

Lies, Damned Lies and Ratings

The ABC's enemies attack it for poor ratings. They claim it is only for minorities, or, worse still, for 'elites'. For some supporters of the ABC 'ratings' is a dirty word, relevant only to the grubby world of commercial broadcasting and associated with dumbing down.

They are both wrong.

Each week 85% of Australians use an ABC service. That's a whopping great majority, not a minority, and it has nothing to do with elites.

But ratings are important to the ABC. In fact the ABC Charter explicitly requires the ABC to take account of ratings, stipulating that the ABC "provide a balance between broadcasting programs of wide appeal and specialised broadcasting programs".

This requirement to both have our cake and eat it has been easier for radio than for television. In radio the ABC has three popular networks that each draw a share of comparable to their commercial rivals. Triple J, Regional Radio and Metropolitan Radio cater to a broad range of listeners. On the other hand News Radio, Radio National and Classic FM are the specialist networks. They have a smaller audience share, generally less than the commercial stations.

In television, with only one channel available, it has been more difficult to be all things to all people. Nevertheless the ABC has generally managed to keep the balance in television as well.

Audience growth does not have to mean dumbing down. For example between 1988 and 1993 ABC radio listening increased by a spectacular 50%. At the same time the educational level, and the socio-economic status of the listeners rose, rather than fell, across all radio networks.

The ratings debate is often distorted by misinformation. There are two principal quantitative measurements of audiences. "Share" refers to the average percentage of the total radio listening audience tuned to the station.. "Reach" usually refers to the average number of people who watch or listen to the station each week. Commercial stations tend to have a relatively high share but a comparatively low reach, while the reverse tends to be the case for the ABC. Thus if 'reach' is our measure the ABC scores well (86% watch and/or listen each week) while if share is the measure then ABC Radio gets just over 20% in the cities and just under 30% in the country. TV share is lower. Thus the ABC's enemies usually choose to quote the "share" ratings and ignore the "reach" ratings.

"Share" and "reach" are only quantitative measures, while qualitative measures are a separate issue for which there is no room here.

The need to be both popular and specialist is not just a charter obligation. It is vital for the ABC's survival. If the ABC only appealed to a minority, if say 60% of Australians never used it, the ABC would be vulnerable. On the other hand if it lost its distinctiveness, if it became commercial broadcasting without commercials, it would become equally vulnerable.

