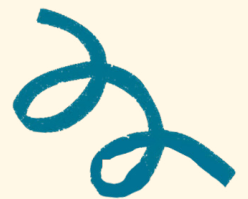

It's Our ABC

A research report for
GetUp! by Per Capita

Emma Dawson

May 2020



percapita
FIGHTING INEQUALITY IN AUSTRALIA

GetUp!



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About Per Capita

Per Capita is an independent progressive think tank, dedicated to fighting inequality in Australia. We work to build a new vision for Australia based on fairness, shared prosperity, community and social justice.

Our research is rigorous, evidence-based and long-term in its outlook. We consider the national challenges of the next decade rather than the next election cycle. We ask original questions and offer fresh solutions, drawing on new thinking in social science, economics and public policy.

Our audience is the interested public, not just experts and policy makers. We engage all Australians who want to see rigorous thinking and evidence-based analysis applied to the issues facing our country's future.

The author wishes to thank Sarah Enderby and Alix Foster Vander Elst at GetUp for their thoughtful feedback on the drafts of this report. Any errors of fact or interpretation remain the sole responsibility of the author.

About the author

Emma Dawson is Executive Director of Per Capita. Formerly, she was a senior advisor on Digital Inclusion at Telstra, Executive Director of the Institute for a Broadband Enabled Society at University of Melbourne, and a senior advisor on broadcasting policy and media convergence to the Minister for Broadband, Communications and the Digital Economy in the Rudd and Gillard governments.

Emma has a research background and policy expertise in the areas of public broadcasting, media and communications, economic inequality, multiculturalism, ageing and disability, gender equality and women's rights. She holds a BA with First Class Honours from LaTrobe University and an MA with Distinction in Media and Communications (Public Broadcasting) from Monash University. She is an honorary fellow in the School of Social and Political Sciences at the University of Melbourne and sits on the board of the Prader-Willi Research Foundation Australia.



About GetUp!

GetUp gives everyday Australians the chance to make extraordinary impact – online, across the airwaves, and in the streets. GetUp is a powerful campaigning community.

By combining the sheer power of a million members, movement partners and a central team of expert strategists, we do what it takes to get things done.

Our work is driven by our values, not party politics. GetUp is, and always has been, an independent organisation. GetUp members come from every walk of life and around a shared belief in fairness, compassion and courage. We campaign on issues that our members care about in the fields of Democracy, Environmental Justice, Economic Fairness, First Nations Justice and Human Rights.

Members have been campaigning to protect and strengthen the ABC since GetUp was founded. GetUp members understand the ABC as one of the most important public institutions we have. It safeguards our democracy by keeping the public informed and holding those in power to account. It keeps us safe in times of crisis through emergency broadcasting on television, radio and online. It entertains and engages us with high-quality drama, comedy, music and more. It teaches our children, with commercial free education and learning programs for all ages. The ABC reaches every community in our country, and our members consistently stand up for its protection.

Most recently, thousands of members funded this report in the lead up to the Federal Budget, when we are calling on the Government to restore funding to the ABC. Sparked by the lifesaving role played by the ABC during the 2019-20 bushfire crisis, and the effects of an \$84 million cut from the Coalition Government starting to be felt deeply, the report aims to lay bare years of government interference in the national broadcaster. All of this has led to program cuts, job losses, political appointments, hostile legislation, and reduced coverage around Australia.

Quentin Dempster AM

Journalist, author, broadcaster and advocate for public broadcasting in Australia.



Quentin Dempster AM is a former staff-elected director of the ABC (1992-1996) and former chairman of the Walkley Foundation (2014-2018). In 1992 Quentin was made a Member of the Order of Australia for service to the media, particularly in the fields of journalism and current affairs. In 2002 he received a Walkley Award for “outstanding contribution to journalism”.

Foreword

by Quentin Dempster

National emergency: A drought at record extremity, bushfires of lethal, unprecedented intensity, vast cyclonic flooding which wiped out far north Queensland’s cattle industry.

And now, in 2020, we confront the COVID-19 pandemic in which our national cohesion and self-discipline has been challenged as never before in peacetime. Through it all the Australian Broadcasting Corporation, a taxpayer funded public broadcaster founded in 1932 by the Coalition government of then Prime Minister Joseph Lyons, has been doing what its legislated Charter requires: informing, educating and entertaining.

As this report and survey shows the ABC is highly regarded by Australians. It is trusted. It is reliable.

Through the digital revolution it has transformed its engagement with audiences to become a media industry leader in content specifically designed for online devices and universal smartphones to keep instantaneous pace with any development locally and internationally. Its audience has increased substantially to lead in online news since the bushfires devastated Australia in 2019.

The ABC has used multi-channelling and the infinite capacity of video/audio streaming to innovate with iView and podcasts so people can catch up with and engage more reflectively with all locally made and acquired programs in news and current affairs, drama, comedy, education, documentary, sport, music, art and gardening.

The ABC Act which governs its operations requires the ABC’s board, management and staff to be “independent” of government.

It’s a big ask and the contentious pressure is often intense on all involved.

Its journalism is required to be of a high ethical standard and to do what any democracy's free media must do: hold authority to account without fear or favour.

But as the good people of Hong Kong fight for their democratic rights against China's authoritarian politburo, Australia's robust, functioning democracy is sustained by its institutional strengths, which must include a properly funded public broadcasting system. In our case, that's the ABC and SBS, the multicultural broadcaster.

Through the COVID-19 coverage the ABC has led the way in informing all Australians. Broadcasting or "cybercasting" is now a two-way street with anyone, anywhere, at any time, able to fire off a pertinent question or comment to a program maker on radio, TV or online. The ABC has become an antidote to fake or news beat-ups often pushed and exploited by click-baiting media and their shock jocks and provocateurs. The public was immediately hungry for fact-based analysis and knew to turn to the ABC and its news, Q and A and current affairs programs.

At a glance, audiences could see from clever analysis using animated graphics exactly what was happening to contain COVID-19, comparing our strategies with the effectiveness of countries throughout the world. Through this informed polity our politicians were empowered to make our federal system of government more responsive.

Instead of acknowledgment of this invaluable Charter contribution now and over the decades, the ABC has endured destructive defunding since 2014.

This report audits and lists all the programs vital to the ABC's creative capacity, relevance, and vitality which have been lost at the local, state, and national level. More than 1000 public broadcasters and support staff have been made to walk the defunding plank, leaving remaining staff to work under much more pressured circumstances to keep faith with audiences.

Through the bushfire coverage and now the COVID-19 crisis ABC people have gone above and beyond the call of professional duty to the point of physical exhaustion to serve the Australian people.

To save money the ABC has had to hack into content creation at local, regional, and national levels and retreat to its Sydney and Melbourne redoubts. It has abandoned almost all in-house production of genres other than studio-based content, but except in Sydney and Melbourne. This is a technical breach of the Charter's requirement for comprehensive nation-wide broadcasting.

I thank GetUp members for funding this report, focus groups, and survey. The results are instructive.

As we recover from this unprecedented crisis, this report reveals the ABC may again be targeted for defunding.

The report lays the groundwork for our response to any further threats to the national broadcaster.

Public broadcasting supporters have always rallied to the ABC's cause. And now, with no funding relief in sight, we have to stand up for the ABC again and demand it be properly funded.

The ABC's case is now more compelling than ever as the national and regional commercial media industry disintegrates at the hands of the global tech giants.

The ABC is there for us in a crisis.

We must be there for it when clearly there are forces out to undermine it by privatisation or, like Rupert Murdoch's News Corp., to destroy it by defunding.

We must never get tired.

Quentin Dempster AM





**The ABC is the
glue that holds
Australia together.**

Adrian Gibbs
GetUp Member

”

Executive Summary

This report looks at the accumulated impact of recent government decisions, and uncovers details of a virtually unprecedented attack on the operational capability of Australia's national broadcaster.

By 2022, which represents the end of the third triennial funding period during which the Coalition Government has been in power, the total funding cut from the ABC will be over \$783 million.

The national broadcaster's 2019-20 operational revenue from Government of \$879 million represents a decrease in real funding of \$367 million per annum, or 29.5%, since 1985-86.

The ABC is now operating with the smallest budget since the Howard Government's extraordinary 2% funding cut in its first budget, in 1996, which removed \$55 million from the ABC's triennial funding.

As the ABC's Chief Financial Officer, Louise Higgins, told the first ABC Annual Public Meeting in February 2018, "...in 1987, [the] ABC famously cost each Australian eight cents a day. In 1987 dollar terms we now cost each Australian just four cents a day."

Cuts to the ABC's budget since 2013 have resulted in a significant loss of jobs, pro-

gramming, and services.

Almost a thousand jobs have gone from across the ABC since the first of the government's funding cuts came into force on 1 July 2014. Many of those gone from the ABC were senior journalists and producers, with centuries' worth of combined knowledge and experience.

State-based versions of 7.30 were axed, as was 27-year old flagship current affairs television program Lateline. Radio current affairs programming via *The World Today* and *PM* has been halved, as has the number of hours of original, scripted Australian content on television. Specialist programming on Radio National, including music and religious programs, has been cut, along with a significant reduction in the recording and broadcast of live concerts on Classic FM. Online, over 100 ABC websites have shut down, including the specialist disability portal *RampUp*.

The ABC no longer covers local sport on TV. Its local production units, other than for news and current affairs, in Adelaide and Perth have been closed, along with five regional local radio newsrooms.



There is no television production other than news and current affairs outside Sydney and Melbourne, and most outside broadcast facilities in the smaller states have gone. Short-wave radio in the Northern Territory has been closed down, and locally produced regional stories for broadcast online and on TV that were produced through ABC Open have been discontinued.

Internationally, the Australia Network was cancelled, with consequent impacts on resources for Radio Australia, and international bureaus in Tokyo, Bangkok, New Delhi and New Zealand have closed or had their operations reduced.

As this report makes clear, the ABC has never been more important, or more valuable, to the Australian people.

It provides a trusted source of essential news and information, underpins our social cohesion and national identity, and brings Australians together in times of crisis. It educates our kids, informs our decisions as participants in our democracy, and provides comfort and entertainment in our homes.

At a time when the federal government is providing extraordinary financial support to the commercial broadcasting sector as part of its response to the economic crisis caused by COVID-19, the ABC – on which Australians rely and trust more than any other media service during times of national emergency – has received no such assistance. The funding cuts that have decimated its operational budget in recent years remain government policy.

It is imperative that the federal government reverses these cuts in its budget scheduled for October 2020. For the government to continue with the imposition of these cuts to the ABC, while providing almost \$100 million in direct funding and tax relief for commercial broadcasters, is indefensible.

If the constant hostility displayed by this government to our national broadcaster is not arrested, and its funding restored, the implications for our nation are significant. It is time for all Australians to defend and protect our ABC.

Introduction

The Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC), has, since its establishment in 1932, provided radio, later television, and, more recently, digital broadcasting services to inform, educate and entertain¹ Australians across our vast land mass.

The ABC is the most trusted and valued media outlet in Australia.

Surveys and polls consistently show that more than three-quarters of Australians consider the ABC as an essential service, and that it is trusted to provide impartial news and information more than four times as much as any other media organisation.

Despite repeated calls from free-market think tanks,² and even a vote from grassroots members of the Liberal Party in 2018,³ to privatise the ABC, the Coalition Government has ruled out such a drastic measure.⁴ This may be a consequence of the ABC's overwhelming popularity: politicians know that Australians, including many Liberal and National Party supporters, treasure the ABC.

Unfortunately, this knowledge has not prevented the current government from subjecting the ABC to a "death by a thousand cuts". Since the election in 2013, excessive cuts to operational funding, the removal of support for specific services and programs, and repeated incursions on the ABC's independence by government sponsored

inquiries and reviews, have combined to undermine the ability of the national broadcaster to fulfil its chartered obligations to serve the citizens of Australia.

This report looks at the accumulated impact of recent government decisions, and uncovers details of a virtually unprecedented attack on the operational capability of Australia's national broadcaster.

Over the last seven years, the ABC has been forced to close regional production facilities, reduce local news gathering, make savage cuts to staff numbers across all divisions, reduce the amount of current affairs and in-depth analysis it provides on radio and

¹ The function of a public broadcaster to "inform, educate and entertain" the populace was conceived by Lord John Reith, the first Director General of the BBC, who is widely regarded as the architect of the principles of public broadcasting.

² <https://ipa.org.au/publications-ipa/media-releases/new-book-end-public-broadcasting-why-we-should-privatise-the-abc-and-how-to-do-it>

³ <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2018-06-16/liberal-members-vote-to-privatise-abc-move-embassy-to-jerusalem/9877524>

⁴ <https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2018/jun/17/never-senior-liberals-in-damage-control-after-party-votes-to-privatise-abc>

television, stop coverage of local sport in regional Australia, cut the number of hours of original scripted Australian content in half, end some essential broadcasting services in remote Australia, consolidate content production in Sydney and Melbourne, and scale back its international programming in our region, with significant implications for Australia's diplomatic relationships with our nearest neighbours.

This report, and the GetUp campaign to restore the funding and independence the ABC needs in order to fulfil its charter, comes at a critical time for our nation. Following a summer of devastating bushfires across the Eastern seaboard and in parts of Western and South Australia, Australia is now, along with the rest of the world, grappling with the COVID-19 pandemic, the greatest crisis of public health in living memory, which has caused the biggest economic shock in a century.

As most of us are locked down in our homes, our reliance on the services of our national broadcaster has never been greater.

A survey commissioned by GetUp in March found that more than 80% of Australians believe the ABC provides an essential service during these times of national crisis.

Outside our capital cities, as commercial media responds to the economic downturn by closing the few local, community-based

news services still operating,⁵ the provision of ABC services in regional and remote communities becomes even more critical.

Through the bushfires, and now into the daily updates about the spread of coronavirus and the changing measures put in place to manage the crisis, the ABC provides the most trusted, impartial, and authoritative information to keep Australians safe.

Even more important than this critical emergency service, though, is the role of the ABC in maintaining our national unity, our sense of ourselves as one people. While we are unable to gather in our own tribes, the ABC represents the ties that bind us together as Australians. It is, quite literally, the voice of our nation.

Our ABC has never been more valued, or more valuable. Yet, as part of its measures to support the economy during the COVID-19 pandemic, the Government has announced public funding for commercial media, totalling \$91 million,⁶ while doing nothing to support the ABC. The package includes a \$50 million "Public Interest News Gathering" program, open only to commercial television, radio and newspaper businesses in regional Australia, despite the clear evidence from regional audiences that only the ABC is committed to providing local stories to their communities.

The government is also refunding \$41 million in spectrum taxes to the commercial television broadcasters, an amount that is almost two-thirds of that returned to the government from the ABC during this financial year as a result of the enforced "efficiency dividend". Effectively, the government is taking money from

⁵ <https://mumbrella.com.au/news-corp-suspends-60-community-print-titles-623279>

⁶ <https://www.paulfletcher.com.au/media-releases/media-relase-immediate-covid-19-relief-for-australian-media-as-harmonisation-reform>

the national broadcaster and using it to subsidise commercial media services.

The analysis that follows finds that, unless the hostility demonstrated towards the national broadcaster by the federal government is arrested and reversed, Australia will suffer irreparable damage to its social fabric, its democratic participation, the safety and security of its people, and its national identity.

Without a strong and independent ABC, able to provide comprehensive, multi-platform services to all citizens, our very understanding of what it means to be Australian will be under threat.

As we recover from this unprecedented crisis, there will be pressure on the government to further cut spending on public services, in an

effort to pay down the debt we have rightly incurred to protect jobs and livelihoods during a time of economic collapse.

The ABC, and the essential services it provides, must be shielded from such misguided austerity; rather, it is fundamental to Australia's recovery that the national broadcaster be adequately funded to play its critical, ongoing role in rebuilding our society, maintaining our social cohesion and sharing the stories of all Australians as we work together through the reconstruction.

It's our ABC. It's time we, as its owners and its audience, demand a long-term, bi-partisan commitment to properly resource and respect the institution that is a bedrock of our nationhood.





The ABC's obligations to you

The duties and obligations of the ABC are set out in its Charter, within the Australian Broadcasting Corporation Act 1983. The Charter of the Corporation is as follows:

1. The functions of the Corporation are:

- (a)** to provide within Australia innovative and comprehensive broadcasting services of a high standard as part of the Australian broadcasting system consisting of national, commercial and community sectors and, without limiting the generality of the foregoing, to provide:
 - (i)** broadcasting programs that contribute to a sense of national identity and inform and entertain, and reflect the cultural diversity of, the Australian community; and
 - (ii)** broadcasting programs of an educational nature;

- (b)** to transmit to countries outside Australia broadcasting programs of news, current affairs, entertainment and cultural enrichment that will:
 - (i)** encourage awareness of Australia and an international understanding of Australian attitudes on world affairs; and
 - (ii)** enable Australian citizens living or travelling outside Australia to obtain information about Australian affairs and Australian attitudes on world affairs; and

- (c)** to provide digital media services; and

- (d)** to encourage and promote the musical, dramatic and other performing arts in Australia.



The ABC has always been part of my life. It is the most reliable news resource in the country. It is there when all of us need professional, unbiased truth in reporting.

Jane Setter
GetUp Member



2. In the provision by the Corporation of its broadcasting services within Australia:

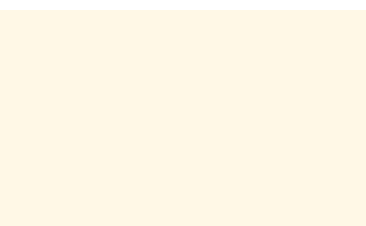
(a) the Corporation shall take account of:

- (i)** the broadcasting services provided by the commercial and community sectors of the Australian broadcasting system;
- (ii)** the standards from time to time determined by the ACMA in respect of broadcasting services;
- (iii)** the responsibility of the Corporation as the provider of an independent national broadcasting service to provide a balance between broadcasting programs of wide appeal and specialized broadcasting programs;
- (iv)** the multicultural character of the Australian community; and
- (v)** in connection with the provision of broadcasting programs of an educational nature—the responsibilities of the States in relation to education; and

(b) the Corporation shall take all such measures, being measures consistent with the obligations of the Corporation under paragraph (a), as, in the opinion of the Board, will be conducive to the full development by the Corporation of suitable broadcasting programs.

3. The functions of the Corporation under subsection (1) and the duties imposed on the Corporation under subsection (2) constitute the Charter of the Corporation.

4. Nothing in this section shall be taken to impose on the Corporation a duty that is enforceable by proceedings in a court.



Note: See also section 31AA (Corporation or prescribed companies to be the only providers of Commonwealth funded international broadcasting services).

ABC news, documentaries and commentaries are the pinnacle of professional reporting. I cannot describe how crucial the ABC is to the well-being of our nation, the strength of our democracy, and to communities around the nation.

Allan Beesey
GetUp Member



Our ABC: A Democratic Institution

Public broadcasting exists to serve the interests of the public as citizens, not as consumers. It is essential to the effective functioning of democracy that public broadcasting remain independent and comprehensive in its service to the public.

The existence of an independent public broadcaster is based on the need for media that has a legislated responsibility to put the interests of the public above all else, including those of government and industry. Its essential function is to take the role of a virtual “public square”, providing space for citizens in their myriad differences to find what they have in common by talking to and learning about each other, and to access essential, impartial information about national and global affairs.

The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) put it this way:

Neither commercial nor State-controlled, public broadcasting's only raison d'être is public service. It is the public's broadcasting organization; it speaks to everyone as a citizen. Public broadcasters encourage access to and participation in public life. They develop knowledge, broaden horizons and enable people to better understand themselves by better understanding the world and others.⁷

The value of the ABC to Australians is multifaceted. As with all public services, the ABC faces the challenge of reconciling equally legitimate but competing goals. It must cater to audiences both as individuals and as citizens of the nation state. It must reflect the diversity of its audience while also providing a platform for shared conversations. It must ensure that public money is spent efficiently and accountably, without reducing quality or stifling innovation.

⁷ UNESCO (2001) Public Broadcasting: Why? How? UNESCO, 2001, <http://unesco.org/images/0012/001240/124058eo.pdf>

In *All our futures: The changing role and purpose of the BBC*, published in 1993, the late media academic Stuart Hall acknowledged that the responsibilities of public broadcasting have altered in the face of modern pressures and the changing forces of media production and consumption:

[Public broadcasting's] broadly defined 'educative' function is to produce a new, more plural, diverse, culturally differentiated conception of 'the nation' by representing its diversities: to find modes of address which do not rest on the old sacred sources of cultural authority or reproduce the old cultural hierarchies.⁸

A national broadcaster's obligation, as traditionally understood, was to the expression of a cohesive unifying cultural character for the nation. While this obligation has been re-imagined for a modern, multicultural Australia, its role in interrogating and delineating our evolving national identity remains a critical function of the ABC.

The ABC provides the space in which a diversity of voices can challenge, negotiate, and reinvent the parameters of national identity. Rather than presenting an authoritative idea or set of beliefs about the nation in the hope of reaching the largest possible audience for the greatest possible time, the modern public broadcaster must develop programming and policies that enable it to engage Australian citizens as members of multiple, overlapping communities.

Moreover, as market forces gradually encroach upon our personal and collective lives, the few remaining public spaces become increasingly precious. In the interests of pluralism and democracy, the ABC serves Australians as citizens rather than as consumers.



**It's a truly comprehensive service
- the breadth of what it offers is
one of its true strengths.**

Michael Ward

PHD Candidate at the University of Sydney



Not just a “market-failure” broadcaster

Despite its clear public interest responsibility and service, the ABC is constantly pressured by commercial rivals and politicians to justify its existence and its call on the public purse.

Current complaints from the commercial sector about market disruption caused by the ABC⁹ are in the fine tradition set by Australia's commercial media when the national broadcaster was founded in 1932. Newspaper proprietors of the day were outraged that the government had established a publicly-funded service to provide broadcast radio news, in direct competition to their daily mastheads.

For a decade or more, Australia's press barons successfully lobbied the government to prevent the ABC from conducting its own newsgathering, lobbying for operational restrictions that kept the nascent broadcaster reliant on content sourced from commercial newspapers. This campaign against the editorial independence of the ABC was led by Keith Murdoch, and only came to an end when the immediate provision of news from the front lines of World War II demonstrated to the Australian public the superior service available through the national broadcaster's radio service, in contrast with the delayed newspaper coverage that relied on the telegraph.

ABC Radio did not kill the commercial news business in the mid-20th century, and it will not be the cause of the demise of commercial media today; nor is publicly funded broadcasting the cause of the revolution in media consumption habits that are disrupting for-profit media business models in the 21st century.

Nevertheless, there remain powerful forces aligned against the ABC, who continue to argue, as did Keith Murdoch and his fellow media barons almost a century ago, against the need for a publicly funded national broadcaster.

These vested interests tend to rely on one of four arguments:

- The rise of digital media and the resulting explosion of choice in media sources means that the public interest will be served without the need for public broadcasting;
- It is unfair to tax those who don't make use of public broadcasting in order to provide it to those who do;
- The profit motive makes commercial broadcasters more responsive than public broadcasters to what 'ordinary people' want; and
- The existence of a public broadcaster distorts the “free media market” and presents unfair competition to commercial media at a time when their source of revenue (advertising) has been gobbled up by online services.

These arguments are all variations on the one idea: the notion that commercial markets are better than public institutions at serving the public interest, and that most public services should therefore be privatised or corporatised, with public provision of services restricted entirely to those areas of operation that are not commercially viable for the private sector.

Contrary to such arguments, public broadcasting does not merely exist to address “market failure”; that is, it is not there only to fill the gaps not served by the private sector. Under its Charter, the ABC has a responsibility to offer comprehensive services to Australian audiences,

⁹ <https://www.theguardian.com/media/2018/jul/23/news-corp-wants-limits-on-abc-to-prevent-advantaged-competition>

The role of the ABC is arguably the exact reverse of such a paltry concept as “market failure”: in fact, the national broadcaster sets a standard for the broader media industry, framing audience expectations around the quality of content and the provision of broadcasting services. The ABC’s freedom from the profit-motive, and its responsibility to serve the public interest, enables it to take a much more innovative approach to its services than any commercial provider in Australia has done. Since its early development of radio news in the mid-20th century, the ABC has led the way in the development of new platforms and programming concepts.

The ABC was the first network to launch digital multi-channels, with ABC Kids and Fly in 2001. This innovation was achieved without additional funding from government, and when the ABC was unable to secure more money to keep the channel on air, it was forced to close it down in June 2003. Nevertheless, the ABC’s relentless push into digital broadcasting led the way for the adoption of digital television in Australia, backed by government funding in the late 2000s, forced the commercial broadcasters to stop a decade-long resistance to providing multi-channel networks over digital spectrum and cooperate with the government’s program of rolling out digital television nation-wide by 2013.

Similarly, the ABC was the first Australian network to develop state-of-the-art on-demand streaming of content via the iView platform, which remains the nation’s most popular and patronized Australian streaming service. The legitimacy of any government-funded public service is based on its capacity to provide public goods or meet public needs which will not be met by either unfettered markets or disconnected individuals acting alone. The innovative function of the ABC in driving consumer demand for digital and online content delivery demonstrates its success in providing services to meet public needs that were not being adequately addressed by the commercial market.

This critical function, of putting the public interest ahead of all other concerns, plays a crucial role not just in market innovation, but in the provision of information that strengthens our social cohesion and the function of our deocratic state. Commercial media outlets have many strengths, but they cannot be relied on to prioritise the public interest over the interests of their advertisers or owners; or to provide impartial coverage of companies with which they have business relationships; or to reflect the diversity of their audiences in their programming. And while digital and independent media are growing in reach, quality and influence, they increasingly serve audiences that are divided into cultural “tribes”, reinforcing prejudices and exacerbating differences. In this environment, a national broadcaster that is charged with engaging all Australians, forging connection and understanding, and speaking with an authoritative and trusted voice to us as citizens, is ever more important.

Critically, the ABC is accountable to the Parliament through Senate Estimates and other budget processes and must demonstrate the efficiency and effectiveness of its operations continually to the Parliament, acting in its capacity as the representatives of the citizens who own and fund the ABC. As a result, the national broadcaster is arguably more accountable to the Australian people than any other national institution.

Above all, the national broadcaster must fearlessly and without favour question governments, and others in positions of power, from a public interest perspective, one that places a premium on the rights of citizens, the pursuit of truth and the responsibility of those in power to those they serve. This is a critical function of the fourth estate in our democratic system, and, in these days of “fake news” and “alternative facts”, it is more important than ever.



What the ABC means to you

Australians trust and value the ABC more than any other media service.

Surveys consistently show the ABC outperforming commercial television and radio, newspapers and social media by significant margins. The *Media Net Trust Survey*¹⁰ conducted in April 2019 by Roy Morgan Research showed that the ABC had the highest “net trust score” of any media service in the country.

To understand the nature of the relationship between the Australian public and their national broadcaster, GetUp commissioned original market research, consisting of a national survey, and a series of focus groups with Australians from three different electorates.

This new research provides a more up-to-date reading of the public’s view of the ABC, particularly in the wake of summer’s devastating bushfires and as we cope with the unprecedented impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. What follows is a break-down of the findings.

¹⁰ <http://www.roymorgan.com/findings/8064-abc-remains-most-trusted-media-201907220424>



I trust the ABC to give us excellent coverage and information without the hype and the bias of the commercial stations. It has shown itself to be vital time and time again – during the coronavirus pandemic, the bushfires, and more. We need intelligent, fact-based and independent media now more than ever.

Veronika Ebbelaar
GetUp Member



As a health professional, I can't explain how much I have appreciated the ABC's considered and in-depth reporting about the pandemic, compared to commercial channels. My appreciation generally for ABC content goes all the way back to my childhood. It truly contributes to my quality of life, particularly ABC Radio National.

Gabrielle Cusak
GetUp Member



Survey Findings

Conducted by *uComms* on the evening of 23 March 2020, the survey gathered views from a nationally representative sample of 1,286 residents across Australia. It demonstrated how very highly the ABC is valued by Australians during times of national crisis and emergencies.

Australians Value the ABC

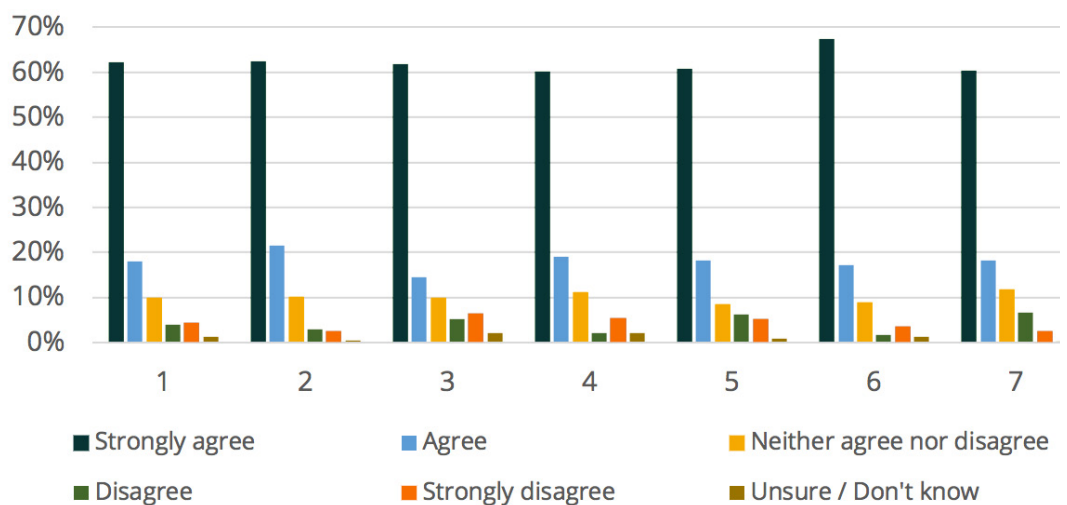
Over 80% of respondents agreed that "the ABC provides an essential service to communities during times of crisis such as bushfires and the coronavirus"; 62.2% agreed strongly with that statement (see Figure 1).

These findings were consistent across all age groups, although women were slightly more likely than men to agree that the ABC's emergency services were essential.

FIGURE 1

To what extent do you agree with the following statement?

"The ABC provides an essential service to communities during times of crisis such as bushfires and coronavirus."



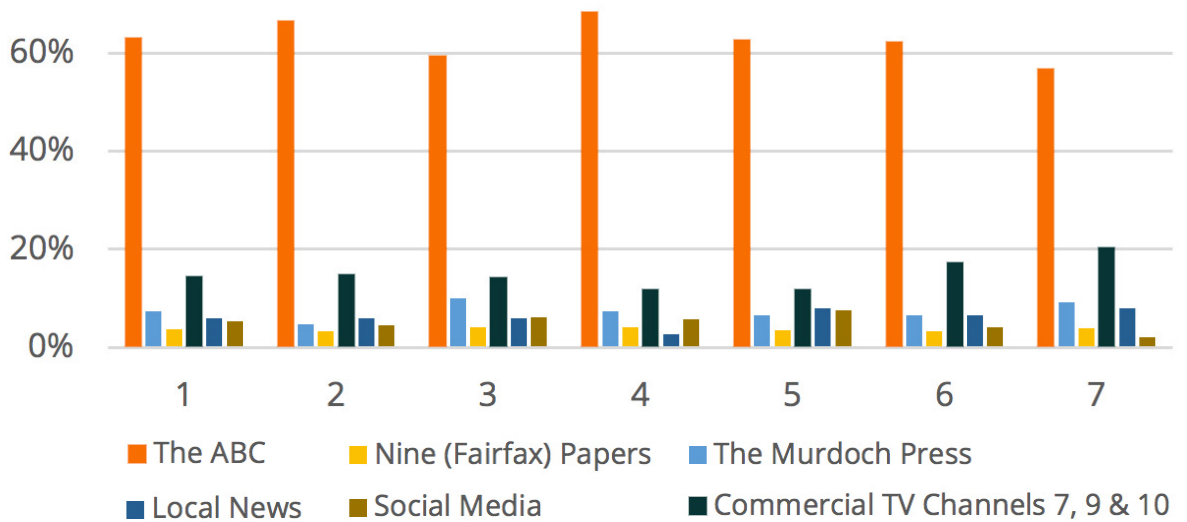
Note: In the graphs, the x axis represents age and gender. 1 is total, 2 is male, 3 is female, 4 is aged 18-34, 5 is aged 35-50, 6 is aged 51-65, and 7 is aged 65 plus.

Australians Trust the ABC

The strong value the public places on the ABC's services during emergencies is reflected in its generally high levels of trust in the organisation on a day-to-day basis. As in other polls, GetUp's survey showed that Australians trust the ABC vastly more than any other source of news and information.

More than four times as many respondents – 63.2% – nominated the ABC as the most trustworthy source of news and information compared with the next most trusted news source, the commercial television channels. None of the other options scored more than 10% on the trust measure, and the ABC is ten times more trusted by Australians than is social media (see Figure 2).

FIGURE 2:
Which of the following do you trust most to deliver accurate news and information?



I wouldn't feel comfortable sending my students off to get info from any other media brand than the ABC. We have to be careful with what they access.



Olivia Sinclair-Thomson
Masters in Early Learning and Primary School Teacher



ABC is my primary source of news. I've got great respect for the standards of journalism it maintains and the integrity of the presenters.

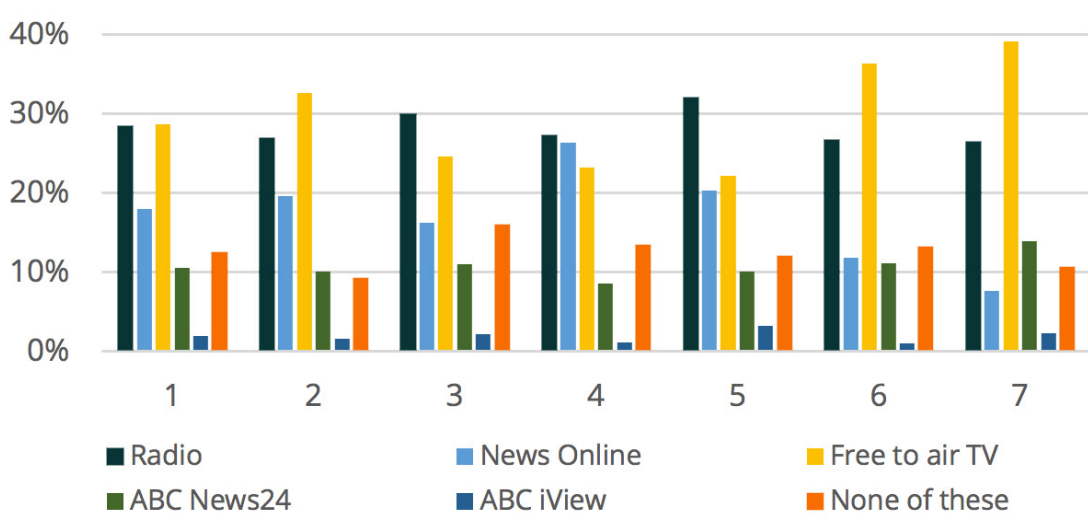
Nicola Silva

GetUp Member

Australians Engage with the ABC

The survey results also showed that almost nine in ten Australians engage with at least one ABC service weekly, with television and radio services remaining the most popular option with all audiences other than those aged 18 to 34, where online news attracts slightly more viewers than does television (see Figure 3).

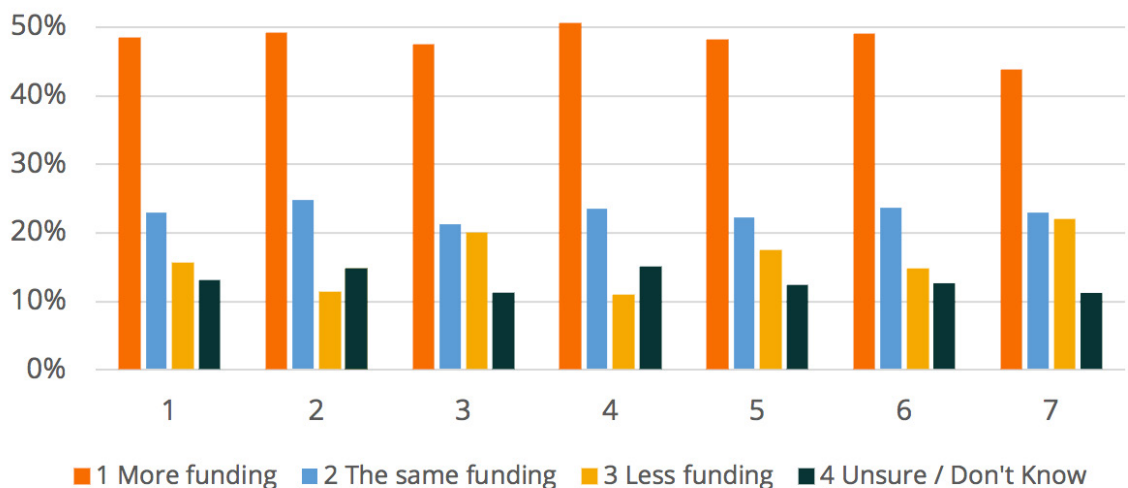
FIGURE 3:
Which of the following ABC channels have you watched, read or listened to in the last week?



Australians want the ABC to be well-funded

When respondents were informed about the cuts to the ABC’s budget, and asked for their views on appropriate funding levels for the national broadcaster, strong disagreement with the government’s approach emerged. Only 15.6% of respondents believed that the ABC should suffer a reduction in funding. Almost a quarter (23%) believed the ABC’s funding should be maintained at current levels, and almost half (48.4%) wanted to see funding for the ABC increased.

FIGURE 4:
The ABC stands to lose \$783.3 million in available funding, over the course of an eight year period (2014-2022). Regarding funding for the ABC from current levels, do you think it should have:

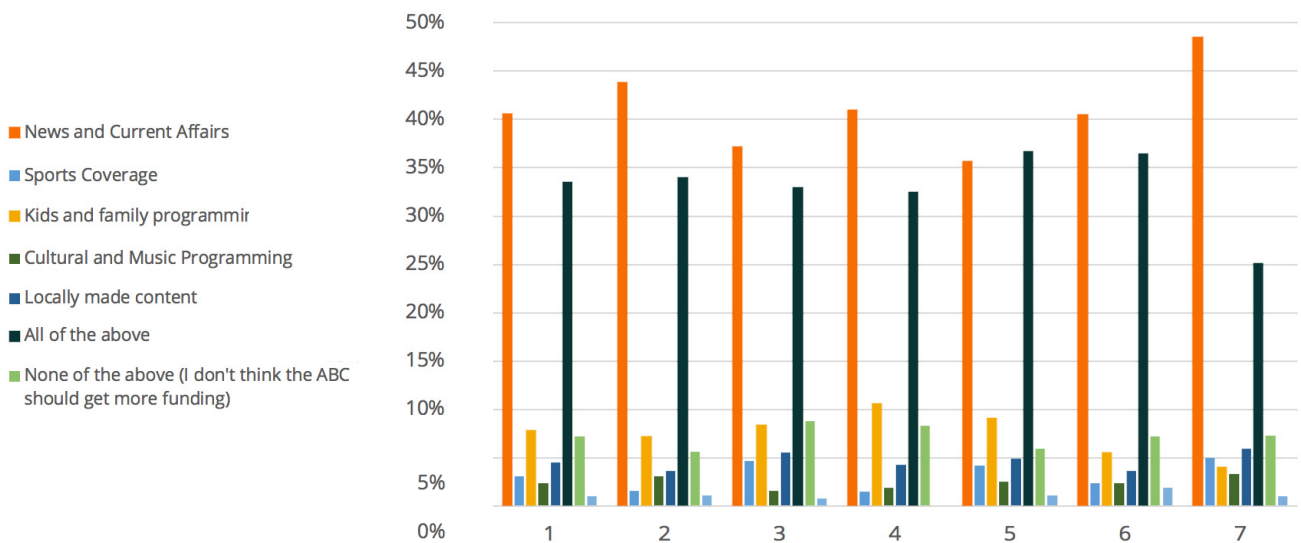


When it came to which ABC services should be first in line for more funding, News and Current Affairs was by far the most popular choice, with more than two in five (40.6%) respondents nominating it as the area most deserving of an income boost.

Over a third of respondents, though, believed that the ABC deserved more funding for all five of the key programming areas nominated by the survey: News and Current Affairs, Sports Coverage, Kids and family programming, Cultural and Music programming, and Locally made content.

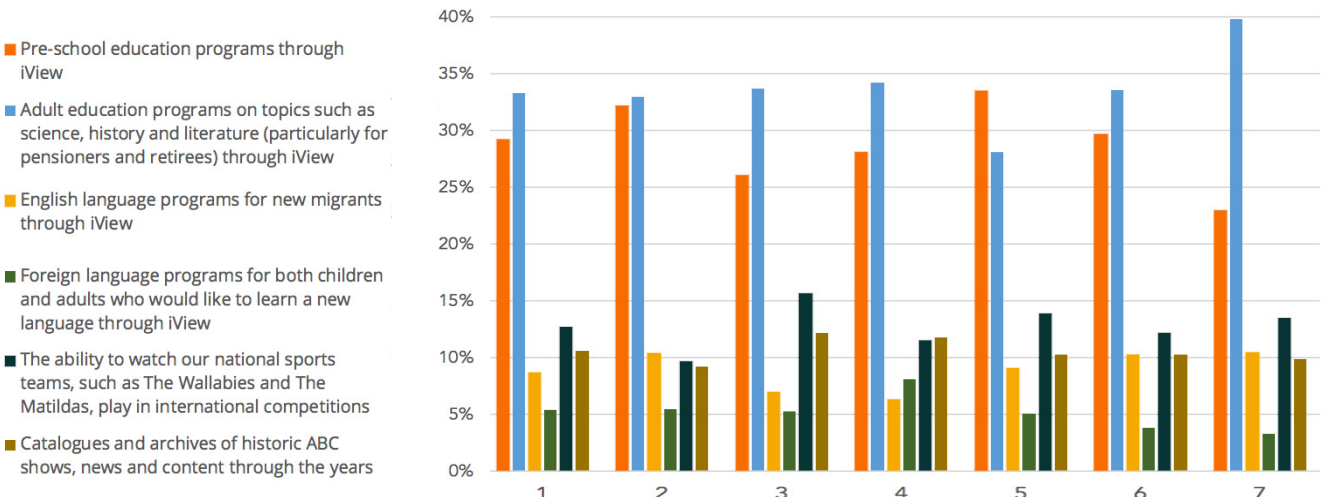
Interestingly, while over 15% of respondents earlier indicated a view that the ABC should receive less funding, in their responses to this question, only half as many said they didn't think the ABC should get more funding, suggesting that when people are reminded of the specific services the ABC provides, much of the opposition to increased funding disappears.

FIGURE 5:
Of the following, which if any do you believe the government should provide funding to the ABC for the most?



When survey respondents were asked to think about what new services the ABC might deliver if it were funded adequately to do so, a clear preference for educational programming emerged, with a third of respondents nominating adult education programs, particularly for retirees, and another 29.2% opting for pre-school education programming, to be delivered on-demand via iView (see Figure 6).

FIGURE 6:
Which do you believe the government should provide funding to the ABC for new services most?



Respondents were not asked about school education programming but, interestingly, since the survey was conducted, the ABC has announced a significant expansion of its educational programming for school-aged children to support online learning as the majority of students are forced to undertake their lessons at home due to the COVID-19 isolation measures.

This programming is being delivered through a mix of television and online services, addressing the concern that a significant proportion of households with school-aged kids don't have access to the internet at home.

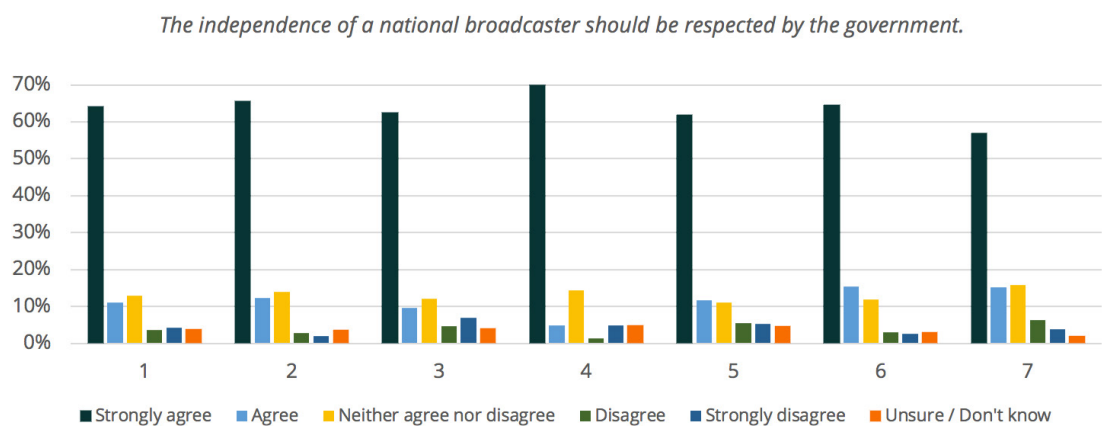
The expanded educational content includes teacher-led "mini lessons" tied to the school curriculum, which is being supported by funding from the NSW and Victorian state education departments. This is an indication of the ABC's capacity to provide innovative educational content to meet areas of clear public need, if they were adequately funded to do so.

Australians believe the ABC's independence must be protected

The final question in the survey sought to gauge respondents' strength of feeling about the independence of the ABC from government interference.

Three quarters of respondents agreed that "the independence of a national broadcaster should be respected by the government", with 64.1% agreeing strongly with that statement. Only 8%, less than one in ten respondents, disagreed, although men (11.6%) were more inclined to disagree that the ABC's independence was important than were women (4.6%) (see Figure 7).

FIGURE 7:
The Government has been accused of interfering in the ABC by restricting its funding, proposing restrictive legislation and appointing board members based on political persuasion.
The what extend do you agree or disagree with the following statement?



Overall, the survey found strong support across all age groups for the ABC's role as a provider of trusted news and information and quality programming. Respondents overwhelmingly believe the ABC's independence should be protected from government interference, and that its funding should be maintained or increased.

Focus Group Findings

To gain a deeper understanding of the value Australians place on the ABC, GetUp commissioned market research company *The Source* to conduct six 90-minute focus groups. These were held via Zoom, on 2, 6 and 7 April 2020, and involved the following groups of participants:

- In the metropolitan federal seat of Wentworth, NSW: one group with retirees (65+) and one group with young families (kids under 5 at home);
- In the regional federal seat of Page, NSW: one group with retirees (65+) and one group with young families (kids under 5 at home); and
- In the metropolitan seat of Kooyong, Victoria: one group with retirees (65+) and one group with young families (kids under 5 at home)

The key finding of this focus group research is that "...there was real affection and respect for the place the ABC fills in our society, the work it does in holding politicians and institutions to account, and the content that it delivers".

During focus group discussions about what people valued most about the ABC, three key elements emerged. Participants described the ABC in the following terms:

Trustworthy: Delivering information in a 'matter of fact' manner that feels very different from the sensationalism other networks provide. This sense of trust isn't just attributed to the ABC's news and current affairs programming; children's programming and documentary content is also held up as being particularly trustworthy and reliable.

"I trust what the ABC does. I can turn the news on and believe what they say, and I can put my kids in front of ANC Kids and know they won't see something unsuitable."

- Study participant

Objective: Many spoke about the fact that the ABC delivers truth: there's no spin placed on international and national news. This is keenly seen in the way that ABC journalists interact with politicians from all sides of the political spectrum: the left is held to account just as rigorously as the right.

"Leigh Sales doesn't care which party they're from, she'll eviscerate someone from Labor just the same as she would the Libs."

- Study participant

High Quality: The ABC's content was felt to be consistently high across different channels and genres. The sentiment here was that if the ABC do it, they do it well.

"You know with the ABC you'll get good programs. It's not commercial TV where you have to sort the wheat from the chaff."

- Study participant



Leigh Sales is definitely part of the family!

Madeline Goddard
GetUp Member



Regional Australia needs the ABC

Participants in the focus group conducted in the federal seat of Page, which is located in the far north-east corner of NSW, along the Queensland border, demonstrated a strong identification with the ABC as "...the only broadcaster with any real interest in their community".

It is local, regional content that underpins the value these regional audiences ascribe to the ABC. Participants in Lismore and Grafton felt that other media was disproportionately focussed on metropolitan Australia, and valued the connectedness that local ABC services forge within their local communities.

"The ABC radio during the bushfires was so important. Without it we wouldn't have known what to do or whether we were safe or not. We had in six or seven hours a day."

- Study participant

Along with the significant value they placed on local content, regional audiences also valued the ABC's role as the national broadcaster, placing great importance on the fact that the ABC was Australian owned, and produced Australian-made content. Perhaps the most impassioned support for the ABC in this regional area was when it came to its reliability in times of crisis. Participants in Page felt they were "...lurching from one environmental crisis to the next: fires, flooding, and more fires", and that the ABC's role as an emergency broadcaster was invaluable

"It's always Sydney, Sydney, Sydney. No one cares about the rest of Australia. The local ABC station is the only thing that tells us we matter."

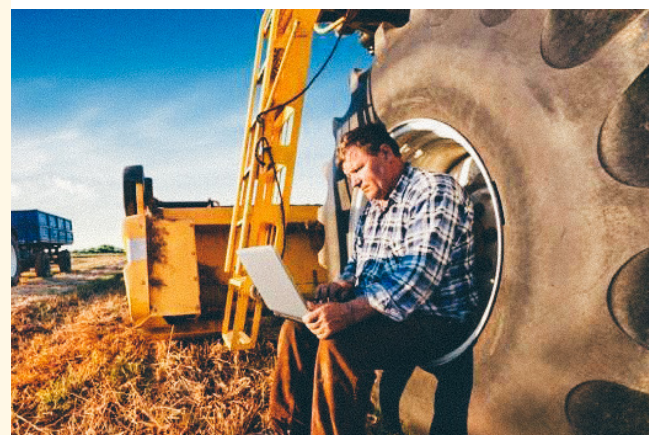
- Study participant

When asked for their views on what the ABC should do differently, regional participants overwhelmingly wanted more Australian content that reflected life outside of Sydney and Melbourne. Regional and rural Australians feel that their life gets "short sharp shrift" by the mainstream media: they rely on the ABC to plug the gaps, and ensure their communities are represented. The focus group research in Page found that, for regional Australians, "...the thought of life without the ABC meant a diminishment of their community, and a sense that life in a time of climate change would be more hazardous".

Living in regional Australia, the ABC isn't just about the news for me, although I rely on ABC News every single day to stay connected. ABC is Triple J, and being the backbone of the Australian music industry. ABC is kids learning, the only programming I as a young mother feel comfortable for my child to watch. ABC is asking questions for the communities it represents. For example, Foreign Correspondent, Four Corners and Australian Story helps us understand the world around us.

Cuts to the ABC threaten not only a public service, but the ability of Australian communities to stay connected and informed.

- Marli Truran-Lakeav
GetUp Member



Families rely on the ABC

Focus group participants with young families highlighted the value that ABC programming brings to their entire household. They felt that no other broadcasters deliver content that suits their family life in the way the ABC does. The value parents of young children place on ABC Kids is immense. Unlike children's channels on PayTV and streaming services, which carry a lot of imported content, ABC Kids provides parents with content that is more "gentle" and, with higher levels of Australian programming, far more suitable for their kids. The lack of advertising aimed at their impressionable children was particularly appreciated by parents.

"I can put my kids in front of ABC kids and I don't feel guilty at all. It's age appropriate and less full on!"

- Study participant

Parents also expressed appreciation for the ABC's educational products and services, recognising that such offerings are part of the public service responsibility of the national broadcaster, and would not be provided by a commercial, profit-driven broadcaster.

"Reading Eggs are incredible. I can't see any other media business doing anything like that."

- Study participant

Young families who participated in the focus groups also pointed to the sense that the ABC reflects multicultural Australia in a way that no commercial broadcaster does. The fact that the ABC promotes a more inclusive, diverse Australia appreciated by the parents of young children. Asked for ideas about what more the ABC could provide for their families, many parents spoke of the need for more content targeted to the 'tween' audience. Those who had children aged 10 – 12 felt there was a real dearth of suitable content for their kids, who had grown out of ABC ME and were being drawn to content their parents felt less comfortable with on commercial channels.

With so much uncertainty around when their kids would be going back to school at the time of the focus groups, parents also expressed a desire for programming that complimented what their children are working on through home schooling programs – something that has since been announced by the ABC in response to the social isolation laws in place to halt the spread of COVID-19.

When taken through the thought experiment of life without the ABC, young families expressed a real sense of concern. ABC's children's programming is regarded by Australian parents as "... unique and irreplaceable".

We love the ABC as a family. Aveena, my twelve year old daughter, grew up with it and learnt respect and good manners from the wonderful Play School. We also had piece of mind that no commercial ads would be played. Every evening the beautiful relaxing music from Jimmy Giggie brought a sense of calm to our house! I love listening to the ABC Radio Sydney presenters: Wendy and Robbie. They are not only knowledgeable, but they interview politicians without being rude or disrespectful. They ask the questions that matter to the community.

- Behnoosh Khalaj & Sina Mavaddati

GetUp Members



Older Australians feel valued by the ABC

Older participants in the focus groups talked about the ABC in "...particularly fond terms: for them it's a trusted and respected part of their community, and is a national institution – it's a part of Australian life they feel immensely proud of".

In a society that frequently marginalises its elders, the ABC was particularly valued by older Australians for providing programs that are "made for them". They felt that the ABC, far more than commercial channels, produced programs that were targeted for their age group, and reflected their interests back to them.

The importance of ABC radio was striking for this audience, who told researchers that "...they always have the radio on, and it's always tuned to ABC". It is, for many older Australians, a key companion throughout their days.

"ABC Radio gets turned on before I get out of bed in the morning, and it isn't turned off after I get into bed at night."

- Study participant

The strong connection older Australians feel with the ABC is built on a lifetime of engagement with its programs across radio and television: many participants in the retiree focus groups "...proudly claimed to have grown up with the ABC, and want their grandchildren to do the same".

"My grandkids watch Play School, which makes me so happy."

- Study participant

The ABC's serious and impartial approach to news coverage is also greatly valued by older audiences, who dislike the tendency of some commercial networks to present news as "a form of entertainment", which they "loathe". The fact that ABC News is "presented in a level-headed, dispassionate manner is particularly appealing".

In considering what additional programming the ABC should invest in, older Australians said they would like to see a stronger and deeper emphasis on investigative journalism; as well as more documentaries, and "...content that spoke to their creative habits and pursuits: gardening, theatre, and the arts".

When asked to think about what life in Australia without the ABC would feel like, the reactions of older Australians were particularly strong, with some saying they would be "bereft without it", and that "...an Australia without the ABC would be a culturally poorer place".

"The ABC radio is a really important thing for older Australians. Many have failing eyesight so rely on the radio as a lifeline to what's going on in the world."

- Study participant

The ABC is valued, trusted and relied upon by Australians from all walks of life

Taken together, the findings of the survey and focus group research demonstrates that Australians from all backgrounds, across the nation, value our national broadcaster immensely.

Whether for essential local content and information about regional communities, or the companionship provided by ABC Radio; whether for its trusted news and current affairs content, or its age-appropriate, uniquely Australian children's content; whether as the provider of general entertainment or emergency broadcasting; the ABC provides an essential and cherished service to all audiences. Its role at the centre of Australian life is indispensable.



How much has the ABC lost since 2013?

Since coming to power in 2013, the Coalition Government has taken a series of decisions to significantly reduce the funding of the ABC. By 2022, which represents the end of the third triennial funding period during which the current Government has been in power, the total funding lost by the ABC will be over \$783 million.

These cuts have been implemented under all three Coalition Prime Ministers, repeatedly, and often through extraordinary measures that have been imposed outside of the standard three-year funding cycle under which the ABC negotiates its funding and plans its operations according to its forward budget.

The funding cuts have come in various measures, regularly and relentlessly, as, prior to the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, the government pursued a budget surplus by cutting government spending across all portfolios. The attack on the ABC commenced with the Coalition's first budget, in May 2014.

Despite the now-infamous promise by then-Opposition Leader Tony Abbott ahead of the 2013 federal election that there would be "...no cuts to the ABC...", his first budget imposed a 1% reduction on the ABC's operating budget, from \$5.47 billion to \$5.22 billion over the forward estimates, a total cut of \$35.5 million.



At the same time, the Government terminated the contract between the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) and the national broadcaster through which the ABC provided international television services, known as The Australia Network. This contract, which under a change to the ABC Act by the Gillard Government in 2013 can only be awarded to the national broadcaster, was worth \$197 million to the ABC.

Later that year, following the Efficiency Review conducted by former Seven West Media executive, Peter Lewis, a further \$254 million was cut from the ABC's operational budget over the forward estimates as part of the Mid-Year Economic and Fiscal Outlook (MYEFO) statement in November.

In the 2016 budget, the Turnbull Government announced that funding for the ABC's Enhanced Newsgathering Program, launched in the previous triennial funding round under the Gillard Government in 2013, would be reduced from \$60 million to \$41.4 million over three years, a cut of \$18.6 million.

In the 2018 budget, then-treasurer Scott Morrison froze indexation of ABC operating revenue for three years. This action was taken outside the usual triennial funding process, resulting in an unanticipated further loss of base funding of \$83.7 million that

the ABC management will be forced to absorb through further cost-cutting across its core operations.

The 2019 budget contained a renewal of the tied funding for enhanced newsgathering, at the reduced (indexed) level introduced in 2016 of \$43.7 million over three years, but provided no increase to base operational funding to alleviate the considerable pressure under which the broadcaster has now been operating after six years of savage funding cuts.

When the above measures are aggregated, we find that, over the three triennial funding periods during which the Coalition Government has held the ABC's purse strings (2013 – 2016; 2016 – 2019; and 2019 – 2022), **the total funding lost by the ABC will be over \$783 million** (see Table 1).

Table 1: ABC funding cuts – Accumulated impact 2015 – 2023

| Federal Budget | Type of funding cut | Financial Year Impact | | | | | | | | |
|---------------------------------------|--|-----------------------|----------------|----------------|----------------|----------------|----------------|----------------|----------------|---------------|
| | | FY15/16 \$M | FY16/17 \$M | FY17/18 \$M | FY18/19 \$M | FY19/20 \$M | FY20/21 \$M | FY21/22 \$M | FY22/23 \$M | TOTAL |
| May 2014 Budget | Core Funding | | | | | | | | | |
| | One per cent reduction | -8.8 | -9 | -8.7 | -8.8 | -9 | -9.1 | -9 | -9.3 | -71.7 |
| | Cross-portfolio budget savings | -0.4 | -0.8 | -0.8 | -0.8 | | | | | -2.8 |
| May 2014 Budget | Terminated contract | | | | | | | | | |
| | Australia Network | -18.6 | -18.6 | -18.6 | -18.6 | -18.6 | -18.6 | -18.6 | -18.6 | -148.8 |
| Nov 2014 MYEFO | Core Funding | | | | | | | | | |
| | Efficiency Dividend | | -20.4 | -47.6 | -55.3 | -67.7 | -53.3 | -54.2 | -55.2 | -353.7 |
| May 2016 Budget | Tied Funding * | | | | | | | | | |
| | Enhanced News Gathering and Digital Content Delivery | | | -20.7 | -20.5 | -20.3 | -20.3 | -20.3 | -20.3 | -122.4 |
| May 2018 Budget | Core Funding | | | | | | | | | |
| | Indexation Freeze | | | | | | -14.6 | -27.8 | -41.3 | -83.7 |
| TOTAL FUNDING CUTS 2015 - 2023 | | -27.8 | -48.8 | -96.4 | -104 | -115.6 | -115.9 | -129.9 | -144.7 | -783.1 |

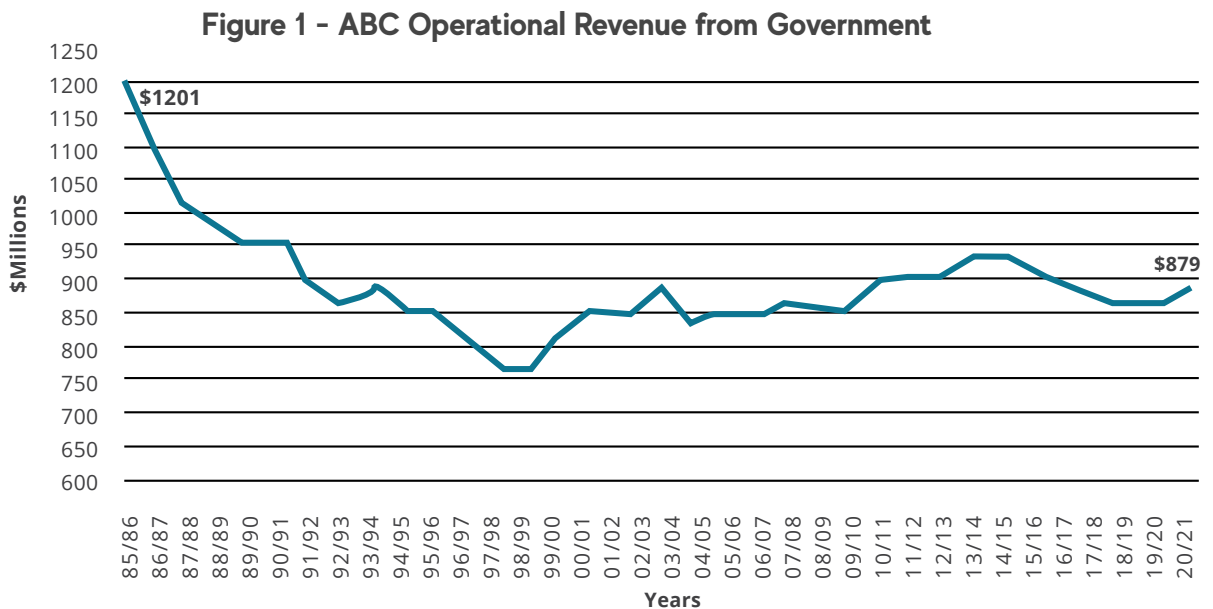
*Tied funding for enhanced news gathering was reduced in 2016, and then renewed at the reduced rate in 2018. Tied funding for Digital Content Delivery was not renewed in 2016.

Source: author's calculations taken from Portfolio Budget Statements and information provided by the ABC at Senate Budget Estimates 2018

This calculation was made by analysing portfolio budget statements for the years 2013 – 2019, and the ABC’s evidence to Senate Budget Estimates hearings in 2018, following the indexation freeze. The figures roughly match those calculated by University of Sydney scholar Michael Ward following the 2019 budget.¹¹

In real terms, the ABC is now operating with the smallest budget since the Howard Government’s extraordinary 2% funding cut in its first budget, in 1996, which removed \$55 million from the ABC’s triennial funding.

An historical analysis contained within the 2019 ABC Annual Report shows that the national broadcaster’s 2019-20 operational revenue from Government of \$879 million represents a decrease in real funding of \$367 million per annum, or 29.5%, since 1985-86, as shown in the chart below.



At Senate Budget Estimates in 2018, the ABC’s Chief Financial Officer, Louise Higgins, put this significant drop in real funding over three decades in the context of the increased services the ABC now provides, saying “[t]hirty years ago, the ABC had five platforms and 6,000 employees. Today, by contrast, we have six times the platforms but just two-thirds the staff and half the real funding per capita.”¹²

In fact, as Higgins pointed out in a speech to the ABC’s first Annual Public Meeting in February 2018, three months prior to that Estimates hearing, “...in 1987, [the] ABC famously cost each Australian eight cents a day. In 1987 dollar terms we now cost each Australian just four cents a day.”

¹¹ <https://theconversation.com/the-abc-didnt-receive-a-reprieve-in-the-budget-its-still-facing-staggering-cuts-114922>

¹² Hansard, Senate Budget Estimates, 23 May 2018

¹³ <https://about.abc.net.au/speeches/chief-financial-officer-apm-speech/>

¹⁴ Australian Broadcasting Corporation Annual Report 2019, P 154.

Higgins also noted that the ABC's "...per capita funding is 34% lower than the average of other public broadcasters, including the BBC. In fact, we serve a population one-third the size of the UK, but do it with a budget one-eighth that of the BBC."¹³

The ABC's 2019 Annual Report notes the challenge faced by the national broadcaster in continuing to provide the services mandated by its charter in the face of such constrained budget circumstances, saying:

There has never been a more challenging time for the ABC to deliver on its Charter, while at the same time reshaping the business to remain competitive and relevant The ABC is in the process of reviewing a program of initiatives to achieve the savings required to operate within the reduced levels of funding for the next three years and beyond. Given that the ABC has already achieved significant productivity gains in response to past budget cuts, the impact of the funding reduction cannot be absorbed by efficiency measures alone, with some initiatives likely to impact on content.¹⁴

This is a clear and unequivocal statement by the national broadcaster that it cannot continue to absorb the loss of operational funding imposed over the last six years without a material reduction in the content it broadcasts over multiple platforms to Australian citizens.



The ABC means safety in bushfire emergencies.



I have evacuated 3 times this past year and having accurate up-to-date information every 15 minutes allows me to make crucial decisions. This is very comforting. It takes the panic out of my response.

I live on an isolated 100 acres of forest with few visitors, so the ABC brings me the world. I have loved the ABC all my life and can't stand to see it torn apart. We need to save it.

Geoff Killip
GetUp Member



Domestic Impact

The impact of the Coalition's funding cuts on domestic services was felt immediately at the ABC following the \$35 million funding cut in the 2014 federal budget, and most acutely after the much larger operational funding cut announced in November's MYEFO statement following the Lewis Efficiency Review.

In a public statement following the Abbott Government's announcement that its response to the Lewis Review would see the ABC lose a further \$200 million over four years, then-ABC Managing Director, Mark Scott, made a public statement entitled *Our ABC, Our Future*.¹⁵ In it, he outlined the considerable changes that the broadcaster would need to undertake to adapt to the significant cut to its operational funding. He began by stating that the cuts meant "...job losses across the Corporation – about 400 people, or 10% of the workforce – and changes to the way the ABC operates, including content and programming". With forewarning of the outcome of the Lewis Review, the ABC Board and Management had taken some difficult decisions.

This includes the following savings measures to the broadcaster's infrastructure and operations:

- Closing its Adelaide and Perth television production units and limiting television production outside Melbourne and Sydney to news and current affairs;
- Closing five of its smallest regional radio posts in Wagin, Morwell, Gladstone, Port Augusta and Nowra;
- Closing or reducing operations at several (at the time, unspecified) foreign bureaux that provided international content for Australian news and current affairs programs; and
- Rationalising the network's television outside broadcast vans, used to cover outside events.¹⁶


Scott also announced significant cuts to ABC programming, includ-

- Ceasing state-based local sports coverage;
- Axing the weekly state-based editions of 7.30;
- Moving *Lateline* to News24;
- Cutting back on the number of concerts recorded and broadcast on Classic FM;
- Unspecified programming changes and staff cuts in Radio National and Local Radio; and
- The closing of more than 100 ABC websites.

¹⁵ <http://about.abc.net.au/our-abc-our-future/>

¹⁶ Ibid

Scott was forthright about the impact of what was a detrimental shift in the treatment of the ABC's funding by the Coalition Government compared to that of the previous Labor administration, saying:



The budget cuts represent a real opportunity cost for the ABC. The efficiency savings normally used to finance our digital reinvestment are now being returned to the Federal Government's general revenue. This presents a challenge for the ABC, which strives to reach a demanding and fickle audience in a competitive industry, by continually reinvesting our efficiency savings in new content.

Yet these changes, radical as they seemed at the time, were just the beginning of a series of major disruptions to ABC operations over the next five years, which escalated after Scott's departure in 2015. Under the Corporation's first female managing director, Michelle Guthrie, the national broadcaster's fortunes took a further turn for the worse, with the new management unable to secure any increase in funding during the next triennial negotiations, and suffering a cut to the tied funds for enhanced news gathering and digital content delivery secured by Scott from the outgoing Labor government in 2013.

This led to even more drastic programming cuts, with a greater impact on the key services provided to Australian audiences than those made in 2014.

The ABC's *FactCheck* unit was axed in May 2016, before being relaunched as a partnership with RMIT University in February the following year.

The ABC's national network, Radio National, bore the brunt of the changes to radio services in 2016. Programs including *RN Afternoons*, *The Body Sphere*, *Soundproof*, *Daily Planet* and *The Live Set* were cancelled, along with all but one of the network's music programs. Audiences were particularly upset at the axing of the 15-year old religious affairs program *Sunday Nights*.

In January 2017, the ABC ceased short-wave radio transmissions that served remote areas of the Northern Territory and the Pacific Islands, leaving thousands of listeners without access to emergency broadcasts.

By far the most noticeable changes instituted by Guthrie following her failure to reverse the ABC's funding decline were to the television and radio news and current affairs programs on which Australians rely for impartial information.

Following its move to ABC24 in 2015, Guthrie decided to axe the ABC's late night current affairs program, *Lateline*, late in 2017. After 27 years on air, the loss of the broadcaster's only long-form interview program left a significant hole in the ABC's coverage of politics and public affairs.

Further cuts to news and current affairs programming were in store for ABC Radio, with its flagship programs *The World Today* and *PM* halved in length from an hour to 30 minutes, and *Business PM* cut altogether, from the beginning of the 2018 broadcast year.

Following the loss of state-based 7.30 programs in 2014, the accumulated reduction in news and current affairs coverage across ABC television and in the space of just three years was enormous.

Equally significant has been the dramatic collapse of the ABC's broadcast of Australian drama since the Coalition came to government. In 2013-2014, the ABC broadcast 101 hours of first-run Australian drama in prime time;¹⁷ by 2018-2019, the network's total broadcast of scripted content, including comedy, was just 50 hours.¹⁸

This decline in original Australian scripted content has had a significant impact not just on audiences, who struggle to find Australian stories in the increasingly internationalised, multi-platform commercial content offerings available to them, but on Australia's once-thriving independent production sector, which is suffering the loss of significant co-production investment by the national broadcaster at the same time as it struggles to maintain a foothold on commercial television and the on-demand streaming services now dominating the provision of drama programs to Australian audiences.

¹⁷ ABC Annual Report 2014, P 41.

¹⁸ ABC Annual Report 2019, P 27.

International Impact

The 2014 cancelling of the DFAT contract to deliver international television broadcasting through the Australia Network, while presented as a cost saving measure, was arguably an ideological decision by the new Coalition government.

Traditionally managed independently of the Communications Minister or Prime Minister's offices by the Secretary of DFAT, the contract had been put out to tender in February 2011. Sky News, the commercial news service carried by News Ltd's Foxtel service in Australia, put in a determined bid for the contract, having long harboured ambitions to replace the ABC as the carrier of Australia's international broadcasting service, which operated as a form of "soft diplomacy" in key Asia-Pacific regional markets.

In June 2011, the Rudd Government changed the process for awarding the tender, replacing the Secretary of DFAT with the Minister for Broadband, Communications and the Digital Economy as the decision maker. In November that same year, the Government terminated the tender process on public interest grounds, subsequently deciding that the Australia Network would be delivered permanently by the ABC.¹⁹

This decision was later legislated through a change to the Australian Broadcasting Corporation Act 1983, through the insertion into the ABC Charter of Section 31AA, which rules that "*Corporation or prescribed companies [are] to be the only providers of Commonwealth funded international broadcasting services*".

The change was legislated in March 2013, by the minority Gillard Government,²⁰ with the support of the House and Senate cross benches, and was opposed by the then-Coalition Opposition.²¹

Just over a year later, the new Coalition Government, being unable to put the DFAT contract out to tender again, simply cancelled it altogether, removing Australia's international television broadcasting service from screens in neighbouring countries.

As well as the immediate loss of the \$197 million contract and the jobs specifically devoted to producing and broadcasting the international television service, the impact on the ABC was felt more broadly, particularly in relation to its international radio service, *Radio Australia*.

As reported by Nic McClellan for *Inside Story* in 2014, the ABC had achieved efficiencies in its international services by combining key functions within the *ABC International* division. The loss of the Australia Network contract resulted in 80 redundancies across the division, and required remaining staff to continue producing critical radio and online content on just 60% of their previous budget. *Radio Australia* lost significant local resources and personnel, with reductions in original programming in English and other languages, and much reduced services to nations with which Australia has key strategic relationships.²²

The cutting of this vital "soft diplomacy" service by the Coalition Government is arguably extremely short-sighted, removing as it does a trusted voice for Australia's interests in our region.

¹⁹ <https://www.anao.gov.au/work/performance-audit/administration-australia-network-tender-process>

²⁰ http://classic.austlii.edu.au/au/legis/cth/bill_em/blaraomb2013670/memo_0.html

²¹ <https://www.malcolmturnbull.com.au/media/speech-to-parliament-broadcasting-convergence-review-and-licence-fees-legis>

²² <https://insidestory.org.au/the-gutting-of-radio-australia/>

Operational and programming changes due to funding cuts

Job losses

According to the Media, Entertainment and Arts Alliance (MEAA):

- **Job cuts** at the ABC since 2014 total 1012 positions, or 829 full-time equivalent staff.
- There have been **939 redundancies** since July 1, 2014.
- Four hundred of those **job losses** were a direct result of the 2014 funding cuts.
- Full-time equivalent staff at the ABC numbered 4093 in the 2016-17 financial year, of which 70% were in content making roles. They were 4679 in 2013-14.²³
- A further **300 jobs were lost** when the ABC closed its network of shops in 2015.²⁴

Reduction in regional presence and representation

Since funding cuts under the Coalition Government began in 2014, the following changes have been made to the ABC's regional and rural services:

- No more coverage of **local sport** on TV;
- Adelaide and Perth local **television production units closed**;
- **No production** other than news and current affairs outside Melbourne and Sydney;
- Closure of **five local radio** newsrooms;
- Loss of most of the **ABC's outside broadcast facilities** in smaller states;
- **Local 7.30** axed;
- **Short-wave radio** in the Northern Territory closed down;
- **ABC Open**, locally produced regional stories for broadcast online and on TV, discontinued.

International

International service losses include:

- Loss of the **Australia Network**;
- Cuts to Radio Australia programming;
- Loss of short-wave radio transmissions to Pacific Islands;
- The closure or reduced operations of international bureaux in Tokyo, Bangkok, New Delhi and New Zealand;

²³ <https://www.meaa.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/06/ABC-fact-sheet.pdf>

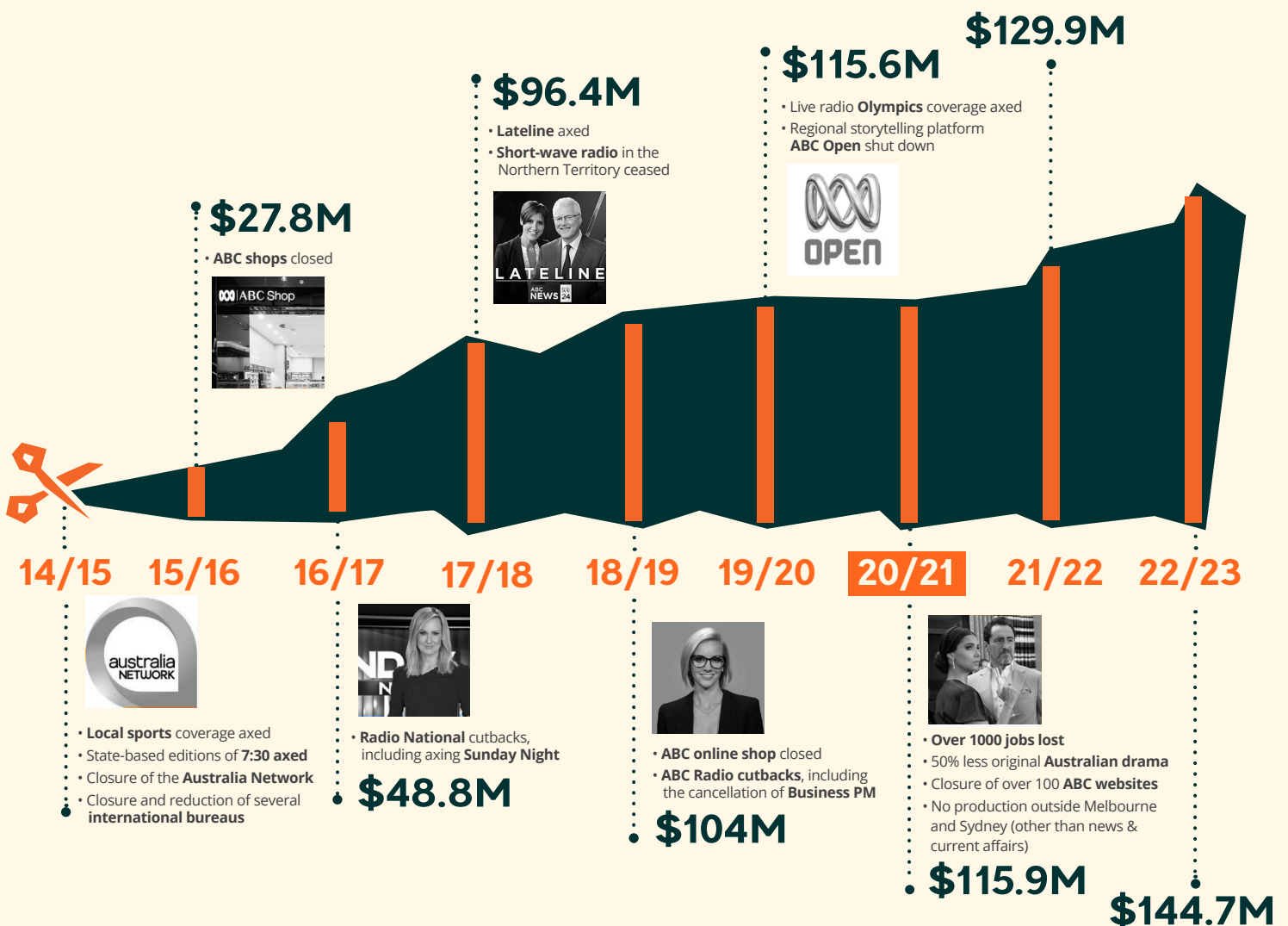
²⁴ <https://www.theguardian.com/media/2015/jul/23/abc-shops-to-close-with-loss-of-300-jobs-mark-scott-says>

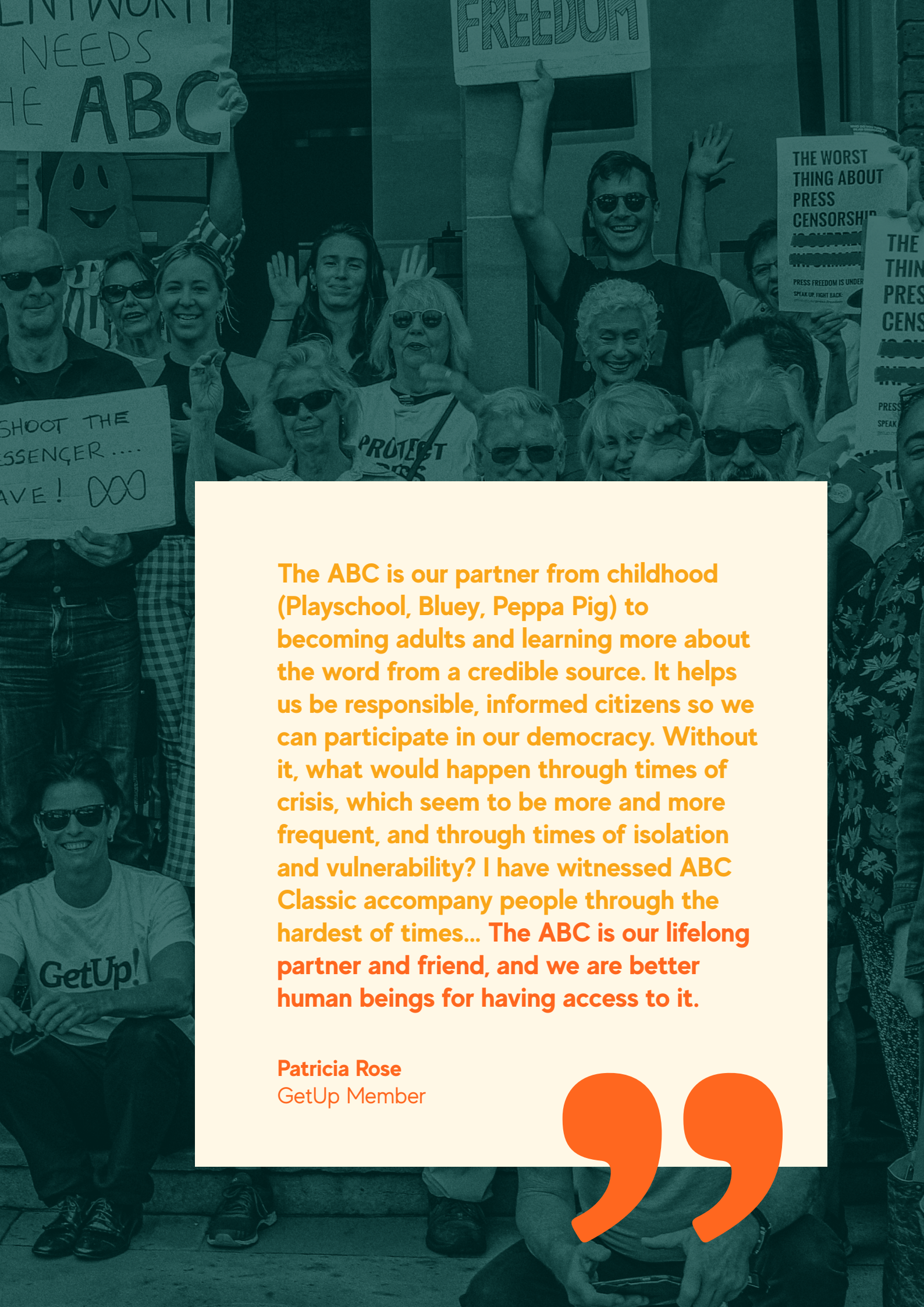
Programming

Programming cuts since 2014 include:

- The axing of 27-year old current affairs television program **Lateline**;
- The axing of the weekly local edition of **7.30**;
- More than 50% reduction in the number of hours of original Australian scripted **(drama) content** on **ABC TV**;
- Cuts to **Radio National** specialist programming, including **music** and **religious** programs;
- Reduction in the recording and broadcast of **live concerts** on **Classic FM**; Short-wave radio in the Northern Territory closed down;
- The closure of over **100 ABC websites**, including the specialist disability portal *RampUp*;
- Cuts to **local newsgathering** and digital content delivery services.

GRAPH: 8 Years of funding Cuts to the ABC \$783.1 MILLION





The ABC is our partner from childhood (Playschool, Bluey, Peppa Pig) to becoming adults and learning more about the word from a credible source. It helps us be responsible, informed citizens so we can participate in our democracy. Without it, what would happen through times of crisis, which seem to be more and more frequent, and through times of isolation and vulnerability? I have witnessed ABC Classic accompany people through the hardest of times... The ABC is our lifelong partner and friend, and we are better human beings for having access to it.

Patricia Rose
GetUp Member



What could have been...

History tells us that, no matter which side of politics – Labor or Coalition – is in power, there is no respite for the ABC from incipient government hostility... However, under Labor these eruptions tend to be episodic – the Rudd-Gillard-Rudd years were relatively tranquil – whereas during the Coalition's past two terms in office hostility towards the ABC has been relentless.

Dennis Muller, The Conversation, 13 February 2019²⁵

There is no doubt that the ABC's fortunes rise and fall with the whims of government far more than should be the case for an independent public broadcaster. To understand the extent to which our national broadcaster is reliant upon the favour of the federal government of the day, it serves us to look at how it fared under the previous Labor administration. The contrast is stark.

As Dennis Muller acknowledged last year, the treatment of the ABC by the Rudd and Gillard Governments was, compared to previous administrations of both sides of politics, relatively positive.

In 2009, under the first triennial funding round of the Labor Government, the ABC was awarded the largest funding increase since its incorporation in 1983, with \$136.4 million in new money to fund the creation of the ABC Kids' channel and 90 hours of new Australian drama.²⁶

Critically, this funding was not tied to those programs in legislation; rather, it was added to the ABC's base operational funding, and indexed for future years. Had this not been done, but rather the funding linked specifically in law to the provision of those services for which the ABC initially earmarked it, the broadcaster's situation today would be far worse than it is. By embedding this funding in the ABC's operational budget, the Government boosted the broadcaster's bottom line, and ensured that the management and board retained independent control of the allocation of core funding.

²⁵ <https://theconversation.com/australian-governments-have-a-long-history-of-trying-to-manipulate-the-abc-and-its-unlikely-to-stop-now-110712>

²⁶ <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2009-05-12/abc-gets-record-funding-boost/1680934>

While ABC Kids continues to provide by far the most popular source of television and online content for children across Australia, its ability to invest in original programming has been restricted by funding cuts in recent years; and, as we have seen, the number of hours of new Australian drama across the network has declined dramatically since the Coalition Government came to power in 2013. Clearly, with a significant loss of core funding, the ABC has been forced to redirect funds to other parts of its business, and is no longer able to devote the same resources to the production of original Australian content for adults and children as it was when the funding boost was first provided in 2009.

Four years after that initial funding increase, in the second (delayed) triennial funding round administered by the Labor Government, the ABC was given \$89.4 million to set up the Newsgathering service and enhance the digital delivery of ABC programs.²⁷ As we have seen, this funding has since been cut in successive trienniums under the Coalition.

In addition to record funding boosts, the Labor Government of 2007 – 2013 also ensured the ABC charter was amended to specifically require them to deliver digital services; overhauled the board appointment process to put it at arm's length from the government of the day; and, as we have seen, created legislation that specified that any international broadcasting service funded by the government could only be delivered by the ABC.

The move to amend the charter to cover digital services proved critical when the Coalition Government, at the behest of commercial broadcasters, launch an inquiry into the competitive neutrality of the national broadcasters,²⁸ which explicitly called into question the legitimacy of the ABC's digital services.

Exempted from efficiency dividends imposed on government agencies during the life of the Labor Government from 2007 – 2013, the ABC was able to direct any savings made through achieving internal efficiencies, such as through technology upgrades and the consolidation of backroom operations, to innovative new services. In this way, it was able to launch iView, the first streaming service by any Australian broadcaster, and create ABC News24.

²⁷ https://www.arnnet.com.au/article/461760/budget_2013_abc_sbs_get_109_4_million_over_three_years/

²⁸ <https://www.communications.gov.au/documents/inquiry-competitive-neutrality-national-broadcasters-report-expert-panel>



The provision of new services such as these were driven by the creativity and innovation within the ABC, but were enabled by the security and adequacy of funding during a period of relative stability for the national broadcaster.

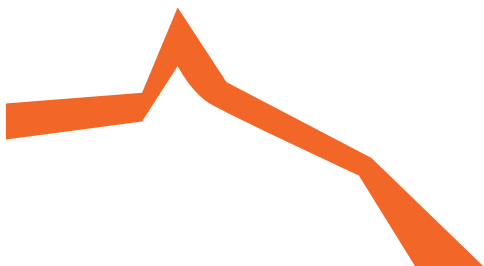
During this era, the Government also legislated an independent board appointment process for the ABC and SBS, attempting to minimise political interference by requiring a merit-based recruitment process at arm's-length from the Communications Minister and Prime Minister of the day. Unfortunately, the intent of this legislation has been undermined by the current government, which has relied excessively on clauses in the legislation that allow the minister to make board appointments outside the merit-based process in exceptional circumstances.

In all, under two trienniums administered by the Rudd and Gillard Labor Governments, the ABC was able to launch the following new services for Australian audiences:

-
- **ABC Kids**
 - **ABCMe**
 - **ABC Comedy**
 - **ABC News24**
 - **iView**
 - **90 hours of scripted Australian drama**, including programs such as *The Slap*, *Miss Fisher's Murder Mysteries*, *Rake*, and *Jack Irish*
 - **RampUp**, an online portal run by and for Australians with disabilities
 - **ABC Open**, a program supporting people in regional Australia to become online producers of local stories and broadcast them online and on television

Some, but not all, of these initiatives remain in place, but all have suffered from the funding cuts imposed since 2013.

It is abundantly clear that it is not a lack of ability or will at the ABC that leads to the loss of programming and services; rather, when supported by adequate levels of government funding, our national broadcaster is innovative, efficient and highly creative, producing programs and offering services to rival those of any broadcaster in the world.





Reports from drought ravaged communities all around Australia... top journalists reporting from fire ravaged communities in their time of peril... then, without a moment to draw breath, once again our ABC is keeping us safe with up-to-date information on the Covid-19 pandemic. We must protect this vital service that provides balance in our lives from those that would bring the ABC to its knees.

Donald Lancaster

GetUp Member



Conclusion

The ABC provides services that are valued, relied upon and cherished by Australians of all ages, from all cultural and socio-economic backgrounds, and in all regions of our vast land mass.

From early childhood, throughout our lives, and right into old age, the ABC is a trusted companion, adviser and friend to Australians.

It is the public's broadcaster, charged by charter to inform, educate and entertain us and, in so doing, to shape and maintain our national identity and social cohesion.

The ABC, on our behalf, is required to hold power to account; to interrogate our leaders; and to question the actions being taken to guide our nation through the good times, and through the ever-more frequent natural and economic crises we face together.

Its role in our democracy is sacred; the part it plays in our day-to-day lives is essential; the truth it tells us about ourselves is vital.

To consider life without the ABC makes us realise how fundamental is our national broadcaster to our very concept of what it is to be Australian.

The past seven years have seen a virtually unprecedented, and relentless, attack on the foundations of the ABC.

Consecutive cuts to core operational funding, the removal or reduction of support for specific programs and services, the "efficiency dividends" that force management to find savings where there are none left to find; the deliberate flouting of legislation to ensure the independence of the ABC board, repeated government criticism of individual programs and journalists, and the wilful destruction of the ABC's international broadcasting service: all these actions speak to a government determined to impoverish the ABC, and leave it unable to provide the services on which the Australian people rely.

While ruling out the privatisation of the ABC, as demanded by rank and file Liberal Party members and the champions of free market fundamentalism who populate the ranks of its favoured think tanks, the current government has instead pursued a policy of slowly eroding the ABC's funding base and its capacity to meet its charter.

These repeated slices into the flesh of the ABC threaten to become a fatal wound. The loss of close to \$800 million in core funding in less than a decade leaves the ABC with no capacity to absorb further cuts, or to continue to invest in innovative new services to keep up with the demands of its audience.

As Australia emerges from the social and economic crisis caused by the greatest pandemic in 100 years, we must decide what kind of society we wish to rebuild. An Australia without the ABC as its beating heart is one most of us find unthinkable. We must unite to demand that the national broadcaster be funded to provide the essential, and much-valued, services it is chartered to deliver to the Australian people, and that our government cease its relentless, ideological attack on our ABC.

Recommendations:

Cuts restored: That the cuts to the ABC's operational funding since 2013 be restored in full in the October 2020 federal budget.

Commit to funding requests: The Government commits to fully funding the ABC's original request for additional money to support newsgathering and digital distribution.

Provide additional funding: The Government provides the ABC with additional, untied funding in the October 2020 budget, to allow the ABC to restore its innovative capacity and invest in new programs and services, as determined by the management of the ABC.

Extend funding period: That the Government extend the ABC's funding period from three to five years.

Reinstated contract: That Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade reinstate the contract for the ABC to deliver international broadcasting services.

Abide by legislation: That the Government and Opposition commit to abiding by the legislation that governs merit-based appointments to the ABC Board.



Methodology

Desktop Research

This report draws on portfolio budget statements over the last six years, and on statements by ABC Executives to Senate Estimates hearings to quantify the impact of funding cuts since 2013.

The report further draws on information from the most recent ABC Annual Report for 2018 – 2019, on speeches and Senate Estimates statements by ABC Executives, and on other publicly available information published by the Media, Entertainment and Arts Alliance.

It also relies on historical data and information about the role and position of the ABC since its inception in the 1930s, and its impact on Australian culture and society; and on international academic research about the critical function of public broadcasting in public life, and the trajectory of digital development of public broadcasting

Member Testimony

GetUp members provided first-hand testimony about the value of the ABC to them as citizens, via email.

Online Survey

GetUp commissioned uComms to undertake an online survey on the evening of 23 March 2020. It gathered views from a nationally representative sample of 1,286 residents across Australia.

Focus Groups

GetUp also commissioned The Source to conduct focus groups, which were held on 2, 6 and 7 April 2020 via 6 x 90-minute Zoom Groups split out as follows:

- **Wentworth, NSW:** 1 x group with Retirees (65+) & 1 x group with Young Families (kids under 5 at home)
- **Page, NSW:** 1 x group with Retirees (65+) & 1 x group with Young Families (kids under 5 at home)
- **Kooyong, Victoria:** 1 x group with Retirees (65+) & 1 x group with Young Families (kids under 5 at home)



Appendix:

Focus group results, commissioned by GetUp and conducted by The Source

Methodology

6 x 90-minute Zoom Groups split out as follows:

- **Wentworth:** 1 x group with Retirees (65+) & 1 x group with Young Families (kids under 5 at home)
- **Page:** 1 x group with Retirees (65+) & 1 x group with Young Families (kids under 5 at home)
- **Kooyong:** 1 x group with Retirees (65+) & 1 x group with Young Families (kids under 5 at home)

Constituents relationship with the ABC:

Amongst our audience there was real affection and respect for the place the ABC fills in our society, the work it does in holding politicians and institutions to account, and the content that it delivers. At an overall level, people spoke of the ABC as:

Trustworthy: delivering information in a 'matter of fact' manner that feels very different from the sensationalism other networks provide. This sense of trust isn't just attributed to the ABC's news and current affairs programming; children's programming and documentary content is also held up as being particularly trustworthy and reliable.

"I trust what the ABC does. I can turn the news on and believe what they say, and I can put my kids in front of ABC Kids and know they won't see something unsuitable"

- Study participant

Objective: many spoke about the fact that the ABC delivers truth: there's no spin placed on international and national news. This is keenly seen in the way that ABC journalists interact with politicians from all sides of the political spectrum: the left is held to account just as rigorously as the right.

"Leigh Sales doesn't care which party they're from, she'll eviscerate someone from Labor just the same as she would the Libs."

- Study participant

High Quality: The ABC's content was felt to be consistently high across different channels and genres. The sentiment here was that if the ABC do it, they do it well.

"You know with the ABC you'll get good programmes. It's not commercial TV where you have to sort the wheat from the chaff."

- Study participant

These themes were consistent across our groups, but potentially more interesting is looking at the relationship our different constituents had with the ABC...

Retirees

Our older participants talked about the ABC in particularly fond terms: for them it's a trusted and respected part of their community, and is a national institution – it's a part of Australian life they feel immensely proud of. If we look at the specifics of where the emotional value of the ABC, we heard the following:

The power of ABC radio: This audience told us they always have the radio on, and it's always tuned to ABC. For older Australians radio content provides companionship and they take real benefit from it.

"ABC Radio gets turned on before I get out of bed in the morning, and it isn't turned off until after I get into bed at night."

- Study participant

The nostalgic link to ABC: Many proudly claimed to have grown up with the ABC, and want their grandchildren to do the same. PlaySchool gets mentioned here as a shared, intergenerational cultural reference point.

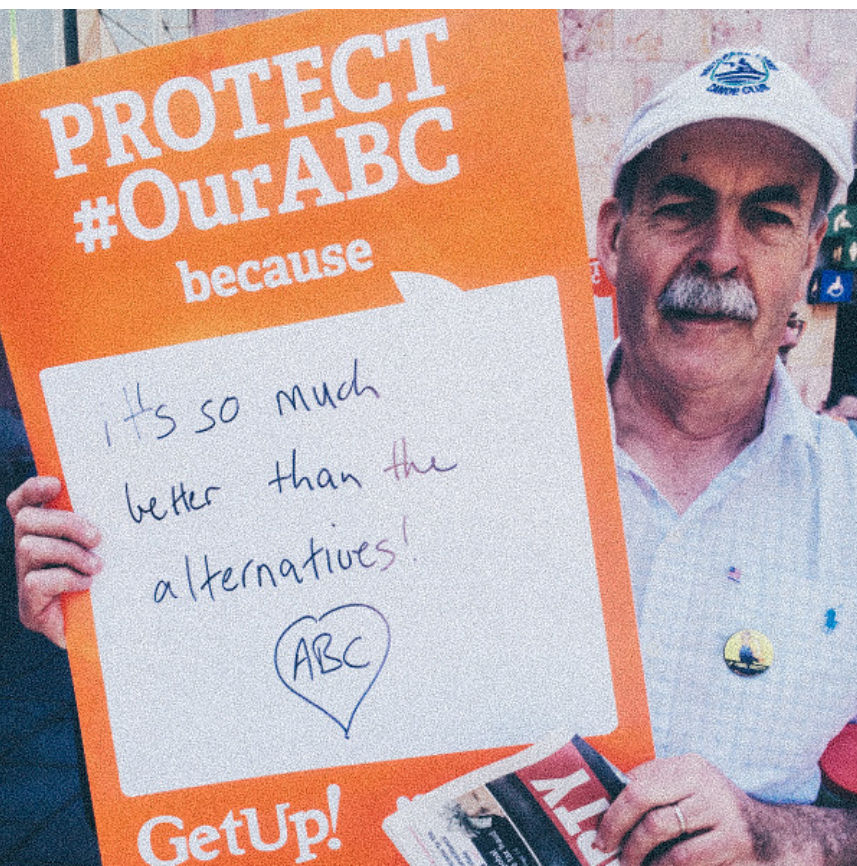
"My grandkids watch Play School which makes me so happy."

- Study participant

The dislike of news as a form of entertainment: the fact that the ABC's News is presented in a level-headed, dispassionate manner is particularly appealing. Other channels – particularly the 'Murdoch channels' – treat the news as a form of entertainment, which many loathe.

And the programming that is 'made for them': Norman Swan and Gardening Talkback were mentioned frequently as programmes that feel targeted for their age group. At a time when other media channels seem to only be interested in the young, ABC is reflecting their interests back to them

When we ran the thought experiment of what life in Australia without the ABC would feel like, Retirees' reactions were particularly strong. Some spoke about the fact that they would be bereft without it, and that an Australia without the ABC would be a culturally poorer place.





Parents of Young Kids

Those with young families tended to point their fondness of the ABC to the programming it brings to their entire household. No other channels or broadcasters were felt to deliver content that suits their home + life-stage like the ABC does. The specific value of the ABC to our Young Families comes from:

The unique tone and feel of ABC Kids: Unlike Nickelodeon and Disney, ABC Kids was felt to provide content that was more 'gentle' and far more suitable (particularly given the lack of advertisements).

"I can put my kids in front of ABC Kids and I don't feel guilty at all. It's age appropriate and far less full on!"

- Study participant

The educational aspect of the ABC's products and services: Reading Eggs and Maths Seeds were felt to be hugely important education sources.

"Reading Eggs are incredible. I can't see any other media business doing anything like that."

- Study participant

And the sense that the ABC reflects multicultural Australia in a way that no other broadcaster does: The content the ABC puts out that promotes a more inclusive, diverse Australia was felt to be unique: no other broadcasters (outside of SBS) were felt to be giving these communities nearly as much exposure.

Running the thought experiment of life without the ABC with Young Families brought about a real sense of concern. In their minds ABC's kids content is unique and irreplaceable.

The regional Australia view:

Our research participants in Page talked about the ABC as the only broadcaster with any real interest in their community. The local content was a unique and hugely important part of the value they ascribed to the ABC. More specifically, these Regional Australians really appreciated the ABC for its:

Australian 'ownership': Our Page audience talked about the importance of a broadcaster that was truly Australian owned, and content that was Australian made. There was an undercurrent of patriotism here that made them particularly proud of the ABC's national ownership.

Local, regional focus: Those in Lismore and Grafton felt that the media was disproportionately focussed on metropolitan Australia. The local ABC services were felt to be particularly unique in giving them content and info on what's happening in their communities.

And reliability in times of crisis: This was absolutely critical in Page. Constituents here felt they were lurching from one environmental crisis to the next: fires, flooding, and more fires. Given that many felt these crises were only going to be more frequent in the future, the ABC's role as an emergency service was invaluable.

"The ABC radio during the bushfires was so important. Without it we wouldn't have known what to do or whether we were safe or not. We had it on 6 or 7 hours a day."

- Study participant

Local, regional focus: Those in Lismore and Grafton felt that the media was disproportionately focussed on metropolitan Australia. The local ABC services were felt to be particularly unique in giving them content and info on what's happening in their communities.

For Regional Australians, the thought of life without the ABC meant a diminishment of their community, and a sense that life in a time of climate change would be more hazardous.

Photo by Sean Davey/EPA



The future of the ABC

The majority of our research participants knew that the ABC had been subjected to cuts over the past few years, and some felt that they noticed this through the weaker quality of some programming and the 'retreat' from ABC services in South East Asia.

However, relatively few knew just how deep these cuts went and few knew that there were more to come – they had assumed this was 'done and dusted'.

"Are they still making the cuts? I would have thought there was nothing left to cut now!"

- Study participant

When we explored the degree to which they felt their Federal MP was sympathetic to the ABC, again there was a general lack of real knowledge here. Generally, they relied on their perceptions of the Party the MP belonged to rather than their individual points of view.

In Wentworth, few had any evidence of Dave Sharma's views on the ABC. The assumption was that he would probably be unsympathetic, and support cuts. Most were depressed by this assumption, and felt that he should be pressed on what his views were.

"I'd like to push him on it... he needs to know that the ABC is important to us and he needs to leave it alone."

- Study participant

Similarly, Kevin Hogan's point of view on the ABC was generally not known. In fact, his views on 'anything at all' weren't known; most knew next to nothing about his intentions as he generally flew under the radar.

"Who knows what he stands for? I don't even think he knows what he stands for!"

- Study participant

Our Kooyong constituents were generally more aware of Josh Frydenberg's views here, and many believed he was openly antagonistic to the ABC. One of our Retirees had written two letters to him regarding the matter and felt he could never cast his vote for someone so hostile to the ABC.

"I've written to him to urge him to reconsider the cuts. He wrote back, but he didn't really answer my questions."

- Study participant

When we turned the conversation to content that the ABC could really do with investing in, the responses tended to differ by audience:

Retirees: These constituents told us that they'd love a stronger and deeper emphasis on investigative journalism, documentaries, and more content that spoke to their creative habits and pursuits: gardening, theatre, and the arts.

Young Families: Parents told us they would love to see the ABC develop more content aimed at:

A 'tween' audience. Those who had 10 – 12-year olds felt there was a real dearth of suitable content for their kids. This age group had grown out of ABC Kids + ABC ME and were being drawn to content their parents felt guilty about ('American' teenage programming, YouTubers etc).

*"I can put my kids in front of ABC Kids and I don't feel guilty at all.
It's age appropriate and far less full on!"*

- Study participant

Educating through the school syllabus: this was particularly relevant at the present time with so much uncertainty around when their kids would be going back to school. The desire here was for programming that complimented what they are working on through home schooling programs.

Regional Australians: The desire here was for more Australian content that reflected life outside of Sydney and Melbourne. There's a tension apparent in this audience regarding the sense that regional and rural Australian life gets short sharp shrift by the mainstream media: they feel they don't see their communities represented.



