Australia we've now been able to create one news team exclusive to the region increase English Language Learning services on both services by bringing RA and AN resources together.

ABC International Projects and AusAid We have projects underway in Papua New Guinea, the Solomons, Vanuatu and a Pacific-wide initiative, all of which support public interest media development and its role in good governance and better development outcomes in the region.

ABC and AusAid have been working with National Broadcasting Corporation in Papua New Guinea since 2005, and expect this significant commitment to continue into a new phase of assistance. Projects on organisation development, content development, training & mentoring and technical aid (direct assistance eg. transmission) are continuing.

Since August last year, ABC AusAid work with Solomon Islands media, including the Solomon Islands Broadcasting Corporation (SIBC) – as part of multilateral RAMSI (Regional Assistance Mission of Solomon Islands) group on improving reach and quality of all S.I. media. Every indication that this project will continue.

For past 18 months, supporting Vois Bilong Yumi in partnership with Vanuatu Broadcasting and Television Corporation. Working on increasing reach, technical stabilisation, content and management of Radio Vanuatu. Introduction of talkback programs highly successful. AusAid commitment potential long-term – 2, 5, and 10 year projects.

Working with PACMAS (Pacific Media Assistance Scheme) on sustainable media in Pacific – sustainable financially, sustainable through content development and exchange, and sustainable at technical and infrastructure level.

### **An era of opportunity for public broadcasting**

While the usual uncertainties about funding will apply, I see the digital era as one that's full of promise for public broadcasters – based on our understanding what kinds of content will be important and where they should be available, about the new behaviour and new

expectations of the audience, and on the importance of reputation. The distinguishing principles of independence, fairness, integrity and impartiality, will continue to be the bedrock for the public broadcaster's reputation. Reputations will also be strengthened as we take the opportunities digital media provide to consistently improve and augment the service provided to the public.

The digital age is both an age of plenty and an age of scarcity. We've seen the gradual retreat of commercial broadcasters from costly news and current affairs programming. That's understandable. That return won't be expressed on the balance sheet but it will show up in the quality of democratic life. Public broadcasters will be expected to provide that service. By embracing the ways in which digital technology will shift forever the relationship between broadcasters and the audience, and take the opportunity to build an even stronger relationship based on greater involvement and participation, that too will help public broadcasting flourish. Thank you all for your time.