

Friends of the ABC

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The Secretary

Senate Environment, Communications, Information Technology and Arts References Committee

Parliament House

CANBERRA ACT 2600

Via email erca.sen@aph.gov.au

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Dear Ms LeGuen,

Inquiry into ABC Online

Following the invitation of the Senate Environment, Communications, IT and the Arts Committee, Friends of the ABC wishes to comment on the following matter:

any extension to legislation which could be considered to ensure that the ABC is able to effectively provide an independent, innovative and comprehensive service in the online delivery environment.

We also seek approval to publish this submission.

1. Advertising and Sponsorship

We do not agree that it should simply be a matter of the ABC Board's discretion as to whether to allow advertising on ABC Online. We agree with Senator Allison that:

This is simply a matter of historical accident, in that the technologies and services which make up ABC Online were simply not foreseen when the ABC Act was first drafted. It is clearly a general intention of the ABC Act to prohibit advertising on all its existing services, something which the Board's current policy recognises. It would be a simple matter, as Mr Dempster recommends, for Section 31 of the ABC Act to be amended to extend the prohibition of advertising to ABC Online and online content sold to third parties.¹

As the current ABC Editorial Policies booklet states:

The ABC national broadcasting and online services are independent services free from commercial and other pressures and as such can provide services that do not depend on the number of listeners, viewers or online users that can be delivered to advertisers. It is crucial to the public credibility of the ABC that it is not influenced by, or perceived to be influenced by, or depend-

ent on commercial or other interests. This provides the public with a diversity of information, ideas and cultural and editorial values.²

Despite this very clear statement of ABC policy, Mr. Johns refused to rule out the possibility that the ABC Board might, in the future, run advertisements on ABC Online. Likewise Mr. Shier, while opposing advertising on ABC radio and television, said he had an open mind about advertising on the ABC's web site. The ABC Board, despite its statutory obligation 'to maintain the independence and integrity of the corporation', has not publicly disputed the statements by Mr Johns and Mr Shier.

Advertising (and sponsorship) should be prohibited on ABC Online for exactly the same reasons as it has been prohibited on radio and television.

Friends of the ABC therefore submits that Section 31 of the ABC Act which prohibits the ABC from broadcasting advertisements be extended to prohibit the ABC from publishing advertisements, or permitting advertisements to be published, on ABC Online or other similar ABC services.

2. Co-productions.

It has long been acknowledged that co-productions and other forms of external funding have the potential to compromise the independence of the ABC. For this reason the ABC's Editorial Policies contain some two pages of restrictions governing co-productions of programs other than news and daily current affairs.³

The Editorial Policies are properly much more stringent with regard to daily news and current affairs programs, which are at the heart of the ABC's reputation for independence and integrity. Thus they completely prohibit co-production arrangements for News and daily Current Affairs in the following terms:

In the case of News and daily Current Affairs programs, the Board has decided that these should depend fully on public funding and that there should be no funding arrangements with private co-producers or independent producers for the production of such material. ⁴

In supporting the ABC Board's current policy, once again FABC is concerned that just as the Board might abandon its rejection of advertising on ABC Online, it might also remove the prohibition on external funding and co-production arrangements for News and daily Current Affairs. If the Board genuinely supports its current policy with regard to advertising online, and the co-production of News and daily Current Affairs, then it should not oppose the incorporation of its policy within the Act.

FABC therefore submits that the ABC Act be amended so as to ensure that ABC News and daily Current Affairs programs depend fully on public funding, and that there should be no funding arrangements with private co-producers or independent producers for the production of such material.

Yours sincerely,

Darce Cassidy
National Spokesperson
Friends of the ABC

1 Report of the Senate Environment, Communications, Information Technology and the Arts
References Committee,
April 2000, 1.91

2 ABC Editorial Policies, April 1998, 13.1.1

3 ABC Editorial Policies, April 1998, p 37-9

4 ABC Editorial Policies, April 1998, 4.2.3

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FABC submission to Senate Environment, Communications, Information Technology and Arts
References Committee

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