

PUBLIC SERVICE MEDIA

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Good Morning. I'm very glad to be here and to speak to you as part of this wide ranging conference. I think it's indicative and highly symbolic that a line can be drawn between just about every other topic being addressed over these two days, and a link and connection made with all the issues that I will cover in my speech. It's indicative of the nature of the digital media environment in which we're all operating, and symbolic of the changes that have been, and are occurring right now. No more one way straight lines and directions; in its place, convoluted snaking criss-crossing connections that go back and forth, and are never still.

We are all in the midst of the massive changes occurring in the digital media environment in Australia. Old certainties about how content is made, stored, delivered and exploited are being swept away. The old alliances and competitors are in a state of flux.

Alongside the digital and analogue free-to-air services both commercial and public we have digital subscription and pay per view services; we have interactive functionality; there are burgeoning choices for online video downloads and video streaming; user created content is being uploaded and shared constantly; social networking is blossoming on the internet; virtual worlds are created and populated at speed; the print media is expanding into online content and video delivery, and citizen journalism. The hot concepts right now include IPTV, Internet Television, Web TV, digital broadcasting and video-on-demand – but this will change soon. Viewers are evolving from just sitting back and channel surfing to taking for granted what has been called the C-words of the digital realm: control, convenience, customisation and choice.

What I'm going to talk about today is a new, invigorated role for public service media in this digital space. Not just in terms of the nature, range and extent of its services and content offering, but its role in delivering against a broad government policy framework. In the analogue world the ABC has been an important part of the broadcasting system and its policy outcomes. In the digital era, in the increasingly complex digital arena, the public broadcaster has an extended and a more central and critical role to play in ensuring that government can achieve its broadcasting and media policy objectives.

If we look back over more than five decades, Australian governments have created and sustained an audio-visual public policy framework to regulate the broadcasting environment. They've done this for a number of reasons, not least because they've always recognised the importance, the potency and the significance of broadcasting in the public arena. Governments, in acknowledging the power and persuasiveness of all forms of media, have continued to intervene in this space. The traditional rationale for public service broadcasting arises both from the perceived and the real social importance of the broadcasting media and the potential influence that broadcasting can have on values, attitudes, and beliefs.

And over these five decades, not much changed in the way business was done and the way viewers watched programs: public broadcasting legislation provided for firstly the ABC, and subsequently SBS, broadcasting legislation has regulated commercial free-to-view, subscription, and community television services, media ownership laws have had their

influence, content regulation has provided for minimum levels, at least, of local content for both children and adults, and legislation has provided for classification, captioning, and copyright and intellectual property protection.

Apart from the regulatory, commercial and technical issues governed by the policy framework, a critically important goal of the policy over the years has been to achieve certain cultural outcomes. By and large, these cultural outcomes are manifested in the production and delivery to Australian audiences of diverse, quality, engaging Australian content.

On this point, let us not forget that the history of Australian content on Australian television is in fact the history of regulation. Where and when government intervention through regulation has been absent, so too has been an extensive and diverse offering of Australian content. This applies to the ABC which when confronted with revenue pressures, both the volume and diversity of its Australian content has been the first to suffer. It certainly applies to subscription television and it will apply to any free-to-air multi channel offering, developments in the area of IPTV, and other developments coming to us from the digital future.

Of course, our existing policy framework was established under very different social, technological and economic conditions. It evolved in response to the particular conditions here in Australia: a small population and a large country, a combination of public and commercial interests, a dominance of overseas content and little or no local production industry in the early years of television. Since 1961, it has involved a combination of regulation of commercial free-to-view television, Federal and State government subsidies, and, importantly, funding to the ABC.

Public broadcasting has always been one of the key planks of government policy intervention in the broadcasting environment. The characteristics traditionally associated with public broadcasting include universality of service, universality of appeal (programming that appeals to wide sections of the community), providing for a range of interests, a relationship to identity and community, independence, universality of funding and ideas of quality and innovation.

Central to the concept has been the goal of serving community needs and the interests of the public. This is reflected in ownership, funding and programming that deliver a public sphere, a public space, for both serious discussion and entertainment, and for the dissemination of information and ideas essential for the functioning of a democratic society.

Of course our existing policy framework was designed for a broadcasting environment which has already undergone dramatic changes and will continue to change. The revolution that we've been hearing about since the mid 90's is finally upon us; with Web 2.0, better broadband speeds and more household computers and broadband connections than ever before, we are now **really** coming to understand the meaning of convergence, of user choice, and of being connected. We are rapidly reaching a tipping point: a point where network television won't be such a dominant and driving force, where time and place shifting devices will tip the balance to truly fragmented and self-pleasing audiences, where a significant portion of network content will be delivered online.

Notwithstanding all this change, the broad concepts, developed in an analogue broadcasting environment, remain relevant for a digital media world. However, I am proposing that in this

rapidly evolving digital environment, it is time to reassess and where necessary reshape the Australian broadcasting policy framework. And while the environment has changed, all the reasons for the original policy framework remain just as vital, especially the cultural reasons.

The policy ambition of the analogue era provided for Australian communities to have access to commercial and non-commercial services, for greater content choices than the market would otherwise deliver, as well as for enhanced content innovation on the supply side. The ABC has played a central role to all this throughout its existence. And this role remains just as necessary in the digital world, where the big fish keep swallowing the minnows, where audiences are fragmenting and the fight for them is more ruthless than ever, and where the drive for fragmenting revenues will inevitably interfere with expanded choice and innovation in content.

It is in this context that I maintain that what hasn't changed is the underlying cultural rationale for a new policy framework to ensure Australian content is available to Australians in the digital era. If it is true that the history of Australian content on Australian television is in fact the history of regulation, it is equally true that the policy debate around broadcasting in Australia is largely driven and dominated by issues around developments in technology, infrastructure development, spectrum management, commercial outcomes and structures, ownership and control. At the moment, on the eve of an election, we have spirited public debate about broadband rollout with little or no consideration given to what content will be going down the pipes. We hear about broadband and education, broadband and home entertainment systems, broadband and download speeds, broadband and child safety even, but rarely if ever about broadband and locally produced content.

In fact the only time the issue of content, and in particular local content, in the digital era took centre stage was during the US free trade agreement discussions a few years ago. The importance of ensuring a space for Australian culture, a space for Australian content in the digital space was recognised by everybody from the Prime Minister down, perhaps with the exception of The Australian newspaper. And ultimately, in February 2004, after concluding the agreed text for the Australia US Free Trade Agreement, the Trade Minister Mark Vaile stated that a critical element of the agreement was that Australia still had the right to ensure local content was retained in broadcasting and audiovisual services, including new and emerging media formats. It was critical then, in 2004, and remains just as critical the deeper we move into the digital environment where audiences are behaving very differently to the mass prime time audiences of the past.

Audiences are now increasingly consuming and engaging with content in fundamentally different ways to the must-watch primetime viewing. Although network TV is still the way most people view TV content, audiences are moving to new platforms and dedicated services, as well as accessing content online and via a range of devices. And they don't just sit and watch quietly; they also want to share the content with each other, and they want to participate in the creation of programs. Audiences have a whole range of new expectations around their content – they expect to choose specific content, they expect to timeshift and placeshift to suit themselves, and they want rich media extensions to programs, the ability to interact, the ability to engage in communities of interest around their programs and areas of interest. Now they even want to build, program and share their own channels. And the content that they view, the content they share and the content with which they want to participate, increasingly is not Australian.

So why is Australian content as important in the digital environment, as in the analog environment?

Whatever else has changed, the thing that remains true is that audiences come together around content. Individuals are drawn to a collective experience around the desire for information, for entertainment and sometimes education. Content is the defining characteristic of the experience and it is the nature, the quality, the relevance of that content, to which an audience relates.

Australian television audiences have access to Australian content by and large as a result of Government policy. If the effectiveness of the policy is diluted by changes in the environment, if the policy framework developed for an analogue world is increasingly no longer fit-for-purpose, then increasingly the Australian community will not be able to find and enjoy quality, engaging Australian programs and content.

Apart from recognising the relationship, and its importance, between Australian culture and Australian audiovisual content, the Howard Government over the last two years has shown its commitment to providing for the availability of Australian content in other ways; through the \$30m funding provided to the ABC last year for additional Australian content in the areas of drama and documentary, and earlier this year with the new \$280 million screen media package, which is aimed at assisting the development of a more sustainable production industry as well as increasing the level of Australian television and feature film production.

However, if we acknowledge the changing environment, as we must, and if we acknowledge the ongoing rationale for a policy framework, which we do, then we need to think about what form a renovated and fit-for-purpose in the digital era policy framework should take. As I said, the Government's interventions over the last two years have been welcomed, and now, to meet the challenges of the technological, social, and economic changes occurring in the digital media world, we need to formulate a new policy paradigm that addresses the tectonic shifts in production, distribution and consumption of content.

Governments will always have the policy tools of regulation and the provision of direct and indirect subsidies available to use. However, as the effectiveness of these interventions is increasingly challenged by the complexity and pace of change, I would argue that the role of the ABC as the public broadcaster correspondingly becomes more important as the vehicle by which cultural policy outcomes can be achieved.

Do we believe new media markets will deliver Australian content to Australian audiences any more effectively than the existing television markets? I think we need to acknowledge that a significant level of Australian content being available to Australian audiences in the digital space will not happen of and by itself. A renovated public policy framework around the regulation and funding of content, and particularly around public broadcasting, will be required – and it will need to be fit for purpose in the digital era. As I noted earlier, I see a new invigorated role for the ABC in the new policy paradigm. It has played a fundamental role in the past, and can continue to play a vital role in a framework that underpins the creation, distribution and availability of Australian content in the digital era.

The ABC has traditionally sought out and cultivated talent and contributed to the development of the Australian screen content creation sector, demonstrating and encouraging creative excellence, innovation and integrity in its programming, and nurturing the Australian production sector. The ABC has played an important role in the development of the

independent production community; I see this role as naturally encompassing the new media and digital content services industries into the future, increasingly important as stakeholders and as production partners with the ABC. Our common interests lie in delivering diverse, quality, Australian content to audiences.

So I think the time is right for the ABC to take on a rejuvenated role within a renewed public policy framework. The ABC can lead the way in the digital environment in creativity, innovation and in content creation, setting competitive benchmarks in the volume, quality and range of Australian programs for our broadcasting and content creation industries.

As I said earlier, in my view there is not enough attention being given to this, in the noise, and bustle, and excitement, and, dare I say, confusion, of the digital environment. Up to now the media policy debate has pretty well been dominated by commercial interests, and by and large the deliberations around the digital future has focused on technology and infrastructure – there has been very little attention given to the cultural policy issues of Australian content and its place in that digital future. For example, the impact of spectrum re-allocation without consideration of Australian content has the potential to limit the breadth and range of its availability, as well as limit Australian people's ability to access Australian content.

The need for a rejuvenated policy framework for the digital environment is nowhere more clearly illustrated than in the current arena of children's content in Australia. As the ABC has outlined in its submission to the Australian Communications and Media Authority for its review of the Children's Television Standards, in the new digital environment Australian children and parents are not being well served by existing regulatory arrangements. As children increasingly seek out content on new platforms, including subscription television and online, the current policy structure, based around traditional commercial free-to-view television, looks increasingly outdated. The key issue, if the cultural objectives of the policy framework are to be achieved, is to ensure that audiences and quality Australian content connect. If Australian children and parents are to have access to Australian programs in the developing digital environment, new and additional mechanisms must be considered.

The ABC can lead the way in this area which is why we are advocating a dedicated, commercial-free Australian children's channel as an integral part of the policy solution. A dedicated children's digital channel, in conjunction with innovative content across multiple platforms, has the capacity to meet the demands of the children's audience by way of multi-platform delivery, interactivity, on-demand services and user-generated content.

The example of the changing children's content market is the canary in the digital coalmine. The migration of children's audiences to subscription and online services, seeking new and richer content, is an indicator of what is happening slightly less rapidly across all audiences.

So where do we go from here?...

I'm arguing for a revised and contemporary policy framework which will reassert the importance of cultural objectives in the digital environment. This new framework should encompass appropriate regulation and direct and indirect public subsidy as it has in the past; and a re-energised role for the national public broadcaster as a leading player in the implementation of the new policy framework. It must place content at the centre of communications policy, with public media as a core element of the content framework

The policy renovation must be broadly based in its conception of regulation, funding and support. However, most especially it must recognise and ensure a place for the ABC - a place for a generally available and free, independent national media organisation; providing diverse, quality and innovative Australian content; across multiple channels and platforms to a multiplicity of devices; a place to connect and speak directly to audiences.

In the digital realm the ABC has an ongoing role as a source of independent, trusted, high quality programs, particularly Australian programs, and as a place for developing a sense of community and social cohesion.

In this environment, in maintaining a public media presence, independence must be guaranteed, funding must be adequate to meet the needs and interests of the community and to promote the flow of information and ideas. There must be appropriate accountability in terms of the discharge of its mission and the use of public resources.

The ABC holds a remarkable and unique unifying position in the hearts and minds of the Australian public. In the on-demand world, where audiences graze across platforms, and consume content from a multiplicity of devices, the new framework must ensure that the ABC remains a part of the nation's cultural, social and political life.