



The corporate media takeover

Don't let Australia get Foxed !



The future of every social and political issue depends upon it

There are major changes taking place in Australia's media landscape: the Howard Government is undermining the ABC, Australia's independent national public broadcaster; and it plans to weaken Australia's cross-media ownership laws.

What happens to Australian media is not just another issue, it is one which impacts on every important social and political issue. The information the general public receives, indeed how many in the community think about a wide range of matters, is determined largely by information delivered to us through the media.

Media in our Society

Media is the gateway to information. It affects how many people in the community think on a broad range of social and political issues. Television, in particular, has a significant influence on our culture.

Diversity of media ownership, including active community and alternative media, and a healthy independent national public broadcaster are critical to our democracy and to our culture.

There are three main sectors in the Australian media: the commercial media, the public sector and community broadcasting. There is also alternative media in the form of newspapers and the internet based Indymedia network.

Discussion of the public sector in this workshop will focus mainly on the ABC, being Australia's independent national public broadcaster.

Mainstream media

Commercial Media

To understand the importance of the ABC and community broadcasting, it is important to contrast them with the role of commercial broadcasters in particular. Commercial broadcasters do *not* exist to inform, educate or entertain the public. They are companies that exist to earn the maximum profit possible for their owners.

The selection of programs, program content, depth and style, and the decision to broadcast or not to broadcast information is determined by the need of commercial broadcasters to sell advertising. To ensure advertisers get maximum exposure to potential customers, programs are selected to attract as large a target audience as possible, for as little expenditure as possible, at any single time. Content is also influenced by the need to promote, or at least take care not to offend, the interests of companies with which media outlets seek to do business.

In the case of major print media companies, these factors are moderated by the need to entice people who are inclined to read newspapers, to purchase their newspaper.

Privately-owned media is frequently also a vehicle for furthering the interests of its owners. Expression of an owner's political interests is rarely as overt as it was in 1995 when Kerry Packer appeared on his own Nine Network and declared that John Howard, then leader of the Liberal-National Party Opposition, would make a good Prime Minister. It usually occurs in subtle ways, through the appointment of senior management and, in turn, the selection of stories and the way in which information is presented to the public.

Every major Murdoch-owned media outlet across the world supported the 2003 US-led invasion of Iraq. When have you seen on the Nine-network - owned by Mr Packer who also has a strong financial interest in casinos - a program analysing the serious social problems that have resulted from the proliferation and promotion of legal gambling?

The media's capacity to influence voters and the increasing concentration of media ownership into the hands of a smaller number of commercial owners, is resulting in commercial media owners having the power to influence - indeed, to dictate terms to - elected governments.

And when the interests of powerful media owners and a political party in government are largely shared - such as occurs in Australia with the Murdoch and Packer media when conservative governments are in office - the media's important responsibility to scrutinise the actions of government is compromised.

Australia already has the highest concentration of media ownership in the western world. Murdoch controls 70 per cent of our newspapers. Packer's Nine Network has an audience reach of up to 70 per cent. They jointly own 50 % of Foxtel and are dominant in online news services. For most in the community, diversity of news, opinions, information and entertainment is being lost as information is delivered to us through a range of outlets and mediums but emanating from a shrinking number of sources.

There is a real danger the situation is about to become worse. Media ownership could become even more concentrated into the hands of a few powerful owners. The Howard Government's attempts to weaken Australia's cross-media ownership laws - which restrict ownership of media licences within the same geographic location and across different media forms - have in recent years been blocked by the Senate. The Government has foreshadowed the matter being back on its agenda after the new Senate takes its place on July 1.

The ABC - Australia's Independent National Public Broadcaster

The ABC is Australia's *independent* and *comprehensive* national public broadcaster. Independent from government and commercial influence, the ABC is able to report without fear or favour. The ABC has a responsibility to promote Australian culture and, as a comprehensive broadcaster, to cater for a diversity of interests in the community. Its programming is not distorted by the need to attract commercial revenue.

The ABC regards its audience as citizens, not consumers. The ABC's charter requires it to inform, educate and entertain Australians, to reflect our cultural diversity, promote the arts and to contribute to a sense of national identity. In addition, as well as informing Australians abroad, Radio Australia (the ABC's overseas broadcasting service) encourages overseas awareness and understanding of Australia.

The ABC is being attacked by the Government and undermined from within.

The Howard Government's \$66 million (12 per cent) cut to the ABC's triennial funding came on top of a steady decline in funding under governments of both major political persuasions. The ABC's operational funds have declined by almost 30 per cent since 1985-86, out of proportion to any other major area of government expenditure.

The Government is dismantling the ABC by starving it of the funds it needs to fulfil its charter commitments to a high standard. The quality of its programming across a range of areas is suffering. Increasingly, the Government is seeking to control the broadcaster by targeting funding.

The Government and its supporters are attempting to intimidate and damage the ABC's credibility with allegations of bias.

The Government has stacked the board that governs the ABC. The broadcaster's commercial fundraising activities risk compromising its independence. It appears that some senior ABC managers naively believe that appeasing the Government will change the Government's attitude toward the ABC. Some are pushing the ABC to 'dumb down', in the belief that increased ratings will result in greater government support. Others simply have an understanding and outlook which is better suited to commercial broadcasting.

It is likely there will be more trouble ahead for the ABC when the Government controls the Senate after July 1.

SBS - Australia's Ethnic Public Broadcaster

The Special Broadcasting Service was established as a niche public broadcaster to reflect Australia's multicultural society. It is required to provide multilingual and multicultural radio and television services that: inform, educate and entertain all Australians in their preferred languages; increase awareness and appreciation of ethnic diversity and its contribution to Australia; contribute to the communications needs, the

retention and continuing development of language and other cultural skills of Australia's multicultural society.

Concern that SBS television neglects its responsibilities to local ethnic communities, in favour of the international cultural interests of Australians from English-speaking backgrounds, has grown as SBS's governing board has been increasingly 'anglicised'. Many in the community believe that SBS TV's move toward lightweight, commercial-like programming in pursuit of ratings is a result of the introduction of advertising on SBS television since 1991, the Howard Government's appointment of political sympathisers to the SBS Board, and the appointment of Nigel Milan to the position of managing director in 2003.

There is a concern that in the future the Government may attempt to amalgamate SBS and the ABC, with the risk that SBS's uniqueness as an ethnic broadcaster will be even further diminished.

Conclusion

The information people get and the way in which many in the community think on a wide range of important matters is determined largely by information delivered to us through the mainstream media.

What happens to Australian media is not just another issue, it is one about which every organisation and every individual should be concerned. All organisations should give some priority to what is happening to Australian media and what they can do about it NOW.

Community Broadcasting & Alternative Media

Community Radio and TV

When people are asked why they listen to/watch community broadcasting, the two most often cited responses are: "diversity/specialisation" and "local". (McNair's most recent national survey on listener/viewer attitudes to community broadcasting) In short, people hear and see people who they identify with. That is, our communities recognise that diverse opinions, lifestyles and practices are part and parcel of what makes up their 'local' social environment. Alongside that, they look for those sources which will allow them to hear and see programs that, if you like, hold a mirror in which they see not only themselves but also other likeminded people.

An important strength of community media, therefore, is its deep connection to the community it springs from. But this strength can also be a weakness. Those with the 'get up and go' to spearhead the establishment of community services sometimes continue to dominate them. And, this has resulted in some stations, particularly in regional and sub metro areas, largely reflecting a narrower range of views which are already well catered for in the commercial media. While there are significant exceptions, genuine alternative programming is more likely to be found in the major metropolitan stations. These stations include 2SER in Sydney, 3CR in Melbourne, 5UV in Adelaide, 4ZZZ in Brisbane and ethnic radio 3ZZZ in Melbourne.

The community broadcasting sector is well served with a national satellite service which allows the distribution of programming content. This service provides a number of alternative programs to about 220 community radio stations that are part of its network. Although community TV is still finding its feet, people who are actively engaged in a range of important issues are already providing content for that medium. Within the metropolitan cities, community TV offers an alternative source of information and news that differs from mainstream services.

Organisations and people who are active in the community should become involved in community broadcasting and trained in its techniques.

Internet based media

The use of the internet to cheaply produce and distribute alternative sources of opinions and news is another medium for community broadcasting. Forums which have opened new spaces for people to debate current affairs, present alternative voices have mushroomed in recent years, responding to the increased control and commercialisation of the mainstream media, and the increasing availability of the technology (specifically access to the internet), especially in Australia. Crikey is a voice in the media debate, and New Matilda is trying to expand this niche under commercial and political pressures.

Indymedia is a global network of sites, which are open to anyone to publish, unedited, their own articles. The code for the open publishing website was developed by catalyst, a Sydney-based IMC (Indymedia centre) collective in 1999 for the Seattle protests against a meeting of the World Trade Organisation. After six years there are now nearly 200 Indymedia collectives around the world. At the height of the protests at the Republican National Convention last year, New York Indymedia was receiving about 5 million hits a day, and there were more than 600 "embedded" Indymedia journalists at the protests. A participant in the Melbourne Indymedia collective refers to the ability and importance of online forms of collaboration as the "harnessing of collective intelligence, breaking the passivity of the producer/consumer divide allowing for a horizontal network of collaboration...a commonality without homogeneity" (A. Lowenthal, 2004).

Indymedia has become very effective for participants in protest movements to tell their stories and the stories of their causes, both of which will rarely make it into the commercial and mainstream media. Discussions within and between Indymedia collectives have started about the direction and aims of the network. It is a discussion that all members of community and campaign organisations should respond to and participate in.

Conclusion

Genuine local media is steadily declining across Australia. Community radio, with its strong local identity, could provide a vehicle for taking back the 'hot' issues and allowing discussion otherwise not accessible to the community. There are thousands of groups in the community which believe they don't have a voice. Yet most are within spitting distance of a community media organisation.

Community radio and alternative media like Indymedia represent an opportunity for connecting more activists, and more communities that is critical to a discussion about the future of the media and social justice movements in Australia. They are an important tool for informing the public and for reflecting the diverse interests of the community. Coupled with a healthy ABC, there is great potential within the existing media landscape for individuals and communities to reconnect and build a better future for all of us.

Further Contacts/Information

Campaigns & Further Information

- Save the ABC: Friends of the ABC (Vic), phone (03) 9682 0073 www.fabc.org.au
- Campaign for Australian media diversity: Friends of the ABC (Vic), phone (03) 9682 0073
- Cross media ownership: www.yourdemocracy.net.au and www.xmedia.org.au
- Community Broadcasting Association of Australia www.cbaa.org.au
- Indymedia www.indymedia.org is the international site, www.indymedia.org.au is the Australian site with links to the IMC Oceania network which includes the Australian centres.
- Andrew Lowenthal, media-activist 'Nodes of Conflict: Weaving a Web of Radical Communications' October 05, 2004. <http://www.melbourne.indymedia.org/news/2004/10/80735.php>
- The New Matilda www.newmatilda.com
- Crickey www.crikey.com.au

This briefing paper was written by Glenys Stradijot, Executive Officer/Campaign Manager, Friends of the ABC (Vic) Inc., with Shane Elson, Australian Producer and Distributor of Alternative Radio, and Andrew Lowenthal, Indymedia, for the conference: **Advance Australia Fair – Building sustainability, justice and peace, 30-31 July 2005, Melbourne Trades Hall.**

For more information about the conference, how to register, this particular workshop and the Now We The People network, please visit www.nowwethepeople.org.

Email info@nowwethepeople.org

Phone 02 9611 4164

Fax 02 9211 1407

Postal PO Box K941, Haymarket NSW 1240