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President*

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**ABC SBS REVIEW
SUBMISSION BY THE AUSTRALIAN ACADEMY OF SCIENCE**

The Australian Academy of Science has a long standing interest in science broadcasting. Advocacy by former Presidents of the Academy in the early 1960s helped convince the then Commissioners of the ABC that communicating the impact of science on society and its contribution to the social and economic wellbeing of the Australian community was not only important but, when done well, also provided excellent material for good broadcasting.

The Academy recognises that that the planned cuts for 2009 affect other specialist programs on affairs in religion, media and sport. However, the Academy has a particular interest in, and is concerned about the planned changes to science programming on both radio and TV. The attached submission amplifies these concerns and provides some suggestions regarding alternative options.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in cursive script, reading "Kurt Lambeck".

Kurt Lambeck

ABC SBS REVIEW

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The Australian Academy of Science has a long standing interest in science broadcasting. Through direct advocacy in the early 1960s by former Presidents of the Academy, the then Commissioners of the ABC were convinced that the organisation had both the opportunity and the responsibility to lead in Australian media by establishing science as a field demanding specialisation in broadcasting on both television and radio. The Commissioners subsequently created a full-time staff post in 1964 for which sound qualifications in science were a prerequisite. As the resulting programs were deemed successful, the Science Unit was established in 1967 and has endured to this day, playing a valuable role in communicating science to the public.

The Academy has publicly recognised the excellence and achievements of ABC science broadcasters. In 1993 Robyn Williams was elected to the Fellowship of the Academy, the first and sole Fellow to work in the media. In 2004 Dr Norman Swan was awarded the Academy Medal which recognises outstanding contributions to science by means other than the conduct of scientific research by a person outside the Fellowship who has, by sustained efforts in the public domain, significantly advanced the cause of science and technology in Australia.

Therefore, while recognising that the planned cuts for 2009 affect other specialist programs on affairs in religion, media and sport, the Academy has a particular interest in, and is concerned about the planned changes to science programming on both radio and TV.

The discussion paper *ABC and SBS: Towards a digital future* states that Australian content, comprehensive and diverse programming, diversity of news and information and education as primary objectives of a national broadcaster.

Australia produces some of the best science and the best scientists in the world, with a reputation for 'punching above their weight' internationally. The Academy considers that by axing of science programs and people – for example *Earthbeat*, *In Conversation* (from January), and closing the Natural History Unit – the ABC is acting

counter to the objectives of national broadcasting, and counter the Australian interest in making Australia a knowledge-based nation.

The removal of a program here or there, or moving programs to web format, may seem small changes, but the accumulated message is that science is not important enough to be in the schedule. It is symptomatic of a steady decrease in air time for science programs. This continuing erosion goes against the ideals of the Academy and, we would argue, the needs of the country. The promotion of excellence in science is essential to advance the development of a scientifically literate culture and long-term scientific vision within Australian society. Australia needs a commitment to maintaining and increasing funds for quality science programs. At the current rate, there is likely to be none left in 10 years time.

If there are less science programs available, the current low level of awareness and understanding of the contribution of science will fall further. This in turn will lead to fewer people considering science as a career and reduced public support for funding Australian science – an important influence in decision-making by governments.

At the 2020 summit there was strong support for ABC's role in children's education (in classrooms) and entertainment. To encourage a scientifically literate public the Academy has developed and implemented *Primary Connections* program. The success of this program in classrooms has shown that science can be interesting and engaging to children, if it is presented in the right way. If a children's channel is established, the Academy would like to see science content integrated into the mix of programs.

In the most recent *Trends in International Maths and Science* report on the education standards of year 4 and 8 students worldwide, Australia performed poorly when compared with students in 60 other countries. A common feature of many high performing countries, apart from curriculum reform, is an implicit understanding that science and technology underlies many of the developmental goals of these countries. This understanding is also central to encouraging an Australian society and scientific culture that is innovative. This process begins not by eroding the very source of most

people's source of scientific information – the media in all its forms – but by strengthening it and diversifying it, the opposite of current programming trends.

The Academy notes that the ABC SBS discussion document also states that the final report of the Australia 2020 Summit emphasised the importance of the news arms of the national broadcasters and their role in supporting an informed and educated citizenry:

National broadcasters should be the venues of public education and offer a space for dissemination of mature judgement on ideas. They should be a repository of knowledge, rather than just of information.'

The Academy strongly supports this view, with particular reference to science content. Answers to the big issues of today – climate change, sustainable energy sources, environmental degradation, medical advances, food security and the growing list of endangered species – can only be found through discussion of science that underlies the issues (eg *The Great Global Warming Swindle*). The education component of the broadcasters' obligation to educate should not stop with children. Once engaged by science, it can become a lifelong passion of relevance to all aspects of life, medical environmental, technology applications.

According to the annual report on American journalism *The State of News Media 2008*, the shape of news is shifting from being a product: story telling and agenda setting are no longer enough. Journalist need to integrate the news and give the audience the tools to make sense of and use the information for themselves. A scientifically literate society can fully participate in discussing ideas and our place in the world.

However, the trend in American journalism is for the news agenda to become narrower, not broader. A similar trend is occurring in Australia, in particular in science news and coverage. It is ironic that as the media world is fragmented into more outlets and options (eg radio and internet) reporting sources have shrunk. The 'big' stories are amplified further, rather than supplying a smorgasbord of information that appeals to a wide range of tastes and interests. The removal of ABC science programs from

the programming schedule is indicative of a shift to formulaic science reporting on medical breakthroughs, space adventures, anthropomorphic nature shows and 'blockbuster' science. The lack of intellectual rigour in populist program can create unrealistic expectations or worse misunderstandings that may result in a public generally disengaged from, or antagonistic to, the science and technology that have shaped the world they live in.

In addition to supporting scientific excellence, the Academy encourages researchers to communicate more broadly with the community about their work and its implications. Minister Kim Carr's recent charter for scientists emphasises both their rights and responsibilities in this regard. The general trend towards removal of science from ABC programming schedules leaves less outlets for effective avenues to do this.

Although scientist's trust of journalists is generally low, the ABC journalists have a better reputation than most, and the ABC is one of the more trusted organisations for fair treatment of interesting, relevant and thoughtful commentary about scientific developments.

The Academy is dismayed to see that in Figure 2, *ABC 1: Imported and local television programming, 2006–07 (24 hours)*, that science and technology had the least number of hours of any genre.

It is stated in the discussion paper that once the transfer to digital transmission is completed by 2013 that transmission costs will decrease substantially. Both the ABC and SBS have flagged proposals for an increase in the number of digital television channels they provide. It would be far preferable to increase the number and variety of programs instead, including a return to quality science programs with an Australian focus as per the objectives of a national broadcaster. It is highly regrettable that the Natural History Unit and ABC-made documentaries are a thing of the past when we now have two ABCs – ABC1 and ABC2.