

Report on arts programming on the ABC by Liz Jacka

Summary

A review was conducted into arts programming on ABC radio, television and online. Its aim was to trace the recent history of arts programming on all three platforms and to assess whether it is meeting its charter obligations.

The questions addressed were as follows:

- Has there been a fall in the amount of arts coverage on the ABC in the last 5-10 years?
- Has there been a diminution of quality in the way the ABC covers the arts?
- Has there been a diminution in the breadth of coverage of the arts?
- Has the ABC been responsive to the growth of new art forms?
- Has the ABC taken sufficient cognisance of changing audience demographics?
- Has there been a loss of expertise amongst the production staff involved in arts coverage?
- Has the ABC met its charter obligations in the area of original production of arts-related works?

Findings

- The amount of arts coverage on all radio and television diminished in the years between 1992 and 2002.
- Coverage of the arts online has recently diminished with the closing down of the arts portal, The Space.
- The amount of Australian arts content on ABC television fell in the years up to 2002.
- From 2003 there is evidence that the amount of Australian arts content on ABC television began to increase.
- The closure of The Listening Room on classic-FM has placed acoustic arts in an uncertain place within ABC radio's priorities.
- The ABC has addressed changing audience demographics by changing the style of programming from "specialist" to "flow programming" in an attempt to win bigger and younger audiences.
- The ABC does not seem to have embraced wholeheartedly the newer art forms, coverage of which would attract younger viewers, especially if the potential of online media was fully exploited.
- This has led to a diminution in the quality and depth of arts coverage and to the level of expertise and specialisation applied in the production of arts programming.
- There is less coverage of arts issues and less analysis of arts policies across all platforms.
- There is less original performance on both ABC radio and television, thus reducing the opportunities to encourage new artists.
- There are fewer opportunities for original commissioned music by Australian composers to be showcased.

- The internal structure of the ABC with its sharp demarcation between different platforms militates against a pan-organisation strategy for the arts and makes co-operation and sharing of expertise across the three platforms difficult.
- The ABC's relationship with the arts communities does not seem to be working very effectively, with the appearance given of a closed organization which is not listening enough to, or communicating adequately with its constituents.

The cardinal question of whether the ABC is currently meeting its charter obligations, does not lend itself to an easy one-line answer. However, the report suggests that, in the area of television especially, it does not appear to be living up to the rhetoric espoused in its own Editorial Policies.

Recommendations

Radio

- Devise strategies that do not treat “specialist” and “generalist” programming styles as opposed.
- Place a higher priority on specialist knowledge, in depth research, high production values and formal innovation in the production of arts programs.
- Ensure that the newer arts forms are adequately covered in the mix.
- Explore way of increasing the coverage of arts issues and policy questions.
- Devise ways of increasing the amount of commissioning of original works for broadcast.
- Review the ABC's music policy, paying particular attention to its responsibilities in the area of new music and Australian music.
- Review the place of acoustic arts in the ABC's repertoire and find ways of ensuring an appropriate and creative way of ensuring that the ABC's excellence in the form is not lost.

Television

ABC TV should do the following as a matter of urgency:

- it should develop a strategy for increasing its recording of new Australian work or notable Australian productions in the performing arts field, but taking into account where new technologies and platforms have made such things available to audiences by other means and not duplicating that;
- it should develop a prime-time arts program which includes serious reviews, criticism and analysis of artists, arts works and arts policies; it should have a stability of name and time-slot so specialist audiences know where to find it; it should not be afraid to call it “arts”
- it should continue its diversified strategies for developing new audiences for the arts by including arts as part of documentary and other genres and using cross-genre techniques for making such program appealing
- it should develop creative works designed especially for television in collaboration with Australia's best artists and with overseas artists where appropriate with the aims of (i) advancing television itself as an art form and (ii) showcasing the creative work of Australian artists. These will probably be co-productions.

Online

- The ABC should reconsider its decision to close down The Space, and it should urgently develop a set of strategies for exploiting the full potential of the web for attracting new and younger audiences.
- It should consider how the ABC might take its rightful place in the Australian creative community as an innovator and leader in digital media.

General recommendations

- Review provision of arts expertise across whole of the ABC to be shared by all platforms.
- Develop an arts policy for the ABC, using all relevant internal and external expertise.
- Liaise more actively with arts stakeholders.
- Share intelligence and strategies with other arts organizations especially the Australia Council for ideas for audience development.
- Revisit the wisdom of moving from designated specialist time slots to “across the whole schedule” programming strategies.
- Ensure the area of the “arts’ is construed as broadly as possible, and in particular, that it includes newer art forms such as digital arts, and new forms of writing and performance.
- Pay particular attention to the coverage of visual arts, which has suffered in recent years.

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March 2004

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