

## **ABC RESPONSES TO EDITORIAL REVIEW 9: SHENHUA MINE**

### **News Response**

ABC News welcomes the findings of Editorial Review Number 9 relating to coverage of the proposed Shenhua coal mine on ABC television, radio and online from 8 July 2015 to 1 March 2016. ABC News is pleased that no instances of lack of impartiality were identified. The reviewer concluded that the stories reviewed demonstrated balance that reflected the weight of evidence and that ABC reporters and announcers regularly sought balancing comment and viewpoints and presented a "diversity of perspectives over time", notwithstanding that Shenhua itself failed to take advantage of several opportunities to provide comment.

While noting that the coverage of the social costs, economic effects and politics of the controversy were well covered, the reviewer concluded that the coverage of the underlying scientific issues in the debate could and should have been more comprehensive. For instance, the reviewer notes that the focus of the early stories following the approval of the mine in early July 2015 was rightly on the political fall-out. However, in his view, the extent of the environmental checks that had been done in the review process, as well as other scientific issues, were not adequately explained.

The reviewer speculates that "silos" within the ABC – different divisions and programs - impede in-depth and coordinated coverage of complex, ongoing stories of this sort. The reviewer says he would like to see "*... more concentrated and in-depth coverage of key environmental "hot spots" - like CSG and coal mining on farmland nationally, the bleaching of the Great Barrier Reef and using brown coal for electricity generation in Victoria.*" He notes that useful reporting that was done by various programs in both Radio and News was not picked up or developed by other programs.

ABC News agrees that there is an ongoing need to emphasise greater coordination and cooperation between divisions and within ABC News. This is a current priority for the division.

### **Radio Response**

ABC Radio welcomes the opportunity to comment on Mark Skulley's report on the ABC's coverage of issues surrounding the proposed Shenhua Watermark Coal Mine in Western NSW during the period July 2015 to March 2016.

Radio found the report to be well-written and well-reasoned, and was pleased to note the overall assessment that the ABC's coverage, as a body of work, presented an appropriate diversity of voices and perspectives.

The content from the Radio Division assessed by Mr Skulley was not extensive and came exclusively from Radio National (the programs RN Breakfast, Earshot, Background Briefing and the Science Show). Mr Skulley makes no criticism of the Earshot program, which included personal stories from the farming families of the district, describing it as worthwhile and moving.

## **RN Breakfast**

We assume that the general observation that 'early coverage' of the story tended to emphasise political angles at the expense of the environmental questions may apply to RN Breakfast, but would welcome more detailed comment from the reviewer on that point if he would like to do so.

The only comment specific to Breakfast was made in relation to an interview conducted by Fran Kelly with anti-mine campaigner Tim Duddy on 9 July. Mr Skulley comments that Mr Duddy was given 'a lot of time' (07:25') to criticise both the process and the relevant Minister, Barnaby Joyce. He notes that 'Fran Kelly asked some reasonable questions, but I would have liked to see a bit more balancing comment'. We would note that Mr Joyce appeared on the program on the following day, in a similarly prominent position, and was given equal time (in fact, roughly one minute more) to put his case and rebut his critics.

## **Background Briefing**

A Background Briefing investigation into the approval process for the mine (broadcast 9 August 2015) is described approvingly as having covered the issues in greater depth than other programs. However, Mr Skulley questioned why the matters raised were not picked up by other parts of the ABC and wondered whether this was evidence of 'silos'.

RN would like to point out that the Background Briefing team produces a text news story for every program, which is always made available to the News Division. These stories are sometimes run on the News Online site, and sometimes not. In addition, a five-minute package is always produced before Friday morning (BB airs first on Sundays) which is usually played on RN Breakfast, and is offered to NewsRadio (within the News Division) and to ABC Regional. However, RN also takes Mr Skulley's observation on board and would be happy to work more closely with colleagues in the News and Regional divisions on suitable stories.

## **Science Show**

Mr Skulley also commented on an item broadcast on the Science Show on November 17, a report on the unlikely alliance between farmers and 'greenies' over their mutual opposition to the mine. While describing it as a 'worthwhile topic' and 'interesting', he pointed out that it didn't contain much scientific information. This is true, but it is within the brief of the program to sometimes focus on the social dimensions of issues with a scientific connection, and Radio does not see this as a problem *per se*.

The report also notes that this item was effectively a prologue for a series called 'After the Coal Rush', which will air on the Science Show in September 2016. During the series, producer Tom Morton will present an in-depth study of communities in the throes of mining expansion and the effect it has on the local environment and ultimately on their lives. The series will balance human interest, economics, community and regional politics and the science behind the decisions to allow mining in those areas. The decision to run the series in the Science Show is to illustrate the human and socio-political context of environmental science, and of the lack of consensus over 'facts' used to establish and underscore mining policy. What 'the science says' is not as clear cut as some might think, and these programs will show how multi-layered policy decisions are made based on estimated margins of risk.

With Mr Skulley's remarks around silos in mind, Radio National will do its best to make other outlets within the ABC aware of this series in good time.

## **Regional Response**

Overall, ABC Regional has no particular issue with the report's findings on individual programs and content.

In terms of the overall conclusion, and in particular in relation to the need to report better on "what the science says" and giving weight to the "majority scientific view", Regional acknowledges that while we endeavour to report scientific issues while ensuring we reflect the majority scientific opinion – in the case of climate change, an acceptance that it exists, and that human activity contributes to global warming - we do not assert that all scientists, or all of our audiences, share this view, or that there is no uncertainty in either the science or the projected climate outcomes. The ABC does not have a position on scientific issues; we report the science and – most importantly for Regional and Rural coverage – we facilitate discussion.

In considering the weight of scientific evidence in relation to Shenhua, Regional was very aware that many of the views were personal, often expressed in a highly emotional way, which is unsurprising given the nature of the proposal and the reality that many people simply did not accept the scientific findings of geologists and geo-scientific/mining experts in relation to the efficacy of some mining practices – in particular, fracking, and what can happen to the geology and aquifers a long way underground. The proposal was seen to threaten people's livelihoods and lifestyles in a very real way, both in the immediate and long-term future, whereas the scientific information and decision-making was seen to be coming from people not living and/or working locally and therefore having no "skin in the game" other than financial interests. Regional coverage strived to reflect those very real community and individual concerns.

With respect to the comments about working in silos – "One feature of the coverage and discussion of this issue was that it was delivered at many levels - local radio, national radio, rural programs, current affairs and news. I have never worked for the ABC, but I did wonder about whether the overall coverage was hindered by people working in silos ... Coverage of the Shenhua project would benefit from a more collaborative approach – combining input from a reporter with knowledge of environment/rural issues with, say, a reporter who knows the coal industry and somebody who is familiar with the Liverpool Plains ... All newsrooms have competing demands and set budgets, and the pace of reporting has quickened with online news and social media. But spending more time on a difficult topic periodically is often better than covering every twist and turn" – Regional points out that the diversity of their coverage reflected the needs of widely diverse and quite discrete audiences - local audiences for Local radio, specialist rural audiences for The Country Hour and other Rural programming and so on – which the division considers to be one of its major strengths. Regional does not necessarily produce content designed to be channelled through a common filter for distribution to a national audience. It does, however, employ a whole-of-team approach, coordinating with News and Radio, to make a wide and diverse range of content for regional, specialist, metropolitan and national audiences on air and online.