

Response to Editorial Review No. 11 — Coverage of the Backpacker Tax

ABC News & ABC Regional

ABC News and ABC Regional welcome the findings of Editorial Review Number 11 of coverage of proposed changes to tax arrangements for international students and other young travellers working temporarily in Australia.

The coverage of the backpacker tax issue was a joint effort by News and Regional teams over an extended period of time. Local metropolitan radio and RN also contributed.

We are pleased that the reviewer found ‘no evidence that the reports were partisan in any way by any deliberate suppression of one view in favour of another and that there was no evidence of any misrepresentation of any perspective’ and that ‘the political coverage was fair in terms of striving, over time, to accommodate the diversity of voices within the Senate and between the major parties’. We also note the finding that ““regional and rural Australia was well served by ABC Rural and regional stations” and that there “is no evidence that the reports were partisan in any way”.

The reviewer, however, did conclude that across the coverage by News and Regional teams, important sectors of the debate did not receive sufficient coverage, there was a lack of diversity of voices from outside the political parties and the tax and its implications were not always adequately explained. We note that many individual reports were recognised for their quality and there was recognition of the crucial role of *Four Corners* and other ABC News programs in revealing the conditions of foreign workers in the agricultural and tourism sectors.

Because of the long lead-up to the final political resolution of the tax and the wide range of programs involved at various times, the scope of the review was necessarily limited and some coverage was not captured or was unable to be reviewed in depth. This may have affected the perception that the coverage lacked a diversity of perspectives and ‘voices’.

In relation to some of the comments on regional content, Regional strives to provide local voices to the national conversation, and while its local audiences were kept well informed about developments and the complexity of this issue, there appears that there is work to be done on a wider scale, since “the strength of (ABC Rural’s) reporting on rural matters, and a deep well of knowledge and background on issues such as the backpacker tax, was not fully exploited across the great spread of ABC programming in framing approaches to the issue”. In the digital space, Regional will look to provide more links to related content on long-running issues to provide context, and work with other areas of the ABC to capitalise on the content it produces.

Regional acknowledges the finding that a large number of voices on its programs and digital content does not always delivers a diversity of views, and this will be considered more fully in relation to other long-running issues affecting regional and remote Australians.

This review echoes conclusions drawn by previous reviewers that ABC News consistently demonstrates its expertise in reporting on the political aspects of complex and contentious policy debates but falls short in exploring the breadth of opinion, impact on communities and complex policy issues underlying them.

Successive reviewers, including this one, have noted the potential for digital platforms to fill this gap with explainers, online features and other digital content. This reviewer notes that, online there are 'no restrictions of time and space'. It is important to highlight that good quality original digital journalism requires significant journalistic and production resources. While space may be unlimited on the internet, resources and experienced talent are not.

None the less, ABC News acknowledges it can and should do better in this area. We are investing increasing resources in our digital outlets and have prioritised making our digital offering at least as compelling as broadcast content. Resources supporting news and current affairs digital output were increased in 2016 and a new digital team is being recruited currently to deliver an 'equal digital life' to major news and current affairs stories.