

ABC chairman Milne attacks 'self-serving' commercial critics

Written by Michelle Grattan, Professorial Fellow, University of Canberra

ABC chairman Justin Milne has gone on the offensive against the organisation's critics, linking the public broadcaster to preserving the nation's identity and strongly warning against the push to clip its digital wings.

Putting the present battle over the broadcaster in an historical context, Milne said in a Wednesday speech to the American Chamber of Commerce in Australia that "Australia has reached another decision point in respect of public broadcasting, just like those of the past.

"The first was whether to establish an ABC, then whether to equip it to deliver a news service independent of the commercial media barons, then once again whether to invest in a public television service.

"And now, as we enter a digital age, Australia must decide whether it wants an ABC fit for the future, and if so, what investments the nation is willing to make to achieve that."

Milne – who was appointed chair by Malcolm Turnbull – said that "in a world of global platforms and content, it has never been more important for Australia to retain its identity.

"And in a world of contested views and facts, it has never been more important to provide an independent and trusted voice, to promote informed democratic debate, and to drive public accountability through investments in investigative journalism."

With reviews into the ABC underway on its competitive neutrality and efficiency, Milne said that, echoing the past, some rivals have suggested the ABC be banned from providing digital services and restricted to linear radio and television.

"Let's be clear: if the ABC were barred from serving audiences on digital platforms, it would wither away and cease to exist. Linear broadcast audiences are in steady decline because Australians, just like people everywhere else on the planet, value the convenience of consuming their favourite content whenever, wherever and however they like."

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The [competitive neutrality review](#), which was set up as part of a deal with Pauline Hanson, is looking at the ABC's role in the modern media environment. An efficiency review of the public broadcasters, including SBS, was announced in May, when the budget froze the ABC's funding until 2022, for a saving of \$83.7 million.

Milne said complaints about the ABC's coverage were taken seriously, because mistakes were made. But the biggest question facing the ABC was not whether a journalist made a mistake or even a question of bias – because some 80% of Australians thought it was not biased. The bigger question was: “How can Australia have a public broadcasting system that is fit for purpose, as efficient as possible, and just as valuable to our children as it has been to us?”

He derided the case put by commercial interests and some partisans who said public money should not be used for a media service that duplicated commercial ones. This argument was “simplistic, facile and entirely self-serving,” he said.

A key challenge facing Australians was how to maintain diversity of voice in a media landscape that was rapidly consolidating, Milne said.

Facebook, Amazon, Apple, Netflix and Google - the FAANGs – had fundamentally transformed the media landscape around the world.

“Facebook and Google alone capture two-thirds of the digital ad market in Australia. Amazon has become a trillion-dollar company. And Netflix's annual spend on content is now three times that of all Australia's commercial, public and pay television businesses combined.

"By contrast, audiences and revenues for incumbent commercial media organisations are tumbling, and ownership is consolidating, especially Down Under.

"Our three pay television operators have become one, owned by the Australian arm of News Corporation in New York. Channel Ten is now in US hands too. And since 2003, the number of owners of Australian newspapers has halved.

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"In television and radio, some 70 per cent of the market is now owned by just four organisations. And in print, 90 per cent is owned by three organisations. These figures will worsen if speculation is correct and Fairfax merges with another incumbent, or regional television businesses merge with their capital-city partners."

Milne said federal governments had dealt with the onslaught of the FAANGs by enabling further consolidation in Australian media, diluting ownership restrictions and boosting commercial incumbents with licence-fee cuts.

"Whatever your view on the business or political logic of this, the effect has been to hand control over many Australian media voices to businesses in the US - while substantially diluting the diversity of voices that remain.

"Those who would cripple or even abolish the ABC would clearly exacerbate that consolidation, leading to further homogeneity of voices.

"That may mean that pretty soon our kids only see American stories and perspectives to mould their morals, culture and behaviour as adults. And those same kids would need to give up any aspiration to work in a healthy domestic production sector," Milne said.

Michelle Grattan does not work for, consult, own shares in or receive funding from any company or organization that would benefit from this article, and has disclosed no relevant affiliations beyond their academic appointment.

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