

# Impartiality and Quality Assurance –

Independent reviews of QA projects 3, 4 and 5, with responses by the projects' manager

December 2008

Advise. Verify. Review



#### **Editorial Policies**

The Editorial Policies of the ABC are its leading standards and a day-to-day reference for makers of ABC content. The Editorial Policies –

- give practical shape to statutory obligations in the ABC Act;
- set out the ABC's self-regulatory standards and how to enforce them; and
- describe and explain to staff and the community the editorial and ethical principles fundamental to the ABC.

The role of Director Editorial Policies was established in 2007 and comprises three main functions: to advise, verify and review.

The verification function principally involves the design and implementation of quality assurance projects to allow the ABC to assess whether it is meeting the standards required of it and to contribute to continuous improvement of the national public broadcaster and its content.

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#### **Foreword**

In July 2008, the ABC published the reports of its first three projects to assess whether three samples, each from different categories of its content, were impartial according to the relevant standards in its Editorial Policies.

This work is new, not just to the ABC but to Australian media self-regulation generally. The methodologies were purpose-built. As foreshadowed, reviews were commissioned from independent experts, with an eye to improving the projects next time, especially the methodologies.

The Background section of this paper briefly explains each of the Quality Assurance (QA) projects, links to the full project reports, and sets them in context.

These quality assurance efforts are unapologetically works-in-progress. As with the daily task of producing media content for broadcast or publication, the task of assessing media performance is a matter of striving for continuous improvement.

The techniques used by media organisations for systematically checking whether they are meeting the standards they set for themselves are not well developed, at least not in public. This is odd, since the media are one of the ways democratic societies assess and disclose whether most other institutions are up to scratch.

The specialist literature on quality assurance in the media tends to contain large one-off studies by academics or philanthropic organisations. These can be valuable, but they are also expensive, time-consuming and often tightly focussed on a particular controversy.

With these QA projects – not just on impartiality, but on accuracy and other standards – the ABC is aiming to create something different: methods that can be re-used regularly, at low cost, with reliable results, according to fair and rigorous processes.

These reviews of the early projects contain a mix of criticism, reservation, encouragement, praise and, above all, constructive suggestion.

Disclosing the reviewers' reports is no more comfortable for the ABC than being the subject of the ABC's journalistic disclosures is comfortable for many others. But, like the journalistic disclosures about those others, this transparency about the ABC's efforts is necessary.

The robust professionalism of the project manager, Dr Denis Muller, in engaging with the reviewers' reports in his written responses and in strongly supporting full disclosure is acknowledged.

The thought and care that the reviewers invested in their work, and their agreement to disclosure of their review reports, is appreciated.

PAUL CHADWICK
Director Editorial Policies

December 2008

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### I. Background

#### Assessing impartiality of ABC content

Unlike other media organisations, the ABC has to abide by the *ABC Act*. That means that the ABC must maintain independence and integrity and ensure that the gathering and presentation of news and information is accurate and impartial according to the recognised standards of objective journalism. To give its statutory duty practical shape, the ABC's detailed Editorial Policies set standards.

The Editorial Policies contain three different tests for impartiality depending on the category of content being assessed -

<u>News and Current Affairs Content</u> has to be impartial. To be impartial, news coverage needs: accuracy; fairness, balance; context; no conflicts of interest; no prejudgement; and decision-making based on news values only.

<u>Topical and Factual Content</u> that deals with matters of contention or public debate has to demonstrate a diversity of principal relevant perspectives across a network or platform in an appropriate time-frame.

<u>Opinion Content</u> relates to matters of contention and public debate and has to demonstrate a diversity of perspectives across a network or platform by providing content of a similar type and weight in an appropriate time-frame.

#### First report on Impartiality and News and Current Affairs Content

A sample of items from ABC TV News in Victoria was assessed. All items related to the contentious issue of deepening the shipping channel in Port Phillip Bay. ABC coverage was compared with the coverage of the same issue by the two main Melbourne dailies, *The Age* and the *Herald Sun*.

Four experienced journalists, none of whom works for the ABC, reviewed the coverage. They reinterviewed various participants from all sides of the controversy, asking each of them consistent questions about the characteristics of the coverage. The reviewers supplied the project manager with preliminary assessments about how the ABC news items lined up against the seven elements of impartiality.

The project manager made the final assessment. As is standard in any audit process, the preliminary findings were provided to the ABC News Division for response, which was considered in reaching final conclusions.

The overall conclusion was that the elements of impartiality were present to a sufficient degree in the ABC TV News sample that was assessed. The requirement of section 5 of the Editorial Policies was met.

The full report *Quality Assurance Project 3: Impartiality (News Content)* is available at http://www.abc.net.au/corp/pubs/documents/ga3-final public report-july 2008.pdf.

#### First report on Impartiality and Topical and Factual Content

A sample of items from the Radio National network was assessed. The matter of contention was how Australia manages its water. The time-frame was the period 1 June to 31 August 2007. Nine principal relevant perspectives were distilled from media coverage of public debate and from advice sought from the Australian Water Association. The sample unavoidably came from a variety of program types because this part of the Editorial Policies requires an assessment of impartiality to be made across an entire network or platform. The sample programs were analysed using quantitative and qualitative techniques. Two qualified researchers, working to the project manager, undertook the work. All three are independent of the ABC.

They examined whose 'voices' had appeared in the coverage: for example, were they decision-makers in authority, experts, pressure groups of various kinds, or the people affected by the issue under discussion? The researchers considered the context or 'frame' in which the principal relevant perspectives had been

presented. The tone and nature of the title, introduction and the body of the item were examined individually, then each item was examined as a whole. Draft findings were provided to the ABC Radio Division for response, which was considered.

A diversity of principal relevant perspectives was found. The programs were found to have presented the matter of contention in a range of contexts or 'frames' (political, environmental etc.) that added to the breadth of the coverage. The requirement of section 7 of the Editorial Policies was met.

The full report, *Quality Assurance Project 4: Impartiality (Topical and Factual Content)* is available at <a href="http://www.abc.net.au/corp/pubs/documents/qa4-final report-july 2008.pdf">http://www.abc.net.au/corp/pubs/documents/qa4-final report-july 2008.pdf</a>.

#### **Report on Impartiality and Opinion Content**

The category of ABC content called 'Opinion' is narrowly defined in section 6 of the Editorial Policies. Opinion content is commissioned or acquired by the ABC to provide a particular perspective or point of view. The opinion is presented by the author of the content. It relates to matters of contention and public debate. A sample of items was taken from the ABC's online platform. The matter of contention was the Apology. The time-frame was the six-month period prior to the week in February 2008 when the Prime Minister made the formal apology in Federal Parliament.

Twenty-one opinion pieces by a range of authors were assessed. The project manager read each piece, extracted the perspectives each contained, and grouped them. From the point of view of assessing impartiality in media, novel factors specific to the online platform, such as linking and tagging, had to be considered. Two ABC Divisions, News and Innovation, responded to draft findings. The conclusions were:

Yes

Is a **diversity** of perspectives presented?

Is the content that provides the diversity of perspectives of a **similar type**?

Is the content of a similar weight, meaning -

is the number of times a perspective is

presented similar?

is the space for the perspectives similar

No, when aggregated
Yes, for individuals

is the linking from the items similar?

Yes is the positioning on the website similar?

Yes

Were the qualities required by the Editorial Policies

present to a sufficient degree? Yes

The full report, *Quality Assurance Project 5: Impartiality (Opinion Content)* is available at <a href="http://www.abc.net.au/corp/pubs/documents/qa5-final report-july 2008.pdf">http://www.abc.net.au/corp/pubs/documents/qa5-final report-july 2008.pdf</a>.

#### Interpreting the three reports in their context

The three impartiality projects summarised above follow a similar assessment of accuracy in ABC radio news and current affairs, published in April 2008 and available at <a href="http://www.abc.net.au/corp/pubs/documents/ga2">http://www.abc.net.au/corp/pubs/documents/ga2</a> final report-april 2008.pdf.

These reports should be understood in their proper context. Like any studies, they are limited in the ways described in the reports. They are specific to certain samples of content from certain time-frames about certain issues only. They are not blanket findings about accuracy or impartiality across all the ABC's many programs and platforms.

#### **ABC Editorial Policies**

The aim of the reviews and of the disclosure of the project reports and the review reports is to encourage feedback, consider it, adapt, refine and continue the quality assurance work. The projects form part of a heightened effort by the ABC to assess whether it is meeting the standards it sets for itself. As with all self-regulation, the aim is accountability, maintenance of trust and continuous improvement in quality.

Part of the ABC's statutory role is to innovate. These projects are innovations in the field of media self-regulation.

The ABC would be pleased to share its quality assurance methodologies with any media organisation that wishes to apply the techniques to its own journalistic output with fairness, rigor and transparency.

#### II. Reviewers

#### Ms Kerry Blackburn

Ms Blackburn is a senior journalist with more than 20 years experience in newspapers, radio and television. She is a foreign affairs specialist, and "veteran" of the two Gulf wars and the Bosnia conflict. An award-winning producer with BAFTAs, Emmys and Amnesty International Awards to her name, Ms Blackburn has held a variety of senior editorial roles at ITN and the BBC. She is an Editorial Adviser to the BBC Trust.

#### **Professor Rod Tiffen**

Professor Tiffen, Department of Government and International Relations, University of Sydney, is one of Australia's leading scholars of the media. His teaching and research interests are in the mass media, Australian politics, comparative democratic politics, democratisation and Australian relations with Asia. His most recent book, co-authored with Ross Gittins, is *How Australia Compares* (Cambridge University Press, 2004). He is also author of *Diplomatic Deceits - Government, Media and East Timor, Scandals - Media, Politics and Corruption in Contemporary Australia*; *News and Power, The News from Southeast Asia*; and numerous articles on mass media and Australian politics. He acted as an observer of South Africa's media during that country's first democratic election, and has worked with the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) reviewing Radio Australia.

### III. Report of review of QA projects 3, 4 and 5 by Ms Kerry Blackburn

#### PART ONE:

#### 1.1 Introduction

I have been invited by Paul Chadwick, Director of *Editorial Policies* ABC, to offer a critique of the three Quality Assurance pilots for Impartiality which were conducted earlier this year.

The ABC source material I have used is confined to the three reports and their published appendices, as well as the *Editorial Policies* (July 2008 edition), and the Discussion Paper *Elements of Impartiality* (updated November 2007). As an Independent Editorial Adviser to the BBC Trust, I have also been asked to draw upon my experience of the BBC guidelines and of the implementation of those guidelines in respect of complaints handling and content reviews, and where findings have been published, I have included specific references in the body of my report and in the footnotes as relevant.

I would like to add a personal note. I am new to Australia, and to the output of the ABC. While I am a consumer of the ABC product, I have never worked for the organisation, nor inside any other broadcasting or journalistic enterprise in Australia. That clearly affords some benefits in relation to the freshness and objectivity with which I approach this endeavour, but for freshness also read naivety and some ignorance. I therefore apologise in advance if for lack of historical reference points, knowledge of contemporary debate on media regulation, or understanding of ABC custom and practice, I misinterpret any of the information or reach any wrong-headed conclusions. As a passionate supporter of quality public service broadcasting, I greatly appreciate being invited to offer my thoughts, and while the criticism is at times blunt, the intent always is to be constructive.

#### 1.2 Summary

These are three very different projects with one purpose: to test the relevant content against the impartiality requirement. Each uses different definitions of impartiality, different subject matter, and totally different methodologies. A few common themes emerge, and they are summarised here.

The term "fit for purpose" has become a key phrase in British politics. It was coined relatively recently by a newly-appointed Home Secretary<sup>1</sup>, declaring his department wasn't "fit for purpose": the structures, he felt, were not able to cope with the problems presented by the recent wave of migration from eastern Europe: the systems and processes just weren't sophisticated enough for the job in hand. I use the fit for purpose analogy here for a couple of reasons: above all it seems to me that the process by which the ABC assesses itself, must reach, and hopefully exceed, the threshold of being "fit for purpose": the purpose in this case being to verify that the ABC is meeting the Impartiality standards required of it, and to contribute to the continuous improvement of the ABC and its content.

Given that such a quality assurance exercise has never before been attempted by the ABC, this was a brave undertaking. And despite the seriousness of purpose and the rigour of the methodology, design and execution of each of the three studies, they all fell short – in varying degrees - of what they set out to do, and in that sense they didn't prove fit for purpose. This outcome was probably anticipated, and the value in the pilots is as much about what didn't work as what did – they may be incomplete but they give a tantalizing glimpse of what might be achieved when the quality assurance process is refined.

Whilst each study failed by different degrees and for different reasons, the difficulty of interpreting and applying the Editorial Policies with any consistency, was a challenge common to all three. Where the pilots didn't prove fit for purpose, it was just as often because of the inadequacies of the Editorial Policies, as the design of the studies themselves. A second key conclusion therefore, is that the Editorial Policies require refinement and standardization: a set of more rigorous and robust Editorial Policies could then applied to all future reviews. It would enable the Quality Assurance process to test strictly against the Editorial Policies —

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup> John Reid, House of Commons 23<sup>rd</sup> May 2006

using them as the constant factor – rather than trying to devise a standard test for each type of content, as was the aim of the pilots. Attempting to shoehorn every item of News Content, for example, into a standard test for impartiality is bound to end in tears at the worst, or prove not very informative at best. Assessing impartiality in just one item can be a hugely difficult task, but to attempt to apply a standard methodology across a whole genre, and then to intend to repeat such an exercise using the same methodology, on a totally different body of content, on a random future date, strikes me as not possible, *if the conclusions are to have any validity or usefulness*. I have faith that the Director of Editorial Policies would wish for the Quality Assurance review process to be meaningful to both the ABC audience and the ABC staff, rather than to neatly fit a methodology, hence my bluntness here.

There is another reason why I use the "fit for purpose" analogy. It is in relation to the nature of content which is most likely in the future to require testing and verification for Impartiality. The central point of the recent BBC Trust Report on Impartiality, *From See Saw to Wagon Wheel*, is encompassed in its title: the report discusses how to safeguard impartiality in a climate of rapid social and technological change, in which achieving balance is no longer about merely putting "both sides" of an argument. This is an extract from the Summary:

"Impartiality in broadcasting has long been assumed to apply mainly to party politics and industrial disputes. It involved keeping a balance to ensure the seesaw did not tip too far to one side or the other.

"Those days are over. In today's multi-polar Britain, with its range of cultures, beliefs and identities, impartiality involves many more than two sides to an argument... The seesaw has been replaced by the wagon wheel - the modern version used in the television coverage of cricket, where the wheel is not circular and has a shifting centre with spokes that go in all directions.

From Seesaw to Wagon Wheel: Safeguarding Impartiality in the 21st Century, P5

For multi-polar Britain with all its races, beliefs and cultures, read Australia. The BBC report is an acknowledgement, that as a society becomes more complex, so too does the job of those tasked to reflect that society to itself - the public service broadcaster.

It isn't clear from the pilot studies critiqued here, whether it is envisaged that future studies will be of randomly selected content, as was broadly the case with the pilots, or whether they are likely to result from criticism or concern about a specific subject area. But from whichever source, the Quality Assurance reviews are clearly going to be expensive and time-consuming projects, which will put demands upon an organization and can strain relations between staff and management. There have been a number of recent impartiality reviews commissioned by the BBC. Topics have included the coverage of Europe, the Middle East, Business and the Nations and Regions. Despite some of the findings being brutal and uncomfortable, it is unlikely that staff at any level would have questioned the studies' validity, or failed to understand the value of the findings in better informing the way they work. All the studies were commissioned as the result of concerns (both internal and external), so it was unlikely that the findings were going to produce a totally clean bill of health. But while the studies at the BBC were not commissioned to "verify" the output, they nevertheless achieved many of the things to which the ABC also aspires in its verification process: they showed an organisation genuine about transparency and accountability, honest about its failings and keen to learn from its mistakes by taking real steps to make changes and then to review the effect of those changes. While each study shared some methodology and design, there were many aspects which were purpose built for the specific task.

My major concerns about whether the QAs reviewed here are fit for a similar purpose, is therefore about their operation in practice. Is the ABC really likely to embark on a QA – with all the costs and work involved - if the topic wasn't something about which there were concerns already raised with regard to impartiality, or a feeling that it was a subject area that required sensitivity in handling? In either of those circumstances, the need to verify that the coverage is impartial is likely to encompass more than one genre: the content to be tested would likely range across all of the output in which content regarding this topic had been broadcast: Opinion, Topical and Factual and News. Such an exercise would be a major challenge to the pilot methodologies, (and also to the current separate definitions by content type in the Editorial Policies). And assuming a future QA did arise out of a real concern, those concerns – whether originating internally or externally - are likely to be specific rather than general. Not only will there need to be a sound method for the testing of these challenges, but also a means to report the findings as they relate to the specific

concerns. Therefore, I don't think as they stand, the Design or the Methodology of the QAs are up to such a challenge. And if the design only works for simple reviews then what is the point? It is the big issues and challenges upon which the ABC will be judged.

As noted above, a recurrent theme in all of the studies is the need for a better definition of some of the terms in the Editorial Policies. This is a positive outcome, rather than a negative one: the pilots helped highlight exactly where the shortcomings existed. But at times it was difficult to separate a critique of the Editorial Policies from a critique of the individual studies themselves. I have attempted to distinguish the issues, and in arguing that none of the three pilot reviews alone, would be sophisticated enough to handle a meaningful QA review, I would strongly support the reuse of many of their component parts – an a la carte menu of methodologies as it were, so giving an additional element of standardization to any future QA Review. The most constructive outcome of these pilots would be that they lead to a Quality Assurance framework that is able to draw on a more comprehensive set of Impartiality definitions, and is able to re-use those elements of the pilots which performed best in the testing.

#### 1.3 A note about the Editorial Policies

As noted above, my review of the three pilots, became dominated by the difficulties in interpretation of some elements of the Editorial Polices. Each of the studies identified weaknesses in the definitions of impartiality as a central concern: they were not always up to the task. I concur with that.

I have not been asked to make a detailed critique of the Editorial Policies, so will only comment in them in detail insofar as they relate to their application in the three pilots. This happens throughout the following pages. In particular, there is a broader discussion in Section 2.4 about defining Impartiality, and in 4.5 there are some suggestions for the future.

A few particular thoughts might be useful here. Although the Elements of Impartiality, as defined in the discussion paper, appear intended to be used for other types of content than just News, it was only in the News QA that they formed part of the definitions. That was a pity, as the concepts needed testing across the board, and this appeared to me to have been a missed opportunity.

Secondly, although the Elements of Impartiality had attempted to give meaning to the term impartiality, in practice, a failure is most often the absence of an element rather than the presence of it. That makes it very tricky to define with a word list. The BBC Editorial Guidelines, a similar policy document to the ABC *Editorial Policies*, avoids any single word definitions, and instead defines impartiality by a series of statements explaining the expectations the BBC has of its output<sup>2</sup>.

Thirdly the BBC Guidelines, unlike the ABC's Editorial Policies, make no separation by program genre or content type: they are the BBC Editorial Values – across all platforms and all genres. Where a particular interpretation of say, impartiality, is required for a particular content type, it is contained as a sub-heading within the section. But the overall guideline still applies. This makes it very useful when assessing, for example, an authored contribution within a news or current affairs program, (or even User Generated Content in a forum). For the BBC it is all about signposting, as long as material is clearly introduced and properly attributed so that the viewer can understand the context, there is latitude in any genre, for program makers to explore or report on a specific aspect of an issue, without having to reflect other relevant perspectives, so long as opposing views are not misrepresented. This approach might be helpful to the ABC when considering how to verify for impartiality when the content is contained across different genres.

#### 1.4 A note on the individual reports

While the global thoughts I had concerning the QAs are summarized above, the basis for my conclusions are contained in the detailed critiques of each pilot. There are additionally some thoughts which only apply to a specific pilot, and which don't necessarily form part of the summary above. It is therefore important that the report is read as a whole.

There has been a substantial use of market research tools in the studies; I make no claims to being qualified to comment professionally on the validity or reliability of the data. In reaching my conclusions, I have therefore assumed others have assessed the techniques and are comfortable with the methods for

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>2</sup> See Appendix A: BBC Editorial Guidelines, Section 4 "Impartiality and Diversity of Opinion"

codifying the data; my comments are confined to analysing the effectiveness of the information produced as a means to verify the content.

#### **PART TWO:**

#### **Quality Assurance Project 3: Impartiality (News Content)**

#### 2.1 Introduction

There were two major problems with this pilot which lead me to conclude that it was the least convincing of the three. Although at first sight it seemed the one which performed the most straightforwardly against the design, it is the lack of sophistication in the design and methodology which in my opinion renders the study what I would call sub-optimal. The content may or not have met the impartiality requirement, but I don't believe the study could have told us one way or the other. Firstly, I think the methodology was flawed in some key respects and therefore incapable of producing a result that is reliable, valid and generalisable, as demanded by the Design. Secondly, the credibility of the study rested in a large part on the effectiveness of the seven elements used to define impartiality. These seemed to me often to be as lacking in definition as the original term, and in the case of news values and accuracy, not strictly relevant to a test for impartiality.

As I read the study my unease grew and I started to wonder, if I was a member of the public reading the report online what I would make of it?

- The reporters had been asked whether they were biased and of course they said no.
- The interviewees who had been invited to comment on what they thought, all said the item in which they appeared was jolly good (and when they said the item was unfair, their views were dismissed as being without merit).
- Those conducting the review, with one exception, had never worked as television journalists.
- Pictures were excluded from the analysis of nine television reports (even though, perversely, the strong pictures were used to justify the inclusion of one of the items).
- Newspapers were used to validate the tv reports, but when the coverage in The Age was substantially different, it was ignored because of the perceived bias of that newspaper

I am obviously paraphrasing and taking some licence. But would a viewer reading the QA, be reassured as to the ABC's impartiality?

I had another major concern, which is that the study was both too simplistic and too complex. Too simplistic in that it failed to treat the material with the complexity it deserves, and too complex, because it employed a sledgehammer to crack a nut. The design of using a series of interlocking approaches – many of which I believe aren't valid - seems unnecessary, and frankly a waste of money, for a study of this type and this scale. After all it was looking at just nine short news reports. One well trained reviewer, with research help, could have devised a more meaningful report on a much-reduced budget. The recommendations made by the report's author for future refinements largely offer further heat, but not much more light. I think the major problem in this study is that the content itself is treated with so little respect and understanding. Some of the refinements suggested might be applicable in a future QA: a focus group could be useful if a broader issue was being tested, but would be fairly pointless on a specific news issue. Similarly there may be a role for a semiotician (not two), if for example the verification was testing for impartiality in respect of the stereotyping of disabled people.

In summary, in trying to devise a "one size fits all" study which can work across the range of news content, no account is taken of the varied nature of the future QAs the ABC may be required to conduct. And unlike the other two pilots, I think there is little of use in this pilot that I would look to repeat.

#### 2.2 The Definitions of Impartiality for News Content QA

For the purposes of this report, I have taken the sections of the *Editorial Policies* as extracted below to be those which are applicable to QA3

From the preamble to the *Editorial Policies:* 

 As a creator, broadcaster and publisher of news and current affairs content, the Board requires impartiality at the content or program level. This means that each program or item of news and current affairs content must be impartial in accordance with the requirements set out in Section 5

From within Section 5 of the Editorial Policies:

#### 5.2 The principles of editorial practice for news and current affairs content

- **5.2.1** All news and current affairs content will be accurate, impartial and objective, and thereby avoid bias. Staff working on news and current affairs content are required to keep in mind the ABC's key values: honesty, fairness, independent and respect.
- **5.2.2** Staff must also observe the following principles:
- (a) The ABC takes no editorial stand in its programming
- (b) Avoid conflicts of interest
- (c) Be accurate
  - (i) Every reasonable effort, in the circumstances, must be made to ensure that the factual content of news and current affairs is accurate and in context.
- (d) Be impartial. Editorial judgements are based on news values, not for example on political, commercial or sectional interests or personal views. Do not unduly favour one perspective over others.
- (e) Be balanced. Balance will be sought but may not always be achieved within a single program or publication; it will be achieved as soon as reasonably practicable and in an appropriate manner. It is not essential to give all sides equal time. As far as possible, present principal relevant views on matters of importance

I note a possible inconsistency between the preamble's requirement that

"each program or item of news and current affairs content must be impartial"

And the statement in 5.2.2 (e):

"Balance will be sought but my not always be achieved within a single program or publication; it will be achieved as soon as reasonably practicable and in an appropriate manner."

It's not clear in the context whether the *Editorial Policies* are stating that an item can be imbalanced but still be impartial. It may be that this is one of the reasons, that the *Elements of Impartiality* discussion paper was produced.

I have also been asked to consider *Elements of Impartiality (November 2007)*, and in particular the five key elements of impartiality set out in that paper, namely:

Accuracy

Fairness

Balance

Context

No conflicts or prejudgement

I further note that while these formed the basis for the definitions used by the researchers in QA3, an extra element, News Values, was added by the review authors for the purposes of this pilot.

#### 2.3 Design and Methodology

#### 2.3.1. The omission of pictures

I am not comfortable with the exclusion of pictures. It may have made no difference to the outcome here, but it makes it hard to judge how generalisable the study would be. Television is pictures: a good television reporter returns from filming a story, and with the picture editor and/or producer run through the rushes to see what they have, and the very best reporter would ask the editor to cut the pictures before writing the script. The study author said that the decision to omit any visuals was to avoid semiotic complexities, but if the study design can't cope with those, then how valid and generalisable can it be?

#### 2.3.2 Assessing the content by interviewing those who feature in the news item

To interview those who feature in an item and ask them what they thought of it in relation to impartiality, is an original and interesting approach to take. But how useful can it really be, and is it valid even as one of a number of interlocking approaches? These are my specific concerns about using participants to help assess a news item and why I consider it to be an invalid approach:

- Some interviewees had a different interpretation of the meaning of fairness and balance than that which had been defined as a test in the study.
- Given that from my experience, many of the challenges to impartiality are about those whose voices aren't heard, then it does seem rather bizarre to use the very people who did have their say. Apart from anything else, they are likely to be the least unbiased source given that they are being interviewed precisely because they represent a particular perspective.
- My understanding is that the interviewees were neither shown the transcripts nor viewed the
  material. Given that the interviews were presumably conducted some time after their contribution
  was made, could the reviewers really rely on the subjects' memories, from a time in which they
  probably appeared all over the TV, radio and newspapers? Or did the reviewers prompt them? If
  that was the case, it ought to be made clear in the methodology.
- Some of the interviewees were not available. While the reviewers noted that not all participants were interviewed, the study doesn't record which aspect those missing voices would have represented in each case. Appendix III lists them in summary form and shows that those missing include the two key authoritative voices. So how reliable can this element ever be, if it can't guarantee to produce many of the voices, and probably none of the key authoritative voices?

A recent BBC Trust complaint<sup>3</sup> did involve a "participant". The item being tested for Impartiality and Accuracy was largely based on an academic paper released by an Economics Professor and an adviser to the Bank of England, and appeared to have taken his words out of context. He was invited to comment as to whether he felt the content (a news item published on BBC Online) was a fair reflection of a paper he had written. His short reply to that specific question was hugely useful in helping the Trust Committee reach their conclusion. The complaint was upheld as a breach of inaccuracy but only with regard to the headline, not in relation to the content of the item itself. It was a very controversial topic, the issue of migration into the UK, and a complicated complaint to navigate, and for that reason a great deal of documentary source material was read, and all of it was included as an appendix to the report which the BBC Trust considered. But only after exhausting all other avenues of research was it decided that the participant needed to be interviewed, because specific questions required to be answered. It wasn't a fishing expedition.

Therefore it is worth including the option of interviewing participants as a menu item in a future QA, but its purpose should be specific and dictated by the nature of the study to be undertaken.

 $<sup>^3\</sup> http://www.bbc.co.uk/bbctrust/assets/files/pdf/appeals/esc\_bulletins/2008/mar.pdf$ 

#### 2.3.3 Comparison with source documents

This appears to have been included primarily to ensure accuracy of the content. The validity of Accuracy as an element of Impartiality is discussed separately in 2.4.1, but assuming it is a valid element, how can the study authors have any idea what source documents a journalist might have used, given that the journalist(s) involved were not participants in the study? What if the journalist was relying on original research, perhaps a telephone conversation with a source? The QA2 Accuracy pilot noted the difficulties of second-guessing the source material a journalist had used for their report. I believe that report clearly demonstrated why the journalist involved should be contacted, if only as a matter of courtesy, if their work is being analysed. In that QA it would have altered the findings. And if source documents are to be utilized, they must be included as an Appendix to the study.

#### 2.3.4 Peer-review of coverage for news values

It is a concern that with perhaps one exception, neither the reviewers nor the study author, appear to have a broadcasting background (I may have misinterpreted this from the report, and apologies if that is the case). It is possibly acceptable for a pilot, but is probably unwise for a genuine QA. There is an entire grammar and rhythm to TV and Radio journalism that doesn't exist in print. And for the findings to have validity, and to be respected inside the ABC as well as by the Australian public, it is imperative that journalists are peer-reviewed by genuine peers. As guidance, the BBC's independent editorial advisers are all senior journalists with extensive backgrounds in TV news and current affairs at output editor level, but with no current or recent employment with the BBC.

It is not clear from the study, precisely how the work was divided amongst the four reviewers. But why was it necessary to go to the expense and effort of four reviewers plus a study author, for nine short items of news? And if it was to make the work burden on any one reviewer less onerous, by dividing the interviews, then the study should have used experienced market researchers with a clipboard. If it was decided that journalists were needed, then it raises issues about their ability to manage the kind of exercise which would generally require specific market research experience to ensure the validity and consistency of the approach. Of course if the interviewing of participants were excluded from a future study, then the workload (and cost) would be much reduced.

#### 2.3.5 Comparison with the Herald Sun and The Age

Why was it considered more relevant to compare the ABC News output with that of newspapers rather than commercial television? Television news is a specific medium, requiring pictures to tell the story, and is also far more restricted as to the volume of material it can communicate: a comparison with other television news would have been immeasurably more useful, particularly given that the Age in particular turned out to be, not surprisingly, flawed as a comparator.

#### 2.3.6 The deepening of the Channel as a single issue

While the purpose of the QA was to test whether the ABC had been impartial in its coverage of this story over a specific time-frame, there was nothing in the design which would have allowed the nine separate news items to be looked at as a whole and assessed as a body of content (such as happened in QA4 and QA5). It rendered it fairly pointless to even take one complete topic; the reviewers may just as well have looked at nine randomly selected news stories.

The concern would be that the nine items could each have been internally impartial according to the tests set out in the methodology, but as a body they may have failed to reflect a significant perspective, or underrepresented the significance of a single perspective. The design had no methodology which could have coped with that.

#### 2.3.7 Headlines and Introductions

There is no discussion or account taken of headlines or of the scripted introductions to an item (unlike in QA4). Even headline pictures can be problematic. These are so often the elements which cause the overall coverage of an item to fail the impartiality test. Very often BBC complaints handlers find there has been a breach of Impartiality or Accuracy in relation to a headline or introduction, even when the actual item itself is judged to have met the requirement (as in the Bank of England example quoted above).

#### 2.4 The "Elements of Impartiality"

I have been asked to comment on the seven elements of which, for this study, "impartiality" is said to consist. This isn't a detailed critique of the Discussion Paper as such, but more specifically a critique of its application in respect of the Quality Assurance Pilot for News Content. Nevertheless, there are some bigger picture thoughts which I hope can be of some help in future discussions on the application of Impartiality in a broadcast context.

Can impartiality be reduced to a set of thesaurus words? As is rightly said in the introduction to the Discussion Paper, impartiality needs to be given a workable meaning. So how clear are the core concepts? Are they principled, contextualised, communicable and capable of consistent application in a variety of settings, as demanded by the Discussion Paper?

#### 2.4.1 Accuracy

If an item of content is inaccurate, it may also fail the impartiality requirement, but usually that is not the case. The reason is that most inaccuracies don't affect either the viewer's understanding of the overall story, or have the effect of misrepresenting an aspect or perspective, and they normally arise indadvertently as a result of poor research – more cock-up than conspiracy. The pilot illustrated exactly this point: on two occasions inaccuracies came to light as a result of the interviews of participants. Although the inaccuracies aren't dismissed, it was concluded that the effect of them didn't lead to a breach of the impartiality requirement.

So, should Accuracy be a core element? Its exclusion would have made the entire pilot much more straightforward. There would have been no need to analyse source documents for example, which appeared to be included purely to verify the accuracy of the content. I appreciate that it is a grey area, and I wouldn't argue that there isn't a symbiotic relationship between impartiality and accuracy, but my concern is that it clouds the issue and occupies a lot of the resource (and therefore cost) of mounting a QA; another element almost always has to be missing for an item to fail the impartiality test.

#### 2.4.2 Fairness and Balance

The two key elements of Fairness and Balance are, as the discussion paper points out, at the heart of what any reasonable person would define as impartiality. But just as impartiality needs defining, using fairness and balance to help explain impartiality without first explaining fairness and balance, is not helpful either.

The sentence used in the existing Ed Pols Section 5.2.2 to define Balance, "do not unduly favour one perspective over others", is a good start, but needs some expansion for it to be applied in any practical sense. Does it mean that a news program cannot produce an item just exploring one aspect of a story, or at least concentrating on one aspect? As already noted, there is an apparent inconsistency here between the preamble and 5.2.2 in the *Editorial Policies*.

This is an extract from the BBC Guidelines on Impartiality:

#### Achieving impartiality

Impartiality must be adequate and appropriate to our output. Our approach to achieving it will therefore vary according to the nature of the subject, the type of output, the likely audience expectation and the extent to which the content and approach is signposted to our audiences.

Impartiality is described in the Agreement as "due impartiality". It requires us to be fair and open minded when examining the evidence and weighing all the material facts, as well as being objective and even handed in our approach to a subject. It does not require the representation of every argument or facet of every argument on every occasion or an equal division of time for each view.

News, in whatever form, must be presented with due impartiality.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>4</sup> Appendix A: BBC Guidelines – Section 4, Impartiality and Diversity of Opinion

There are two key areas that the BBC demands are observed, the first is that in allowing a single view to be expressed, an opposing view isn't misrepresented. And secondly, that any partial item should be signposted to the audience. If an audience understands the context, they are less likely to be unhappy when a particular perspective is dominant – so long as (in the words of the BBC guidelines on Impartiality) "no significant strand of thought is knowingly unreflected or under represented".

The key word "unduly" already exists in the ABC Editorial Policies. And that is helpful. I would suggest it is the practical application of this word which should be teased out, to make the elements of fairness and balance understandable to journalists and program-makers, as well as to the wider audience.

#### 2.4.3 Context

There was a lack of clarity about the arguments for the inclusion of Context as an element in impartiality, and of its definition in the Elements of Impartiality paper. Its application in QA3 of the pilot further confused. I am therefore concerned as to how it could be useful as a key element in assessing Impartiality. Is it capable of being communicated? Can it be applied consistently? In one case it was applied as justification for an item's position in a news bulletin (when set against another item), and then it was applied in a totally different and unrelated way with reference to documentation.

If I were asked to define context, it would be more about audience expectation, signposting, the *context* in which an item was appearing - e.g. a current affairs program as opposed to a straightforward news bulletin for example, one where children might be watching, or one which is likely to have a strictly adult audience.

The reviewers in their summary suggested that any future use of a similar study should seek to more closely define the terms which comprise the elements and against which the material is being tested. I wholeheartedly concur.

#### 2.4.4 No conflicts, No prejudgements

A genuine conflict of interest should of course be declared. And it is assumed that ABC employees are aware of their obligation in this respect. But sometimes it is not that straightforward. "No prejudgement" suggests that a journalist is not allowed to hold views, which of course is patently nonsense. The key is that they don't allow their views to interfere in the proper conduct of their job, and this area seems to be adequately covered in 4.4 of the Editorial Policies. It may be that an expanded Impartiality section might include something even more specific in relation to on-air staff. For guidance, the BBC guidelines specifically prohibit presenters in news and current affairs areas from expressing their views or opinions, but allow for greater latitude in less sensitive areas.

This may be a useful extract from the BBC Guidelines:

- our journalists and presenters, including those in news and current affairs, may provide
  professional judgments but may not express personal opinions on matters of public policy or
  political or industrial controversy. Our audiences should not be able to tell from BBC programs
  or other BBC output the personal views of our journalists and presenters on such matters.
- we offer artists, writers and entertainers scope for individual expression in drama, arts and entertainment and we seek to reflect a wide range of talent and perspective.<sup>5</sup>

The interpretation of "no prejudgements" as applied in the study is too narrow, and appears concerned more with the attitude of the reporter at the point at which the item is commissioned, rather than the effect of the reporter's voice on the final product. While it is imperative that a viewer isn't able to discern from an item of content the views of the reporter, there nevertheless needs to be space for informed judgements from a knowledgeable correspondent. Here is how the BBC discusses the issue in two separate extracts from their recent report, *From See Saw to Wagon Wheel*:

"Impartiality is no excuse for insipid programming. It allows room for fair-minded, evidence-based judgments by senior journalists and documentary-makers, and for controversial, passionate and polemical arguments by contributors and writers.."

Appendix A

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>6</sup> From Seesaw to Wagon Wheel: Safeguarding Impartiality in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, P42

"Impartiality does not require absolute neutrality: the BBC should broadcast professional, evidence-based judgements by those qualified to make them: specialist correspondents, senior documentary-makers, expert presenters.... But the airing of personal opinion on public issues by BBC personnel is incompatible with impartiality. This is a challenging distinction, particularly at a time when the press, other television and radio channels, and the variety of new media on the internet all crave personal opinion."

As an adjunct to the consideration of pre-judgement as an element of impartiality, the Elements of Impartiality Discussion Paper suggests there are two categories of impartiality traits: internal and external. An internal failure of impartiality it argues, is the result of a content failure that is internal to the item. It separately defines "bias" as a failure of impartiality resulting from an external factor, e.g. a closed mind from the reporter. It calls this external. But although the internal failure can occur without the presence of an external failure, the converse isn't true: an item of news content can't only be externally biased, that bias would have to have manifested itself in the content somehow. Consider this: it is perfectly possible (indeed probable), for a presenter to have a viewpoint on an issue (and therefore a bias as defined here), but not to exhibit it.

The BBC guidelines don't presume to argue that a presenter shouldn't have views, only that the audience shouldn't be able to discern them. It's an important distinction. It is of course incapable of being independently tested, as the lack of an open-mind doesn't necessarily render an item in breach.

Therefore I recommend excluding no pre-judgement as an element of impartiality and would question whether "no conflicts" need be there either, given that it is already made clear what is expected of ABC staff in the Editorial Policies.

These are complex issues, which I have reduced to a few short paragraphs. But they are intended to be the start of a conversation, not its conclusion.

#### 2.4.5 Decision-making based on news values

It's a tricky road to go down if it is stated that respect for program-makers' independence is a guiding principle, yet at the same time news values become an element of impartiality. The point is this: it may be that an item is broadcast that appears not to be newsworthy, but that doesn't necessarily mean that item is not impartial. It could just be a poor example of editorship. For an item to fail the impartiality requirement, there would need to be a substantial failure of a further element.

As guidance, at the BBC, the guidelines do not impose any thoughts about what constitutes a news story or where it should appear in a bulletin. That doesn't mean that news values aren't important and don't exist, but it is not the role of an impartiality review to test for them. There are a few words within Guidelines that nod to an interest in news values, particularly the clause which states that it is acceptable to raise any issue at any point on the spectrum so long as there are good editorial reasons for doing so. But in practice, whenever the BBC Trust receives a complaint that a particular story should not have been broadcast, it finds that the selection of stories and their position within a news bulletin are properly matters for the relevant editors and not for the Trust.

#### 2.4.6 Bias by Omission

This isn't one of the seven elements, but I've included it here to prompt debate, as I believe it needs teasing out in any definition of impartiality. Very often content can be judged to fail the impartiality test by virtue of what is missing, rather than that which is present, what in the BBC is called Bias by Omission.<sup>8</sup> It is not just about completeness in the sense of what is available at the time to a reporter, nor about balance or fairness, but much more about the inclusion of a breadth and depth of views, so long as they are honestly and rationally held.

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>7</sup> From Seesaw to Wagon Wheel: Safeguarding Impartiality in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, P80

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>8</sup> From See Saw to Wagon Wheel: Safeguarding Impartiality in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, p37

#### 2.5 The Items in Detail

The significant conclusions relating to the News Content pilot are in the comments above. Many of those conclusions were based on the results as reported in Section V, Findings, so I have included some extra detail in note form below where I think it might be helpful to support those conclusions.

#### 2.5.1 Federal Government green light to dredging; opponents seek injunction

It is a concern that only two of the four participants were available for interview. This seemed a significant flaw of a key design element of the study. It would have been helpful if the reviewers had noted which perspective/aspect the unavailable interviewees represented.

There were very few serious challenges to the impartiality of any of the items in the study, so when there was one – as was the case here - it would have been helpful to have had more information from the review authors about why the criticism didn't have merit. Their justification was that it was only one item in an unfolding news story, and that the anti-dredging position didn't merit more than a minor reference. But either a news story needs to be internally impartial or it doesn't. If it is argued that it is just one story in a running saga, then there needed to have been a means by which the nine items were assessed as a body of content, with a proper calculation of the range of pro and anti views present across the time-frame. This is noted as a flaw in 2.3.6 above. It would have helped here if there had been a transcript of the item appended to the report.

The second issue, which is related to the first, is the easy dismissal of the criticism. The problem with asking for a participant's view and then dismissing it as without merit shouldn't be underestimated in relation to purpose of the QA in the first place: to help the ABC maintain legitimacy and build trust. If each time a comment is made, it is dismissed as without merit, part of this trust-building role could easily be negated. I tend to think the report's conclusion, that the criticism lacked merit, is likely to have been the right one. The flaw may lie more with the idea of asking a participant to comment in the first place. So, if such an exercise is to be conducted again, using a similar design, thought needs to be given on how to handle invited comment with greater sensitivity and transparency.

The divergence of the coverage in The Age newspaper from that of the ABC news story illustrated the inadequacy of The Age as a comparator, and therefore another shortcoming in the study design. The Age devoted much more space to the anti-dredging views. But this wasn't discussed in the report as having any relevance. So what was the point of using the interviewee and The Age if both were dismissed? The reviewers may have been right to conclude that the item was balanced, but then surely the methodology is flawed.

A separate issue arose here with the presentation of the findings. It would have made more sense to have paired this item and the next, as the items ran together on the bulletin on the same evening, and would have been viewed as a whole.

#### 2.5.2 Protests at State Parliament

Only two of the three people approached were available for interview. The concern is the same as for the first item, which view was missing?

#### 2.5.3 Port of Melbourne to start dredging as planned – strict conditions

An interviewee had commented that controversial views had been omitted. The report concluded,

"whatever the merits of the item's content, they are not germane to the issue of impartiality".

The concern here again is about inviting comment and then not appearing to take it seriously. An interviewee has commented about an element which is central to impartiality – the alleged exclusion of a perspective - and the report doesn't explain why it isn't germane. It may have been without merit, but how can a reader of the report verify that finding without further information? More transparency of decision-making was needed here.

The detailed explanation of why the news judgements were sound was interesting, but irrelevant to an understanding of whether the item was impartial. It highlighted the irrelevance of applying a news values test to help verify for impartiality. Again The Age took a different angle, and again it was discounted, further invalidating the inclusion of this approach.

#### 2.5.4 Protesters tried to prevent the start of dredging this morning

Assessing the validity of the finding here is impossible without seeing the transcript, and far from ideal without the pictures. But the nature of the alleged inaccuracy appears to be just the kind of issue which can very easily render a body of content inaccurate. And to do credit to the study design, it is unlikely it would have been uncovered without re-interviewing the participants. But it isn't clear from the detail given, just how central the issue was to understanding of the news item, or whether it led to a serious misrepresentation of an individual or organisation. The assumption is that because the study concluded that the item was impartial, it wasn't that central.

Equally interesting was how the study's author dealt with the unforeseen problem: he devised a test for reasonableness. It was an interesting response, but I'm sure he would agree that it would need serious further thought if consideration was being given to apply it formally as a means of mitigation of a possible breach of impartiality. I would though gently question the validity of adding another layer of definition in the course of a pilot study. Might it have been better to have used the lack of such a definition to highlight the inadequacies (if there were any) of the existing definitions, rather than invent a new test on the hoof?

Regardless of whether it was appropriate to invent the test, it is worth looking at what were felt to be the relevant considerations. It suggests that one consideration (as to whether the reporter should have gone back to the original interviewee to put the new points raised), was how much air-time the item was likely to be given. I think this is irrelevant. If it is to be the lead story on a flagship bulletin on the ABC, even a 30" report can do a lot of damage, if it is inaccurate. Equally an hour long documentary at 11pm – in which the disputed information made up four minutes, could be arguably less damaging. I also feel that the point has been somewhat missed. The tests as devised may be useful for mitigation if there was a question of intent, i.e. deliberate bias. But in terms of the *effect* of any inaccuracy, i.e. the seriousness of the error, it didn't offer any useful means to assess that. Any test of content for impartiality must be capable of being applied to the content independent of any need to deconstruct the material. A more useful test might have been to assess the seriousness of the error in relation to how it affected the understanding of the item. There are two tests the BBC applies when deciding whether an error is serious (and therefore needing to be corrected). The first is whether it materially affects the viewer's understanding of the item and the second is whether it significantly misrepresents an individual or an organisation.

Whether an issue of accuracy had been raised or not, the reporting of protest is always a delicate balance for a reporter, and one which requires some care. For example, the temptation to take police numbers as the true ones, to film from behind police lines (for understandable safety), to accept what the police say about the conduct of protesters. It is why pictures are crucial – although can be equally misleading - to assessing a protest-based item for impartiality.

Specific mention is made in the report of this item, of "the quality of the visuals", as justification for the inclusion and prominence of the story under the news values heading. But I understood that the review team only saw transcripts, and that the complexities surrounding the assessment of pictures would have overcomplicated the study? I'm assuming that the pictures they are referring to are those that they saw in the newspaper cuttings from The Age and the Herald Sun.

The consideration of this item must surely be invalid for all the reasons above.

2.5.5 Port of Melbourne's first report on the effects of dredging

There are no problems with the analysis of this item as far as I can tell.

2.5.6 Opponents of dredging take case to the streets and the courts

There are no problems with the analysis of this item as far as I can tell.

#### 2.5.7 Federal Court gives Port of Melbourne green light to begin dredging

There are no problems with the analysis of this item as far as I can tell.

#### 2.5.8 Dredging supporters hail court decision allowing work to begin

The report notes the lack of a mutually understood meaning for words like balance and conflict of interest, with each interviewee understanding it to mean something rather different than the reviewers. The conclusion is that the media need to be more transparent about what they do, so that terms like fairness and balance in the context of broadcasting are more easily understood. Whilst that is undoubtedly a good idea, it is a long term aim. For the more immediate purpose of future QAs, it should give further pause for thought when asking participants to assess an item of content. The problem the reviewers came up against here, reinforces my earlier concerns about the validity and generalisability of using the interview approach to assessing for impartiality.

This is the only occasion in this study in which the reviewers decided an item failed one of the elements. But it didn't fail the overall test. This supports the recommendation that Accuracy be reconsidered as strictly relevant to impartiality. It's one of those occasions when a straightforward mistake should be assessed purely as that – even if it's quite a fundamental one...

#### 2.5.9 Stateline item on the channel-deepening issue

There are no problems with the analysis of this item as far as I can tell.

#### 2.6 Conclusion

The reasons I conclude that the pilot was unsatisfactory can be summarised thus:

- the inability of the Definitions of Impartiality to stand the rigour of a real test:
  - this was the result of the inclusion of some unnecessary elements,
  - other necessary elements not adequately defined,
  - and some elements missing entirely
- the inadequacies in the structural elements of the study design
  - the interlocking series of approaches is in principle a good idea, but only if the choice of approaches is sensible.
  - Interviewing participants usually added more heat than light
  - Pictures are a necessary element in assessing TV content
  - The newspaper comparators were weak and often confused rather than illuminated the task in hand
  - Source documents were not itemised and in any case may not have matched that which the journalist had access to/used
  - The reviewers occasionally lacked the relevant experience to assess the content.

#### PART THREE:

#### **Quality Assurance Project 4: Impartiality (Topical or Factual Content)**

#### 3.1 Introduction

This was a more successful pilot: it devised some useful concepts and demonstrated it is possible to quantify and then test for some elements of impartiality. The definition of the test for impartiality was of course relatively straightforward, when compared with that required for the News Content study:

"a diversity of principal relevant perspectives on a matter of contention or public debate demonstrated across a network or platform in an appropriate time-frame" In reality, the study just had to test for the presence of "a diversity of principal relevant perspectives".

Most of the comments I have to make in respect of this pilot are also made by the report's author. I would though make a general point: there is an inconsistency if in one Quality Assurance review the researchers are asked to check for accuracy, context, conflicts of interest etc. and in another they aren't. There is nothing inherent in these elements which make them more relevant to News Content than Topical or Factual Content. It is appreciated that the Elements of Impartiality were in themselves being piloted, but the assumption is that they will be standardized and adopted in some form across a number of content genres. So in deciding whether this pilot is capable of replication on another body of content, consideration needs to be given to how a more detailed definition of impartiality might be incorporated into the design for a future QA of this type.

#### 3.2 Definitions of Impartiality for Topical or Factual Content

For the purposes of this report, I have taken the sections of the *Editorial Policies* as extracted below to be relevant in testing for impartiality in respect of Topical or Factual Content.

#### From the *preamble*:

- As a creator, broadcaster and publisher of opinion and topical and factual content, the Board
  requires impartiality at the platform level (i.e. the individual television or radio network, or on ABC
  Online). This means that while individual items of content can take a particular perspective on an
  issue, the ABC must be able to demonstrate at the platform level that it has provided its audiences
  with a range of different perspectives on the subject under consideration. Individual items of
  opinion and topical and factual content must themselves meet the requirements set out in Sections
  6 and 7 respectively
- The Board is clear that the requirement for impartiality whether at content level or platform level –
  does not oblige the ABC to be resolutely neutral on every issue. As an Australian public
  broadcaster, the ABC is committed to fundamental democratic principles including the rule of law,
  freedom of speech and religion, parliamentary democracy and equality of opportunity

From Section 7, Topical and Factual Content:

**7.4.1** The ABC is committed to impartiality: where topical and factual content deals with a matter of contention or public debate, a diversity of principal relevant perspectives should be demonstrated across a network or platform in an appropriate timeframe

#### 3.3 Study Design and Methodology

The study relied heavily on the use of computer analysis and content coding techniques, the validity of which I am unqualified to comment upon. My assessment of the design and methodology is as a consumer of the results. Nevertheless, the rigour with which the key sentence defining impartiality was deconstructed, and its component parts defined, was impressive. The separation of perspectives into aspect and voice was clear and logical. And particularly credible was the list of perspectives and the explanation as to how they had been arrived at. The four categories of voice also made sense and were clearly explained.

#### 3.3.1 Scope

There is one concern here in relation to the selection of "water" as the topic to be tested. It may not have been clear at the outset of the pilot, the extent to which the debate over the centralising of control would dominate the time-frame selected. But once that was realised, it may have been more productive to have recast the "Matter of Contention" as the centralisation of control. That is clearly where the real debate was happening during this period; the other perspectives receded into the background. The data doesn't show the actual airtime devoted to that perspective, and perhaps that's something that should be considered for a future study.

#### 3.3.2 Accounting for varying audience demographics and program briefs

The Radio and Regional Content Division's comments, in regard to no account being taken of the different briefs for each program, or the different audience demographics, have been acknowledged by the report's author, who accepts these factors would need to be taken into account in the future.

But the points made by the Division raise a wider issue, which was touched on in Section One of this report: Breakfast is a mix of News Content and Topical and Factual. On the same theme, an item was excluded from this study because it was classified as Opinion. If another study is to be made in the future in relation to a specific topic, such as water, then does it really make sense to divide the genres in this mechanistic way? The purpose is surely to reassure the ABC Board and the public that the issue is being covered fairly, therefore the more content that can brought into the study, the better, so long as it is contributing to the debate in a rational and sincere way. I would go further, and argue that by expanding a study to include News Content, Topical and Factual, and Opinion, it would better serve the educative purpose of QA projects. It would allow more direct comparisons to be made across the genres.

To give an example: it may be that News Content is demonstratively impartial in its coverage of the drought. But Topical and Factual had paid disproportionate attention to the political row over control of the Murray Darling, whilst neglecting the impact on farmers, which aspect is confined mainly to the regional audience of the *Bush Telegraph*, as farmers are their core demographic. Under the Opinion genre, items on programs and ABC Online have a paucity of any of the authoritative voices, because no government minister has agreed to contribute. The value of that overview snapshot across the content should not be underestimated, and would transform the QAs from a necessary audit to which all the divisions feel obliged to pay lip service to, to a really useful piece of research which could genuinely aid program makers in their commissioning. But without the cross-genre overview, such inconsistencies would be difficult if not impossible to pick up. Furthermore, the audience doesn't respond to the ABC output, particularly within one program, by ring-fencing news content from current affairs content. If there is unease about the ABC coverage of an issue, that will usually manifest itself into a general complaint about the coverage, not about one particular genre.

Taking the argument one stage further, it is yet another reason to devise a definition of, and test for, impartiality, which could apply across all genres. It would make devising a template for cross-genre tests of impartiality much simpler.

#### 3.3.3 Should there be a value assigned to the relevant perspectives?

How valid is it to quantify the number of times a relevant perspective is reflected in the output, unless account is also taken as to the relative importance of that perspective in relation to any other perspective? It was well illustrated in this study, with regard to the perspective labelled "centralise control". It received far more air time than any of the other perspectives, but the reason could be clearly demonstrated. This would suggest that rather than assign a value to each perspective in advance (which is a tricky task and incapable of being objectively reached with any consistency), it would be more efficient and just as valid, to pay close attention when analysing the results (precisely what happened in this instance), and if it is clear that one or two perspectives have the lion's share of the output, then the data needs to be explainable in relation to the news debate at that time. If it can't be explained then that would clearly give cause for concern that the impartiality requirement was not being met. The design of the pilot study was perfect for this, and the domination of the one perspective was easily explained because of the significant debate about the management of the Murray-Darling Basin during the relevant time-frame. It wasn't necessary to have assigned that perspective a value in advance.

#### 3.3.4 Framing (Tone)

The report's author raised the issue of the usefulness of assessing some aspects of tone:

"Although the methodology states as a key question an assessment of whether individual items were associated with a perspective in a supportive, opposed or neutral way, in practice this was not a relevant question in this project. These items presented various points of view about the perspectives but allowed these to be expressed freely by guests."

It is generally accepted amongst broadcasters, that once a platform is given in a "live" or "as live" context, to an interviewee, whether in the form of a discussion or what is known as a one-on-one, balance is assumed – i.e. the interviewee has a fair chance to make their point and it is up to them to use it wisely. That doesn't preclude challenges to the impartiality of an interview, but reduces the likelihood of a challenge being successful. Only very rarely has it been shown that an interviewer chaired a debate unfairly, slightly less rarely has an interviewer been found to have been too harsh on an interviewee in a one-on-one so resulting in a failure to observe impartiality.

The task of an interviewer in a discussion, is much more that of a facilitator than in a one-on-one, where the interviewer is expected by the audience to pose the difficult questions, so bringing balance to the interview. Because nearly ¾ of the content for this pilot was interview and discussion-based, this aspect of the test was never likely to yield much that was useful. I would however question whether this could have been meaningfully coded in any case. Tone really does mean tone, and in the case of radio, what might read quite innocuously in print can sound very different on the radio. The BBC Trust recently considered a complaint about a prominent presenter on a popular BBC Radio Show. The findings are yet to be published, but the accusation was that the presenter demonstrated an anti-government bias in their show, which was actually part of the light entertainment offering on Radio 2. Reading the transcript didn't reveal too much of a problem, but on actually hearing the manner of the comments, it was clear they were intended to have an edge. That is not to suggest that the coders should have listened to nine hours of broadcasting, but it should have been an option open to them if there were any items which gave any cause for concern when coding the content.

### 3.3.5 Framing (Titles and Introductions)

The inclusion of titles and introductions, and an attempt to devise a methodology for testing them for impartiality, was a significant improvement over the News Content pilot, which excluded them altogether. But as the report found, assessing them for the neutrality of their content is like suggesting that newspaper headline writers should write the most boring descriptive headline they can think of. The Editorial Policies specifically allow that not all output has to be "resolutely neutral". So is it possible to devise any reliable test? Or might it be more helpful if the content of each were noted and compared with the item itself? Introductions tend to feature as the reason for a failure of impartiality when the introduction diverges so far from the actual content of the subsequent item, that it distorts the coverage. What might be helpful here for a future QA is not so much a defined test for the impartiality of a headline sequence or scripted introduction, but instead a checklist of relevant questions to apply to said content. For example:

- Does the item reflect what is "promised" in the headline/introduction?
- Does the headline/introduction help signpost the item for the audience?

#### Framing (Location)

This might have produced an interesting result, had the issue in the time-frame not been dominated by a location-specific perspective. Nevertheless, it is certainly worth retaining as an element of any future study, where the information may be more meaningful.

To illustrate the point, the BBC Trust recently completed a major study examining the impartiality of its coverage of the whole of the  $\mathsf{UK}^9$ , in particular the national regions (Wales, Scotland, Northern Ireland) and England outside of the South East. While the results were very positive overall in relation to the usual definitions and interpretations of impartiality, they were less than optimal in respect of the balance of reporting from around the UK. The study concluded that the audience respected and trusted what the BBC did tell them, but felt the BBC significantly under-reported the nations and regions. The further away from London, the greater the audience dissatisfaction.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>9</sup> Impartiality report: network news and current affairs coverage of the four UK nations, June 2008 <a href="http://www.bbc.co.uk/bbctrust/news/press\_releases/2008/network\_news.html">http://www.bbc.co.uk/bbctrust/news/press\_releases/2008/network\_news.html</a>

#### 3.3.6 Defining a Perspective

The difficulties of defining a "principal relevant perspective" are discussed in some detail in Section D of the methodology. It rightly points out that any agreed application of a PRP to test for impartiality should not serve to exclude other perspectives from being reflected. I would recommend that any definition of PRPs in the Editorial Policies or future QAs should state that specifically. Separately from this, I have a concern with using words like "relevant" in relation to impartiality. Relevance should be for an output editor to determine: it is akin to including "news values" as an element of impartiality. It is appreciated that it is a word that comes from *the Editorial Policies*, but if there is to be a refinement to those, there may be a case to review its application.

#### 3.3.7 Whose Voice?

There is a great deal of very good information on the kind of voices which have been used to reflect the perspectives. But there is no cross-referencing of the two. It would have been helpful to have known within the most important perspectives (e.g. centralization of control), the kind of voices that were heard. Were they authoritative or influencers or experts (as defined in the methodology)? The perspective might be who controls the water, and that can be shown to have been given airtime equal to its importance. But whose voices are giving the issue that airing? How much airtime are they given?

#### 3.4 Conclusion

The main conclusions of the author are also mine. I do have one additional point. In Section 2 it is stated that major decision makers didn't feature much amongst the sample tested:

"The pattern and nature of the coverage suggest that this is because these Radio National programs for the most part played the role of debate facilitator, rather than being a vehicle for reporting decision-making. Politicians were not excluded *per se*, but opposition ministers or minor party MPs were more likely to be invited to present their point of view than authoritative decision-makers in government."

Unless it works differently here from the UK, it would be surprising if the Bush Telegraph or Breakfast wouldn't leap at the chance of having a one-on-one with Peter Garrett. The explanation is more likely to be that senior ministers rarely make themselves available for live interviews, and they certainly resist any attempts to get them to join a discussion (apart from a few established set piece debate programs).

Assuming I am right, and they habitually decline to take part, then it is an issue for program makers with regard to achieving impartiality. The reluctance of those in government to participate in news and current affairs programs, leaves the ABC open to accusations of bias. The question I would have in relation to the study, is whether it was possible to discern from the methodology who exactly was putting the government's point of view if the authoritative voices weren't? And is the voice of an expert or an experienced reporter, describing the government's position, a reasonable balance to an opposition minister outlining his party's view? In the UK there is a tradition of what is called "empty chairing". Very occasionally – for dramatic effect - it involves placing a physical empty chair in the studio where a government minister might have sat. In one classic example a producer decided to make his point by placing a tub of lard on the chair which the Deputy Leader of the Labour Party had been due to occupy (after failing to turn up for a third occasion)! More usually though it involves the presenter saying, "We invited the minister to come on to explain the government's position, but neither he nor any of his colleagues were available". I am assuming this occasionally happens in Australia. But making the statement isn't always good enough, although it does help explain to the audience that the ABC acknowledges it would have been a valid view to have heard. There are three particular extracts from the BBC Guidelines which are relevant:

- We strive to reflect a wide range of opinion and explore a range and conflict of views so that no significant strand of thought is knowingly unreflected or under represented.
- We can explore or report on a specific aspect of an issue or provide an opportunity for a single view to be expressed, but in doing so we do not misrepresent opposing views
- We must ensure we avoid bias or an imbalance of views on controversial subjects.

They are the most common tests applied by BBC editorial advisers when assessing content for impartiality. In respect of balancing viewpoints, the guidelines serve to remind program makers that it isn't good enough

just to empty chair, they have to find a device to reflect the missing aspect (voice). Does the design of QA4 have a way of accommodating this kind of test? Again, it is also something to consider for any refinement of the *Editorial Policies* 

So could the design and methodology of this pilot be repeated and applied to other blocks of Topical and Factual Content? It performed well here, but the content in this case consisted largely of interviews and discussions which tend to be self-balancing. The challenge would be to apply the same methodology to a mixture of content types from the same genre and on the same topic: interviews/documentaries/scripted reports/online.. But the definitions of aspect and voice, and the method by which PRPs were established would be an excellent starting point for any future QA . Apart from the suggestions for consideration above, what was really missing from the pilot in my opinion, was the sense that a competent editorial assessment had been made of the overall body of content under test.

A very recent and high-profile BBC failure of impartiality may help illustrate the point. Michael Palin presented a major series on BBC Television called "The New Europe". One episode focussed on the Balkans. It failed the test for two reasons: the first was that the commentary on occasion lacked sufficient historical context. But the more damaging, and more thought-provoking, is the finding that it was effectively too balanced. The conclusion was that the commentary over-simplified the issues and didn't do enough to highlight Serbia's role in the conflict. The effect was to give the impression that all sides were equally to blame for the war. It is an example of an occasion in which the BBC, to borrow a phrase from the ABC *Editorial Policies*, did not think it had to be "resolutely neutral", or as *See Saw to Wagon Wheel* argues, the centre ground is not always the right place to be. Although the QAs are not designed to test a single program, they nevertheless do need to be sophisticated enough to pick up on this kind of major structural failure in coverage. The Michael Palin ruling followed a similar Trust finding in relation to the genocide of the Armenian people by Turkey at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. Again, there was a breach of impartiality - by a body of Online coverage this time – because it was "too balanced". It may be that the incorporation into the study design of a simple statement that all content was also viewed/listened to/read by the study author to ensure no significant issue was overlooked or misrepresented, would be sufficient.

In conclusion, genuinely useful information has been extracted in this study, and the conclusions it reaches, based on the tests it was applying, appear valid for the body of content it set out to assess. The challenge (and my serious concern), is how far the methodology would be capable of dealing with a more diverse range of content.

#### PART FOUR:

#### **Quality Assurance Project 5: Impartiality (Opinion)**

#### 4.1 Introduction

This was a fabulous pilot, as it gave a flavour of the real opportunities that could flow from the Quality Assurance process when it is up and running. It doesn't matter that it didn't get the methodology right first time, it was a pilot. But it would be surprising (and disappointing) if some of the issues that arose during the course of the study, hadn't already led to discussions within the relevant Divisions. It may be that the Unleashed team have had many internal conversations about how far the perspectives they air should mirror the climate of public opinion, but I wonder whether they've ever engaged with their audience on the subject? Here their editorial considerations are laid bare, so that even if the audience doesn't agree with the decisions, they can at least understand how they were reached. As the Director, *Editorial Policies* puts it in his Foreword,

".. the enduring value of projects like this one will not be to provide an illusory definitiveness. Rather they will provide necessary information, explanation and discussion."

As this was a study of Online content, its results will also aid debate within the ABC about the ability of its Editorial Policies to cope with the blurring of genres brought about by ABC Online. Again the foreword makes the point better than I can:

<sup>10</sup> http://www.bbc.co.uk/bbctrust/assets/files/pdf/appeals/esc\_bulletins/2008/may.pdf

"The project showed up the importance of the ABC's striving for consistency in basic standards across the different Divisions. Content created in isolation by each Division tends nowadays to gather and mix on the online platform, and that trend will grow."

There are clearly a number of important issues raised in the course of the study, and as a result I would question the validity of the findings. I'm not sure that the report author's wouldn't agree; they clearly struggled to interpret the results against the definitions they were working with. I'm in broad agreement with their conclusions, and offer some thoughts below on where to go next.

#### 4.2 Definitions of Impartiality for Opinion

For the purposes of this report, I have taken the sections of the *Editorial Policies* as extracted below to be the most relevant in making an assessment of QA5 (Opinion).

#### From the *preamble*:

• As a creator, broadcaster and publisher of opinion and topical and factual content, the Board requires impartiality at the platform level (i.e. the individual television or radio network, or on ABC Online). This means that while individual items of content can take a particular perspective on an issue, the ABC must be able to demonstrate at the platform level that it has provided its audiences with a range of different perspectives on the subject under consideration. Individual items of opinion and topical and factual content must themselves meet the requirements set out in Sections 6 and 7 respectively

#### From Section 6.6.3:

The ABC is committed to impartiality and must demonstrate this in its opinion content through the presentation of a diversity of perspectives. This requires a diversity of perspectives to be demonstrated across a network or platform by providing content of a similar type and weight and in an appropriate time-frame.

#### 4.3 Design and Methodology

Overall the project design was clear and sound. But while the terms of reference were clearly defined, the attempt to define weight, given the lack of such a definition in the *Editorial Policies*, was a challenge that wasn't quite met. However, it should be seen as a positive that the study illuminated the deficiency.

It is not clear whether there is any other ABC Online Opinion Content which could have been included, or whether Unleashed and the Opinion (News Online) are the only examples. It would have been helpful to know.

The clumsiness of an arbitrary time-frame was revealed in the findings and in the responses from the Divisions. That should have been foreseen, and the study design should have allowed for item selection to be discussed with the relevant content editors when establishing the scope of the project. It would be easy to include in a revised study design for this type of QA. Identifying the three relevant clusters would have been enabled some internal analysis which could have produced more meaningful results: it is perfectly valid to conduct a survey around a series of cluster time-frames whilst staying within the spirit of the Impartiality requirement. I don't believe that aspect of the Editorial Policies needs any alteration. The keyword in the definition is *appropriate* timeframe. That would cover a cluster as well as a single date span. As an example, in a recent BBC Trust survey examining the impartiality of the coverage of murders of white people by non-whites, where the allegation was of a form of reverse political correctness (i.e. that racially-motivated murders of white people were under-reported for the sake of harmonious race relations), the design incorporated a series of time-frame clusters, which were directly related to the content under analysis:

- the day of the murder and the following seven days
- the trial

- the appeal (where relevant)
- the three months immediately preceding the study

It enabled the content to be assessed within an appropriate time-frame and proved a very workable structure.

There is an issue in relation to the Editorial Policies requiring the content to be of a similar *type*. In the bracketed sentence at the end of 6.3.3 the example given of *similar type*, is of presenting a discussion program after a point-of-view documentary. That doesn't seem to me to be at all similar, although I would wholeheartedly agree that it would be a good counterpoint to a polemic. Furthermore, in the ABC definition, the point-of-view documentary would be classified as Opinion Content and the discussion would surely come under Factual and Topical. Unless the Editorial Policies clearly define what they mean by *similar type*, I would suggest omitting that requirement altogether. (The example also illustrates the value in having one set of definitions of Impartiality, which could operate across the genres). One suggestion of a better way to express the sentiment requiring Opinion Content to be balanced in type and weight, is to provide a form of wording that introduces proximity into the debate. For example, if it is argued that a discussion program about under-age pregnancy is a good counterweight to a polemic arguing that 12 year old girls should be offered contraception without their parents' knowledge, then that discussion program should be either aired on the same platform soon after the polemic, or if it is to be on another platform (for example, a webchat on ABC Online), then that should be trailed prominently at the end of the documentary, so that the link is made obvious to the audience.

#### 4.4 The Process

#### 4.4.1 Links and Tags

The value of analysing links in Opinion Content, with regard to how far they contribute weight to any of the perspectives, is not proven here. There is some validity with regard to assessing prominence, but I would suggest if links are to form part of a future test, assessing their weight and value needs much greater refinement. An interesting by-product of the study revealed the different policy regarding links adopted by *Unleashed* and *Online* respectively. In the interests of greater accountability and transparency it would be useful if the policy was clearly stated on the web pages. The explanation could be via an embedded hyperlink to an editorial version of "terms and conditions". Such a public statement ought to help confidence-building with the audience and limit impartiality challenges on the grounds of links. At the very least, there should be a statement saying something along the following lines:

"the content of external websites is not the responsibility of the ABC".

It is regretful that related opinion pieces on the subject, for example, of The Apology, are not tagged, and that only News Content is tagged. That is a missed opportunity, which perhaps could be remedied by some software tweaks? If the audience aren't made aware of a balancing item of opinion content, how can it be helpful in achieving balance?

#### 4.4.2 User Generated Content

Does user-generated content merit any weight in a study of this nature? The Innovation Division argued strongly that it should, that the articles it commissions are "conversation starters" and not "ends in themselves". Their argument would appear to have great merit; how to assess such content could though prove a serious challenge for the design of a future QA. One simple way of dealing with it, is to allow for UGC be taken into account in any future study, but only when there is reason to believe from the initial content analysis that balance hasn't been achieved through the commissioned voices alone. There is one caution here, it appears that the policy of News Online (but not Unleashed), is to remove UGC after three months and include this comment alongside the item of Opinion:

"Comments for this story are no longer available. ABC policy is to delete comments on stories three months after they are published."

#### How far should public support for a perspective be a factor in the weight allocated to that perspective?

It became clear during the analysis of the findings that there was a serious imbalance in the commissioned opinion for and against The Apology. There was separate concern that the balance was further shifted because one of the supporting voices, that of Malcolm Fraser, was sui generis. But the discussion then became confused, and too much effort was put into devising refinements to the Editorial Policies which would allow the editors "get out of jail free" cards if they failed to balance the voices. It missed the point entirely.

There are two entirely separate issues here. The first is how far the commission of Opinion pieces should reflect the weight of support for any one perspective. The second issue is what then needs to be done, when it is acknowledged that a viewpoint needs to be better reflected, to ensure that the output is balanced.

#### 4.4.3.1 The difficulty of commissioning appropriate voices.

If a program or online feature is unable to commission an item presenting what they believe is an important perspective, how should that be dealt with? This is an important issue for reflection and editorial discussion; it won't be the first time that a much-needed viewpoint proves elusive to commission, nor will it be the last. I'd respectfully recommend that the editors of Unleashed and News Online review the commissioning process. The responses from those Divisions in the study, suggest that their approaches may need to more pro-active. Does there need to be outreach to increase the pool of "talent" available to write such content? If potential polemicists aren't yet aware of the power of Unleashed (compared to say an Op Ed in the SMH), does Unleashed need to commission polling on the demographic of who reads the opinion pieces? And then use those results to create a marketing document that blows its own trumpet on how influential Unleashed is as an Op Ed platform amongst the ABC1 audience? Should contra-deals be considered between say Unleashed and a couple of reputable newspapers, for each to reproduce each other's opinion items as and when they wish? "This comment first appeared on ABC Online 'Unleashed" would be excellent PR and would raise the profile of ABC Online (as well as encouraging reluctant writers). It may also be that the power of the internet isn't as apparent to the pre-iPod generation as it might be. So the outreach could perhaps be concentrated on targeting voices that might be wanted in the future, and who fall in the age range that may have only heard about blogs and podcasts, but never actually experienced them. These are of course just suggestions, but the point I hope to make is that it just isn't good enough to say "we couldn't find anyone", not just from the perspective of meeting the impartiality requirement, but because it's not sound editorial policy. I am not underestimating the difficulty of finding appropriate voices, years of editing discussion programs makes me hugely sympathetic to the producers, but it just has to be done.

If all else fails, there is always the option of actually explaining to the audience why a view is being "empty chaired". The BBC employs a very useful device for mea culpa moments: it's called the Editor's Blog. It is where senior editorial staff at the BBC share their dilemmas with the audience. They are some of the most widely-read blogs on the internet. But while the ABC Online website devotes extensive space to blogs by its reporters, the content seems to be confined to informal takes on running news stories, rather than providing a platform for off-screen editorial decision-makers to start a conversation on matters of editorial policy. The BBC Editors Blog<sup>11</sup> actively encourages UGC. In this circumstance, it would have been a very useful means by which the editors of Unleashed and News Online could have explained the imbalance of The Apology contributions. Interestingly, the then editor of Newsgathering at the BBC, Jon Williams, employed just such a device when there were questions about the BBC's political correctness in relation to the reporting of racial murders. The feature Jon Williams penned for BBC Online 12 explaining the issues which inform coverage decisions, formed part of the BBC evidence in defence of its output during the subsequent Trust investigation.

The problem with the refinements suggested by the study author are that none of them would require an editor to communicate to the audience why some views were missing, or in short supply. They are all

<sup>11</sup> http://www.bbc.co.uk/blogs/theeditors/

<sup>12</sup> http://news.bbc.co.uk/newswatch/ifs/hi/newsid\_4480000/newsid\_4489300/4489328.stm

internal "conversations". The suggestions above show a greater respect for the audience, outline how a dialogue can begin and encourage transparency in editorial decision-making.

#### 4.4.3.2 The relative weight of perspectives

None of the foregoing makes any assumptions as to what should be defined as a balancing weight. And it may be that it is a perfectly defendable position not to offer a numerical balance of opinions in favour and against The Apology. I agree with the study author that tides of opinion are relevant but not determinative, and the opinion poll data showing the overwhelming majority of public support for The Apology was interesting. Also valid was the argument that given the "no" view was not the popular sentiment at the time, serious contributors may quite reasonably decline on the grounds of political expediency. (It might have been an interesting lateral thought in this circumstance for the editors to have commissioned an opinion piece from a commentator on how unfashionable was the view, and how few were willing to publicly acknowledge holding it — or even as suggested, an Editors' Blog on the subject). The counter-balancing provided by the user generated comments was helpful here, but only if a revision of the Editorial Policies allows them to take their place as perhaps a "casting vote" where necessary in an impartiality test. In such circumstances (where a formal commissioned balance piece was not available), it may have been worth the editor compiling a summary of the best contributions brought together in a coherent way to sit alongside a voice in favour.

Assigning a value to a word count or duration, and relating that to weight is not necessarily helpful. Again it may be relevant but not determinative. The point is well-discussed in the report: one line of prose can have more impact than 8000 words. In recent weeks, Martin Luther King's "I have a dream" speech has been hugely quoted and rebroadcast. But not the whole 2000 words... He actually used the phrase (eight times) at the end of the 16' speech. The weight "occupied" by a contribution therefore is really as much if not more about quality (i.e. impact), and not quantity. While it may be possible to devise a ranking for "impact" as an element of weight, it may not be worth the effort. This is my suggestion: I agree that as a word count or duration is relatively straightforward to measure in a study of this nature, it should continue to be measured. But nothing should be read into the disparities, unless further analysis shows them to be meaningful. It was coped with absolutely correctly in the findings.

#### 4.5 Conclusion

The checklist in the study's conclusion is much the same as mine. I specifically agree with the report's author, that the disparity between voices on each side of *The Apology* debate needs explanation. However, a strict interpretation of the Editorial Policies can only lead to what the report's author rightly describes as a "specious impartiality". He is therefore right to conclude that it is probably an issue for the Editorial Policies just as much as for the Study Design itself.

May I tentatively suggest a few new phrases to start the ball rolling:

- In seeking to reflect a diversity of perspectives of a similar type and weight, editors are not bound to
  ensure a strict balance of time or space, they may also take into account the degree of public
  support for any perspective, the relative standing of a contributor and the impact and quality of their
  contribution.
- Account may also be taken of any user-generated content, where it appears directly alongside a specific item of opinion content.
- The requirement to achieve impartiality affords editors the latitude to commission material from across the spectrum of views and ideas, so long as those views are rationally and honestly held.
- In reflecting a diversity of perspectives, there is a duty to retain respect for factual accuracy and not to misrepresent opposing views. It may require a right to reply.
- Where a single view is reflected on an item of a contentious nature, it is desirable that any counterbalancing view is clearly cross-referenced as appropriate

Ms Kerry Blackburn

## IV. Response to Ms Blackburn's review by the projects' manager Dr Denis Muller

Note: Dr Muller's response was originally addressed to the Director Editorial Policies, and is published here with Dr Muller's permission.

The first thing I would like to do is thank Kerry Blackburn most sincerely for her thorough, thought-provoking, good-faith critique. She has given you and me a rich vein of ideas and challenges to mine.

I would make just a few points.

The big one is this: Broadly speaking, Kerry is coming from a subject-based, rather than a genre-based approach. In reading her critique, I noted several places where the criticism seemed to be premised on a subject-based approach. This was most evident in here criticism of the News pilot IQA 31. I am sure she is right when she says the method we used might not be up to the challenge of assessing a complaint about the coverage of a specific topic, because the terms of the complaint would, to some extent, set the parameters for the assessment, although there would of course need to be some standard criteria of assessment too. But my main point is that she has raised a very important issue for us to talk about: the merits of a subject-based and a genre-based approach. What are their respective strengths and weaknesses? When might they be useful? When might they not be? It is conceivable that in the future the ABC would indeed embark on a QA that was not complaint-based (as we did this time), but look at a specific topic: say, the presentation of Muslims on ABC TV. This illustrates the wagon-wheel analogy. The question we would then have to face is: to what extent does any one of our pilot designs - or some combination of them - offer a valid and reliable means of assessing the presentation of Muslims? Clearly a genre-based approach would be wrong, because ABC TV uses multiple genres. But if we were asked to look at the presentation of Muslims on ABC TV News, then clearly the requirements of the News genre, as described in the ed pols [Editorial Policies], must be taken into account in the design.

So I would consider the subject-based and genre-based approaches to be different in essence, and with Kerry's critique it is important, I think, not to judge a genre-based approach by a subject-based approach's criteria. I think this happens a few times.

Kerry makes many of the same points as did others about the exclusion of sound and vision, and I accept all of them.

I agree with her remarks about the ed pols.

As for the BBC Guidelines, a close reading of the Impartiality requirement reveals, as you would expect, considerable overlap with what we constructed, even if they were sometimes disguised (e.g., for "not misrepresenting views" or "giving an opportunity to respond" read our "fairness"). But they also included a reference to the public interest and two difficult words, "approach" and "tone", both of which are important, but would need careful delineation.

I don't agree that accuracy should be excluded. Gross inaccuracy might not only dramatically alter public understanding, but also be evidence of bad faith. Similarly, I believe news values have to be there for all the reasons we've discussed. I note that in dealing with the Opinion QA, Kerry also questions the inclusion of links and tags. It seems to me she might not be giving sufficient consideration to Prominence as an element in impartiality, because both news values and links and tags have to do with prominence, and I think they should be there for that reason. I would also retain "no prejudgment" because for all its apparent naivety it opens up the possibility of finding something relevant to impartiality.

I think three of her four observations about the participant interviews have merit, and while there is little to be done about people's lack of prior understanding of terms like "fairness" and "balance", next time we would certainly sit them down and replay the item, including the intro. The "voices that aren't heard" is important but implies the need for interviewing the journalists and seeing the uncut footage, and these raise issues of intrusion. Not insurmountable, but delicate. I'm not so sure about the fourth point. We could have

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recorded which aspect the missing voices represented, but I don't think the absence of two voices undermines the reliability of the findings.

I like the idea of looking at the nine items as a body as well as individually.

On Topical and Factual, I still think having an independent set of "PRPs" was a useful device, otherwise something becomes principal just because it gets a lot of attention. I think that's too self-referential.

I like cross-referencing PRPs with the different voices. Lovely idea. And she makes a very fair point about my assumption as to why the incumbents played so little aprt in the RN debates.

I agree – as we both do – about the way we set the time frame for the Opinion QA..

I just think this is a terrifically valuable review that Kerry has done, and it gives us so many ideas.

Dr Denis Muller Project Manager and Chief Investigator

## V. Report of review of QA projects 3, 4 and 5 by Professor Rod Tiffen

#### Report for ABC Quality Assessment Projects by Rodney Tiffen for the Director Editorial Policies.

I have reviewed the reports and policy documents. Generally I think the review process is sound and likely to be a constructive exercise. The explication of the difficult and elusive concepts surrounding the idea of impartiality is clear and good. The guiding principles of the quality assessments are also well framed and appropriate.

### Quality Audit Report on television news and current affairs coverage of channel deepening in Port Phillip Bay.

This is a well chosen case, receiving extensive coverage in Melbourne and arousing substantial controversy. The case study and period is appropriate. The approach is sound.

My major reservation in the analysis of this case concerns the use of news values. As framed I think that this has no place in such an exercise. There is a long history of scholars trying to codify newsworthiness. I have always thought this effort analytically wrong-headed (as alluded to in my chapter on news values in my book *News and Power*). The use of one of these formulas in this evaluation exercise is particularly inappropriate. The formulas began as an attempt to describe what constituted which stories were likely to be covered. To convert them from a very imperfect attempt at empirical description into a normative standard of what ought to be covered has no logic or merit. I would question whether the criteria stated are exhaustive, but more importantly whether they constitute what is desirable. Judgements about the elements contributing to newsworthiness vary with the organisation and audience – they are different for the *Age* and the *Herald-Sun*, for instance – and also to some extent with medium. More importantly it does not seem to me that some of these are desirable criteria on which the ABC should base its decision-making. Are negativity and personification virtues which the national broadcaster's news services should be aiming to achieve? I think not.

With qualifications, a better way of approaching newsworthiness is simply a stronger examination of currency, what other news organisations are covering. This is not a perfect measure and should not be used uncritically. It is a measure of conformity of news judgements rather than of their quality. In some ways we would expect and hope that the ABC would, at least sometimes, have different criteria than its commercial competitors. So a departure from others is not necessarily something to be criticised, but rather explicitly considered.

An examination of currency is an aspect that could be improved in future studies. The use of the two Melbourne morning papers as comparators rather than the evening TV news on the other four channels is a relative weakness. The requirements of the medium of television are one part of newsworthiness. Moreover, the close to simultaneous transmissions mean that they are all operating in an almost identical news cycle in their decision-making, rather than one that is in a sense a half day out of sequence. Again it should be emphasised that such a comparison does not imply that conformity is a virtue. Rather it would allow a more systematic basis for considering how and when ABC news judgements were the same as or differed from its competitors.

The use of interviewees in the stories to comment on their accuracy is also a good, although of course not foolproof, technique. Their comments are used appropriately and sensibly in the report.

The one example of inaccuracy in the TV reports is noted. This particular example would seem to be a lapse of competence, not trivial, but likely to have resulted from the reporter not understanding a technicality. It is important that the Quality Review Report note the lapse, but it does not seem to have resulted from any partiality by the journalist, and so in that sense is a lapse of competence rather than lack of impartiality.

#### Future Studies of TV News and Current Affairs:

Impartiality is a central, but only one, aspect of news performance. Presumably the ABC does not want to have a passive and mediocre but impartial news service. Future studies might also try to grasp how often the news managed to carry the story forward or advance the policy debate or public understanding. This again would imply more systematic comparison with other TV news services.

There were scattered references to visual images, musical sound bites, and the journalistic assertion of larger, not immediately verifiable, assertions (such as being a boon to the economy). I would suggest that at this stage none of these become necessarily built in to future projects. In theory, studies of impartiality could expand infinitely. In practice, the design of projects should be guided by what are live issues among those commenting on the ABC's performance. I would not recommend committing extra resources to monitoring visual or audio aspects unless these become objects of controversy.

#### Quality Audit Report of Radio National Coverage of Water Management Issues.

Again this is an appropriate topic, given the importance and complexity and currency of the issue. The project was carried out over a reasonable period of time, and the design is broadly appropriate and the conclusions well justified. A particularly good aspect of the design is the categorisation of factors affecting 'voice' (p.4) on an issue while the attention to different aspects or 'principal relevant perspectives' of an issue is also promising.

By its nature – reviewing all material on topical and factual programs over the network – this is a more open-ended assignment. It is appropriate in that at least some listeners tend to equate all of the ABC as if it were a single entity, and sometimes see its decision-making and content as more monolithic than it is.

While the category 'topical and factual content' has precise meaning within the ABC, it is less clear that listeners make the same distinctions. Nevertheless the range of programs surveyed does have a clear internal rationale, although equally there is a case for including all programs, and equally for being more restrictive, concentrating on a few individual programs.

If this study were conducted again, I think more of the results about impartiality should be presented by individual program. They have different audiences, very different audience sizes and limited carry over of listeners between programs. Each program should therefore be examined internal to itself. My guess is that the breakfast program has a much bigger audience than any of the others, and so it should aim to present the relevant voices on an issue by itself, quite apart from balance being achieved across the network.

Similarly perhaps there should be more differentiation of findings among program types – especially between documentaries and interview programs. While the problem-solution framework is helpful, it could also perhaps be elaborated more revealingly.

In sum, the conclusions about impartiality are supported by the data, such as a range of voices and perspectives and an absence of editorial input by interviewers, and this study has been competently and fairly executed. Nevertheless, perhaps because of its scope across a whole genre of programming on a network, it is less penetrating and informative about the quality of the material presented than the TV Report.

Impartiality is a concept most easily applied to issues of accuracy, and then to partisan balance between the major parties. It becomes a less tangible concept as its scope widens.

In particular there can be no objective measures of how much prominence an issue should be accorded. This was brought home to me very early in my career, when in 1976 I was doing research on international news coverage in Thailand. Some conservative Thais were indignant at what they saw as the biased coverage by the Western media of the recent military coup there. When I quizzed one of them about what he meant he referred especially to the killing of 28 university students who had been demonstrating (peacefully) against the military, but had died when the military fired on the demonstrators. He did not take issue with the accuracy of the reports, but rather said the incident had received too much attention. There can be no objective answer to the question how much attention was such an incident worth is. The answer will depend at least partly on one's values, as well as considering other factors that determine newsworthiness. I have found similar arguments raised about news performance ever since, and especially

it was a common complaint about media coverage of scandals. It was a complaint I think I heard that members of the Howard Government had made about *Lateline*, that the program was giving too much attention to issues concerning the detention of asylum seekers, for example.

Although the ABC must have a means of considering such criticisms, and editorial review processes for considering them, it needs to do so in the knowledge that there will never be an 'objective' answer, nor any formula that will ever automatically defuse such controversies.

A systematic consideration of how much attention was given to an issue such as water management and the perspectives that were present is a useful means of editorial review, but managers will then need to actively decide any implications for changes to content or presentation. They will not automatically follow from the findings of the review alone.

#### Quality Audit Report of internet forums - Unleashed and Opinion - content on the Apology.

I found evaluating this quality review more difficult, partly because I am less familiar with the contents of these sites, partly because, being an evaluation of opinion sites, it raises rather different issues from evaluating more mainstream news and current affairs programs.

It is not clear that on any issue – even if the sides can be neatly defined without distortion as pro and con – that the presentation of opinion should be 50-50. Neither is it self-evident that the content of the sites should reflect the distribution of public opinion. Even when we have good polls revealing what it is (and this is very often not the case) then the distribution of opinion often changes, and should the ABC want its decisions about contents to simply follow the latest fashions?

It is also the case that these online opinion sites do not have the large audiences that ABC TV and radio do, and that therefore contributors either do so from some sense of obligation or evangelism or whatever. There is little in their political or financial interests that the ABC can offer in inducements. In turn, this implies that the refusal rate is likely to be fairly high when commissioning new material. It is particularly likely that this will be the case when it seems that the political tide is running against a viewpoint, as it was at the time of the Apology. Elected politicians are particularly adept at deciding when discretion is the better part of valour if they favour an unpopular cause.

The critical conclusions of the report regarding the differential numbers of pro and anti apology views are cautiously and carefully argued, and based on sound research. They should be a spur to editorial managers to actively seek out relatively under-represented views. Nevertheless I would not regard these findings as alone justifying any serious criticism of the web sites' performance, especially given that they unsuccessfully sought other views. Moreover I think that such 'imbalances' are likely to keep occurring on many issues, and that editorial review processes will be needed to keep ensuring diversity, especially when the tide of public sentiment is running strongly in one direction. An active quest for diversity should be a hallmark of such activities, but a 50-50 outcome should not be regarded as the measure of success.

The online sites raise some new issues regarding impartiality, in particular regarding links and tags assigned to items. Again no formula is perfect, but my inclination on the former is that ABC policy should be inclusive rather than restrictive, and normally be willing to give links that its contributors wish unless there seems some compelling reason for not doing so. It would not normally be sufficient to omit a link because the site linked to contained one-sided political coverage, but only if it was explicitly anti-social, such as urging violence. After all the ability to link quickly to related material is one of the things users most like about the internet, and editorial caution should not be a reason to deny users this facility.

Several of the thoughts that reading this report and looking at the sites prompted in me were beyond my mandate. It is not clear to me that the sites serve sufficiently distinctive purposes to have two sites rather than one. Nor does the label Unleashed seem to me to suggest to any casual user of the ABC site what its content or purpose is. I think there could be internal consideration given to how these sites are distinctive from, or complementary to, other successful online services such as Opinion Online and Australian Policy Online, (I declare having some association with the latter) and therefore what unique contribution to Australian public life, consistent with the ABC's Charter, they might make. In particular a greater attempt to aggregate contributions on a single topic – to serve more explicitly as a forum - and to have places where information can be pursued as well as opinion given might be helpful.

Overall, I think these three studies of ABC performance regarding the attainment of impartiality are well designed and conducted, and fairly reported. They should be a stimulus to internal editorial review and a constructive input into these processes.

Professor Rodney Tiffen

## VI. Response to Professor Tiffen's review by the projects' manager Dr Denis Muller

Note: Dr Muller's response was originally addressed to the Director Editorial Policies, and is published here with Dr Muller's permission.

#### Introduction

We thank Professor Tiffen for his insightful and constructive critique. It contains many important criticisms, and some positive ideas for how the methods used for the three Impartiality reviews might be refined.

In this response, we follow his structure and look at each of the methods in turn.

#### **Project 3, Impartiality of News Content**

Professor Tiffen's major reservation about the method concerns the inclusion of news values in the definition of impartiality.

This was an issue we too reflected deeply upon as we designed the study. Our concerns were in many respects similar to those expressed by Professor Tiffen. In particular, the inescapable element of subjectivity and the almost infinite scope for codifying news values were problematic. Against that, however, we weighed two countervailing challenges:

We had to consider the news operation as it actually operates.

We had to find some way of including the concept of Prominence in the assessment of impartiality.

In responding to the first challenge, our thinking was that even though journalists and editors generally do not articulate even to themselves the considerations that go into deciding what is news, in fact we considered there was a sufficient body of scholarship from which a core of consensually agreed news values could be distilled. We chose seven to try to keep the complexities of the definition manageable. We would be the first to admit that this was imperfect: we could have added at least one more – "significance" – and for this particular case we could also have omitted some identified by Professor Tiffen – "personification" comes to mind, certainly.

Omitting "negativity" we could not agree with, although it might have been better to break it down into its common constituents of "conflict" and "badness", and it is in this area that we would differ from Professor Tiffen insofar as he seems to suggest that news values might be looked at in a normative sense as representing values to be promoted by the national broadcaster. We might not have expressed ourselves very clearly, but we were using "values" in a different sense: the value placed by journalists on certain characteristics of information for the purpose of determining how much prominence to give it. Our reason for wanting to hang on to "negativity", however defined, is that this characteristic is perhaps the most ubiquitous of all in influencing the prominence given to stories.

As an alternative to news values, Professor Tiffen proposes a test of "currency". This is a most interesting idea and one we would be keen to develop. It is associated with, but by no means comprehended by, the news value of "timeliness", one of the seven news values we used. As we read Professor Tiffen's idea, "currency" certainly includes timeliness in the sense of "recency" or "topicality", but it also seems to include the idea of "the attention already being paid" to a story by the media. We would welcome the opportunity to discuss this whole issue further with Professor Tiffen.

In responding to the second challenge, we used both a peer-review element and a comparison with the treatment given to the same stories by the two newspapers, *The Age* and *Herald Sun*.

We agree that the use of the newspapers as comparators was a relative weakness, and acknowledged as much in our report. Their use was somewhat expedient as a means of trying to assess whether the relative prominence given to stories by the ABC was in some way consonant with the treatment other journalists

had given, but for the reasons stated by Professor Tiffen the comparisons were only very generally indicative.

But it was not just expedient. We needed to have some external references for ABC news judgments, otherwise this part of the assessment would have been hopelessly self-referential: that is, a story was worthy of the prominence given by the ABC because that was the prominence the ABC gave it. Our difficulty was that the news values given weight by the ABC were considered to be so different from those given weight by the commercial TV channels and by SBS that the use of them as comparators was thought to have been weaker still.

However, Professor Tiffen's further objection – that the news cycles of evening TV and daily papers are half a day out of sync – is a very strong one, and provides further ground for reviewing this aspect of the method.

We will have to give very serious consideration to this element of the method in our review of it. However, it seems to us that retaining some assessment of prominence is essential. The reason is that if a story were to be seriously underplayed or overplayed, it would be legitimate to question whether this indicated an absence of impartiality in the sense that the news judgment had been made not on the basis of news values, as required by the Editorial Policies, but on some other basis, perhaps to advance a corporate, political or personal interest.

And since journalists will rightly defend their judgments by reference to news value (and in any case this is required by the Ed Pols), it seems inescapable that in some way these will need to be retained as one element of the assessment.

Finally, Professor Tiffen recommends taking a different approach to selecting material for this type of review, based upon what he calls "live issues" concerning ABC coverage. This is in some respects similar to the subject-based approach advocated by Ms Kerry Blackburn, as opposed to the genre-based approach taken by us on this occasion. Once again, this is something to which we will give close attention.

#### Project 4, Impartiality of Topical and Factual Content

Professor Tiffen, while broadly endorsing the study design, suggests a greater focus on individual programs' performance because of their different formats, audiences and carry-over potential. Again this is a valuable insight. He also suggests cutting the possible program sample differently – along program-type lines (documentaries, interview-based programs etc) - and this too merits close consideration.

Professor Tiffen relates a cautionary tale about prominence in this category of content, and his account illustrates one of the difficulties inherent in assessing impartiality: the very nature of what it consists of can vary widely among individuals. Professor Tiffen's subject averred that the story had received "too much attention"; in some of our work we had people saying that to seek the opinion of a minority ran counter to the concept of impartiality.

One does not need to agree with these points of view to appreciate the degree to which individual perceptions play into people's views about what the term impartiality means.

#### **Project 5, Impartiality of Opinion Content**

Again Professor Tiffen broadly endorses the study design. In doing so he makes some useful observations about the way in which the ABC might reconfigure its website commentary platforms, but these lie outside the scope of our work.

Dr Denis Muller Project Manager and Chief Investigator