

the Australian Society *for* Medical Research



Newsletters, News and Events
Submissions

August 1996

SUBMISSION TO THE REVIEW OF ABC ROLE AND FUNCTIONS

*

ABOUT ASMR

The Australian Society for Medical Research (ASMR) is a voluntary organisation whose objectives include the promotion of excellence in, support for, and public understanding of Australian health and medical research.

These objectives are addressed through:

- direct interaction with policymakers,
- events, activities and materials directed at high school students contemplating careers in research,
- national and local scientific meetings, including awards and assistance for promising young researchers, and
- the public activities comprising National Medical Research Week.

The Society was founded over 30 years ago. It has 1100 full members and, through a system of affiliation of 30 member scientific societies, can claim to represent the views of most of the 12,000 or so health and medical researchers in this country.

The interest of ASMR in this Enquiry concerns the quality and quantity of coverage of science and health issues in the Australian media.

SUMMARY AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The ABC plays an essential role in the communication and analysis of scientific, technological and health-related issues and events. These issues include some of the most important facing Australia in the 21st century.

Any downgrading of that role would have negative long-term consequences:

for public understanding of science and health issues,

for the formulation of sound public policy with respect to innovation, technological change, the environment and health,

for the recruitment and retention in Australia of young scientists, and

for the awareness of and support for Australia's scientific community.

ASMR recommends that:

1. The ABC maintains a leading role in the broadcast coverage of science, technology and health issues, especially where they involve or impact on the Australian community.
2. This role requires a capacity for specialised news and investigative reporting, the production of feature-documentary programs for radio, television and the maintenance of high-quality internet sites.
3. This implies that the ABC should retain journalists, researchers and producers with specialised expertise in the analysis and communication of concepts, events and issues in the scientific, technical and health arenas.

SCIENCE IN THE MEDIA AND THE PUBLIC INTEREST

Australia faces major challenges at the end of the 20th century. High among these are those posed by rapid advances in scientific knowledge and technological developments.

From a strict economic perspective, it is more important than ever that the nation continues its transformation into a producer of goods and services with high added value. This requires that we continuously improve our capacity to make fundamental scientific discoveries, to capture and commercially exploit our fair share of intellectual property, and to rapidly and intelligently adapt offshore scientific and technical developments to local conditions.

This will not happen unless:

the quality of school science education is high,
bright school leavers choose careers in science and engineering,
scientists and technologists can be trained to a high level and their expertise retained in Australia, and so long as
science literacy and awareness is sufficiently strong in corporations and public agencies for innovation opportunities to be created, recognised and supported over the long term.
This implies that it is in the national interest for a very broad spectrum of people, including school teachers, career advisors, bureaucrats, parliamentarians, investors, patent lawyers, managers and business leaders, to have reasonable science literacy and awareness. For those who are not science professionals themselves the media may be the only source of information available.

There is also an increasing number of areas of public policy involving decisions about resource allocation and economic development, or the development of the law and regulatory mechanisms, in which a well-informed public debate, and a balanced scrutiny of expert advice is essential. Examples include the nation's response to climate change, food contaminants, illicit drug use, and AIDS. Again, broad-based science literacy contributes to sound and politically robust decision-making in such controversial areas by, as far as possible, focussing the debate on principles and values, rather than on misunderstood and misinterpreted facts.

Medical science provides many examples of rapidly advancing knowledge which are revolutionising our understanding of disease, but at the same posing great economic and social challenges. To take one specific example, the current decade is seeing the identification, by genetic means, of many of the important factors in vulnerability to common cancers. This knowledge can be exploited to develop new ways to prevent and treat these conditions, some of which will require reorganised, or wholly new, health services. However identifying these genetic factors challenges present life and health insurance practices in relation to privacy and fairness. Decisions about these issues will not be made just by science or medical professionals, but will involve the whole community.

It goes without saying that independence of commercial interest is often essential for balanced presentation of scientific and health issues.

In summary, it is in the national interest that Australians are well-informed about scientific, health and technological issues. This cannot be left to the formal education system, or just to professionals, but must also take place via the mass media. [TOR 3a, 3b]

AUSTRALIA'S SCIENTIFIC COMMUNITY AND THE MEDIA

There are about 80,000 people engaged in research and development in Australia, about 15% in health-related disciplines, most of whom are scientists.

Compared with many other occupational and professional groups, their visibility in the media, especially in drama and popular culture, is low and often subject to stereotyping. This weakens interest in science, and science careers, among school students.

Since most researchers depend directly or indirectly on public funds, accountability requires that their work is in the public domain. The success of particular projects, and the development of Australia's research capacity in the long run, will suffer unless those researchers are visible and their research accurately represented. [TOR 3c]

On the other hand, public interest in scientific and medical developments is very high, and opinion polling (e.g. Newspoll/ASMR 1995) shows strong support for investment in science and medical research. This indicates that achievements by Australians in scientific fields are highly valued and are a source of national pride. [TOR 3b]

On both these grounds, reporting of local developments and the local production of feature programs are essential.

THE ABC AND ALTERNATIVES

The volume and quality of science and health-related content in ABC programming far exceeds that available from commercial broadcasters. In general, researchers have a high level of confidence in the performance of ABC specialist science journalists and program producers. The maintenance of specialised resources for production in this area, such as the ABC Science Unit, seems to be an obvious prerequisite.

The flagship program "Quantum" is a prominent example which achieves world-class standards, highlighting both the best overseas research and local developments in accessible and attractive style. On Radio National there are a variety of programs which present science and health issues, ranging from regular slots such as the Science Show and the Health Report, to occasional forays by teams such as Background Briefing. These programs characteristically produce material which is accessible, devotes sufficient time to the issue at hand, and does not compromise on accuracy or balance.

Some do not achieve a mass audience, compared with "lifestyle/infotainment" programs - of which in any case there are very few covering health, and only one (Beyond 2000) dealing explicitly with science and technology. However people who access, for example, the Health Report include many of those most closely concerned with developments in health research and policy, and in that respect the program has influence far beyond the size of its audience.

This is not to argue against the value of mass-market programs which give a lighter, or less sustained treatment to health or scientific issues. They have an important place, but do not meet the need for specialised programming. If that need is accepted, then the question is whether the private sector can or will fill it. The record suggests that it will not, largely because of the primacy of audience share.

A fair assessment of the influence of ABC programs in this area would also need to take into account what secondary use is made of tapes and transcripts of those programs in schools and the community generally.

Independence is an important issue, particularly in the health arena. There is good evidence that links with tobacco advertisers led to below-average coverage of the adverse health effects of smoking in women's magazines during the 1980's. Robust, independent coverage of health, environmental and technological issues is one of the major assets that public broadcasting represents.

Finally, the ABC has adapted well to the opportunities presented by the internet. ABC Online provides excellent support to its science and health programs via transcripts, program synopses and well-selected links to other sites.

SUMMARY

It is in the national interest that science, technology and health events and issues are reported, presented and analysed by an independent public broadcaster.

Australian researchers are a poorly-visible group whose work is of interest to and a source of pride for the broader community.

The performance of the ABC in science and health programming and production is well-regarded, which in part reflects the specialised teams which the organisation maintains.

It is very unlikely that the private sector would produce programs of the same depth and quality if the ABC did not produce them.

RECOMMENDATIONS

ASMR recommends that:

1. The ABC maintains a leading role in the broadcast coverage of science, technology and health issues, especially where they involve or impact on the Australian community.
2. This role requires a capacity for specialised news and investigative reporting, the production of feature-documentary programs for radio, television and the maintenance of high-quality internet sites.
3. This implies that the ABC should retain journalists, researchers and producers with specialised expertise in the analysis and communication of concepts, events and issues in the scientific, technical and health arenas.

Australian Society for Medical Research

Graham J. Mann PhD

President