ABC News Response to Editorial Review No. 5

Higher Education Reform Bill Coverage, March 2015

ABC News welcomes the findings of Editorial Review Number 5 relating to coverage of the Federal Government's Higher Education Reform Bill during March 2015. The reviewer concludes that the overall quality of the coverage across the ABC was satisfactory and that only one News segment was unsatisfactory and was not in accordance with the ABC's guidelines for impartiality. The reviewer identifies a number of instances where he believes there were minor lapses and areas where ABC News should consider reviewing its practices. The comments are constructive and perceptive and News is pleased to have an opportunity to respond.

News notes the conclusion that the ABC did a better job covering the day to day politics of the higher education debate during this period than in delivering in-depth analysis of the long term issues confronting the sector and that the coverage would have benefited from contributions from a wider pool of experts and institutions. To some extent, this is an inevitable result of the expectation to produce daily news and current affairs during a period dominated by shifting negotiations and events in Canberra. News accepts that there is room for improvement in this area and that it is crucial for the ABC to not just follow the debate, but to elevate it.

Providing more insightful and contextual coverage of important issues has been identified as a goal in News' current content strategies. Both at a national and state and territory level, the investment in the National Reporting Team, state coverage producers and Digital Interactive Story-telling Team and the state digital producers should enable News to provide more insightful coverage across its platforms and output.

As noted, the reviewer did find one segment unsatisfactory.

The introduction to the interview on AM on 18 March with Senator Eric Abetz, which assessed the government's situation as going "from bad to worse" was described as a "simplistic over statement". The review concluded that this was contrary to ABC Impartiality Guidance Notes, which suggest avoiding the desire to overstate key points. Overall, the segment was said to have "risked being seen as having a tone of prosecuting a crisis narrative, ie 'the smell of blood'."

News notes that most members of the audience would have listened to this interview as part of a 30 minute *AM* program. Assessed in this light, News does not believe that the introduction was an overstatement. The preceding story had reported that the Senate had voted down legislation concerning the Australian Building and Construction Commission (ABCC) and the higher education reforms. It had also been revealed that while the government was promoting new red-tape reduction legislation, \$2.5 billion of similar saving from the previous year's budget had failed to pass the Senate. The story included quotes from three senators, Xenophon, Lambie and Madigan, outlining the problems the government was having in the Senate.

News does not believe that the introduction to the interview was "simplistic"; in the sense that it was in any way misleading or distorting of the facts or a reasonable analysis of the situation. The introduction described the Senate as "recalcitrant", while the phrase "from bad to worse" simply means that the situation had deteriorated, which it demonstrably had.

The interview primarily concerned the government's failure to get its legislation through the Senate and the widely reported perception that the government had lost political control of its agenda and its relations with the Senate were at a low ebb. It was conducted in the immediate aftermath of the Prime Minister describing the Senate as "feral". As the manager of government business in the Senate, Senator Abetz was the appropriate politician to challenge on this failure. The interview by Michael Brissenden was civil and respectful in its tone and the minister was given ample opportunity to respond to questions. He was rightly put under some pressure but News rejects the suggestion that the interviewer was attempting to manufacture a crisis narrative, ie "the smell of blood" or that it was not in accordance with the ABC's guidelines on impartiality.

The reviewer cited AM on 16 March, The World Today on 4 March, PM on 13 March, 7.30 on 2 March and News Breakfast on 8 and 18 March, as examples where he believed key points had been exaggerated or nuance and context had been lost in favour of oversimplification. None of these instances was found to be outside the parameters outlined by the Impartiality Guidance Notes. News agrees this is an area which requires constant scrutiny. News notes that each of these examples is of daily current affairs content in which the reporters and presenters are expected to clearly communicate complex ideas and analyses quickly and concisely in a way that engages audiences.

The reviewer pointed out a small number of examples where the source of content was unclear or where attribution was insufficient. This is a valid criticism and News will examine its processes with a view to implementing more consistent and transparent practices.

A similar observation was made that there was a lack of transparency in some instances concerning whether a reasonable opportunity for a right of reply had been offered in cases where there had been direct criticism of a person's or party's policy statements. This is a complex issue in the context of rolling news services, whether on television, radio or online. The editorial policies state that the ABC should "Present a diversity of perspectives so that, over time, no significant strand of thought or belief within the community is knowingly excluded or disproportionately represented". News is pleased that the reviewer has found that News' overall coverage and each individual item was consistent with this extremely important standard. It is worth noting that there is no requirement in the editorial policies to offer a direct right of reply in relation to differences of opinion, no matter how strongly expressed.

None the less, transparency and clearly demonstrating fairness have an important impact on the perception of bias among audiences. News accepts that it can improve in this area by ensuring that whenever possible, audiences will be clearly informed when interview requests have been declined or when further comment is being sought.

The comparative lack of scrutiny of the ALP and the Greens was also raised in the review. News Breakfast did interview the shadow Education Minister, Kim Carr and challenged him on the former government's policies and the Opposition's current lack of a policy. However, it is true that the emphasis was not on the Opposition. The period of review covered the government's attempt to legislate a specific piece of legislation. The total opposition to the changes by the ALP and the Greens was a given in the process. Most news developments concerned the negotiations between the government and the cross benchers and within the government itself, influenced by key external stakeholders such as the universities.

ABC News welcomes the reviewer's suggestions in relation to The Drum. News notes that the program now regularly directs viewers to the website to read analysis from contributors and the program team is currently exploring ways to attract a broader range of contributors to the program as panellists or guests.

The reviewer noted that there was no evidence on The Drum website that contributors were invited to respond to criticisms and comments made about their articles. He also noted that there was a lack of interactivity between the program and the comments section and had questions about how the section is moderated. The section is, in fact, carefully moderated, although the software currently being used is less than ideal and an upgrade is planned. It is not common practice in any mass media news sites for contributors to be required to participate in online forums. The comments section should be seen as a community of the audience, which is open to all views as long as the House Rules are observed. People who are criticised are welcome to contribute but The Drum does not believe it is its role to facilitate that.