EDITORIAL REVIEW OF ABC INTERVIEWS WITH AL GORE July 2017

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14th August 2017

Background:

Former US President Al Gore visited Australia in July 2017 to promote his new documentary – *An Inconvenient Sequel: Truth to Power.*

He received widespread media coverage, including on various ABC outlets.

Several ABC programs approached Mr Gore's publicist to arrange interviews. In some cases, they were advised that they could have only limited time with Mr Gore because of the number of separate interviews he was conducting with different ABC outlets. In conversation on the day, it was suggested that as many as 18 different ABC interviews were booked.

The purpose of this review was to consider:

- 1. Whether there was sufficient editorial justification for the interviews, or whether they were mostly an opportunity for Mr Gore to promote his film (*did we allow sectional interests to improperly influence our editorial decision making?*).
- 2. How many separate ABC interviews were conducted with Mr Gore, and whether this constituted unnecessary duplication (*did this result in disproportionately representing a particular perspective?*).
- 3. Whether the actual editorial content of each interview was sufficiently different to justify the time and resources involved.

The last issue was not strictly an issue of editorial policy, but allows for consideration of whether the ABC's editorial resources are being put to best use to ensure the organisation is providing "content which fulfils its functions under the ABC Act to a high standard." ¹

Relevant editorial standards:

- 1.3 Ensure that editorial decisions are not improperly influenced by political, sectional, commercial or personal interests.
- 4.2 Present a diversity of perspectives so that, over time, no significant strand of thought or belief within the community is knowingly excluded or disproportionately represented.

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¹ Note on Interpretation & Scope, ABC Editorial Policies

Methodology:

The review team confirmed the actual number of interviews conducted, obtained transcripts of all the interviews together with available audience data and then compared and analysed the content of each interview.

ANALYSIS & DISCUSSION:

1. Was there sufficient editorial justification for the interviews, or were they mostly an opportunity for Mr Gore to promote his film (did we allow sectional interests to improperly influence our editorial decision making?).

Al Gore's visit to Australia received extensive coverage on all mainstream media outlets, including major newspapers, commercial radio and television, Sky News and The Conversation.

This is not surprising, for three reasons. Firstly, a senior international politician (former US Vice President) who remains active in a significant policy area will always attract attention when visiting this country. Secondly, his original climate change film (An Inconvenient Truth) was both influential and controversial and helped to shape the global warming debate a decade ago both internationally and in Australia. And finally, his return to the debate via a sequel to the original film comes at a time when Australia has a renewed focus on climate change and energy policy as a result of gas shortages, power blackouts, rising electricity prices and a series of policy challenges informed by the recent Finkel Report.

Given that, the reasons for considering an interview with Al Gore were clear. On the other hand, was there clear evidence in the lead up to his visit that the actual *content* of the new movie was sufficiently newsworthy? The initial responses from overseas in the lead up to the film's release were mixed:

https://9to5mac.com/2017/03/02/tim-cook-al-gore-movie/

https://www.theguardian.com/film/2017/jan/20/an-inconvenient-sequel-review-al-gore-climate-change-documentary

https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/arts-andentertainment/wp/2016/12/10/goremoviesequel/?utm_term=.effcdc6af72f

http://variety.com/2017/film/news/al-gore-an-inconvenient-sequel-trump-paris-accord-1202451487/

https://www.theguardian.com/film/2017/may/22/al-gore-inconvenient-truth-sequel-trump-environment

There were indications that the film was unlikely to have as great an impact as the original one, and that many of the points raised were not particularly new, or were more familiar these days.

However, there were at least some new points of emphasis in the new film, including an optimism that solutions to global warming were becoming clearer, and a critique of decisions made by the Trump administration.

For all of these reasons, the opportunity to interview Al Gore on these issues was sensible and newsworthy. While there is no doubt the publicity around his appearance was likely to help promote his film, the ABC's interest was separate to this, and editorially appropriate. It is relevant to note that, in order to limit any sense in which the ABC's interviews with Al Gore were designed to promote the film, there was no overt publicity provided by way of screening dates or locations. Mentions of the film were confined for the most part to raising significant matters of editorial focus that emerged through the film's content.

2. How many separate ABC interviews were conducted with Mr Gore, and did this constitute unnecessary duplication (did this result in disproportionately representing a particular perspective?).

Despite early reports (see background summary above) suggesting as many as 18 different interviews were conducted, our investigations revealed a total of 8 separate interviews across all ABC outlets. Segments of some of these interviews were picked up, edited and repeated across a range of different programs in addition to that, meaning that Al Gore's visit generated substantial coverage across the ABC.

Setting aside the issue of how different each interview was (to be discussed in section three below), it is relevant to ask whether the overall coverage of Al Gore was excessive and unjustified by the editorial value. There is no evidence to suggest this was the case.

Climate change, and the broader issue of appropriate energy policy in response to climate change, are issues which the ABC has covered extensively over time and will continue to cover. Our coverage, like that of other media outlets, has included a wide range of perspectives to ensure appropriate impartiality.

In the weeks surrounding the time that Al Gore's views were covered on ABC news, current affairs and topical programming, there were also comments from a range of other perspectives, including:

- Reports from the Bureau of Meteorology;
- The Queensland Resources Council;
- The NSW Nature Conservation Council;
- The Green Climate Fund;

- The Climate Council;
- A representative group of 35 local government bodies;
- Regular comments on a range of environmental issues by the Federal Government, the Federal Opposition and the Greens;
- The independent financial think tank 'Carbon Tracker Initiative';
- G20 leaders meeting to discuss the Paris Agreement;
- An update on the latest data by the National Greenhouse Gas Inventory;
- Pacific leaders meeting in Fiji for a Climate Action Pacific Partnership event;
- The Australian Competition and Consumer Commission on energy prices;
- Arrium in Whyalla;
- The Australian energy regulator.

In circumstances where climate change and associated energy issues remain highly newsworthy and regularly reported from a range of angles, there was nothing disproportionate about the attention given to the views of Al Gore in the ABC's coverage.

3. Was the actual editorial content of each interview sufficiently different to justify the time and resources involved?

Having ascertained that Al Gore's views were newsworthy and the ABC's coverage of them was not disproportionate, it is useful to now turn to whether it was necessary to conduct eight separate interviews with him in order to cover his contribution to the climate change debate.

On the one hand, it is understandable that many different program teams within the ABC will seek their own one-on-one interviews with prominent visiting international talent. The impact of having a well-known guest on your own program, rather than running excerpts of someone else's interview that has already been published or broadcast elsewhere on the ABC, is significant and should not be discounted.

However, every one of these interviews takes time and resources to research, arrange and conduct and inevitably that is time and resources that could be spent on gathering other content to provide further richness and depth to ABC coverage.

The interviewees themselves are often short of time too (as was indicated on this occasion by Al Gore's minders) and so limiting the number of interviews conducted can sometimes ensure more time with the talent, covering more issues in greater depth.

So, the clearest editorial justification for running multiple interviews (instead of sharing excerpts from the same ABC interview) would be that each interview generated new, significant and different editorial content. That is what we will now consider.

These are the separate ABC interviews done with Al Gore:

10 July:

- Interview on 7.30 with Stan Grant
- Interview on *Hack* with Tom Tilley

11 July:

- Interview on Radio National Breakfast with Gregg Borschmann
- Interview on Sydney Radio Breakfast with Robbie Buck
- Interview on Perth Radio Drive with Belinda Varischetti
- Interview on *Melbourne Radio Drive* with Alicia Loxley

12 July:

• Interview on Brisbane Radio Afternoons with Kelly Higgins-Devine

3 August:

Interview on One Plus One with Jane Hutcheon

(The dates above indicate when the interviews were aired, rather than when they were recorded. All of them were actually recorded around the same time).

The last interview – a half hour extended profile for *One Plus One* - has been excluded from this review as it clearly served a very different purpose to the other seven interviews. It was a broad-based personality profile for a magazine-style program and, as such, its editorial value was distinct and different from the other topical, news-based interviews covering the issues of the day.

That leaves the seven key interviews that all ran within a couple of days of each other. How different was their editorial content?

This analysis begins by examining the 7.30 interview, the first interview to air, which was also the only television interview (apart from the *One Plus One* profile). This means it was capable of providing both audio and video excerpts for any ABC outlet that needed them.

The 7.30 covered the following key issues of substance:

- The key elements of Al Gore's original film An Inconvenient Truth
- What has changed in climate change science in the ten years since
- Gore's view of the recent Paris Agreement talks
- Gore's view of President Trump's attitudes and their impact on the US reputation
- The reality of what is happening inside the US and globally in the area of renewables
- Gore's view of recent developments in Australia in solar, wind & battery power, particularly in the wake of recent blackouts

- The extent to which climate change has become a political football and affected by the rise of populism
- Some reflections on Al Gore's political past and failure to become President

Overall, it was relatively comprehensive and appropriately challenging in some areas, such as accusations that some of Al Gore's views were alarmist or exaggerated.

It is interesting to note that this was the only interview done with Al Gore by News division programs (other than *One Plus One*). All other news programs which ran comments from Al Gore took them from this principal interview.

Turning to the remaining interviews, we have focussed on new issues of substance which emerged from these interviews and were not already covered in the 7.30 interview.

RN Breakfast:

Greg Borschmann is a highly experienced specialist journalist on environmental issues, and this was reflected in the interview. It was more detailed and more specific than the 7.30 interview and explored a range of issues more closely. The key issues of substance in this interview which were not included in the 7.30 interview were:

- More pointed questions on whether Australia was an international 'laggard' on climate change
- The impact of population growth on climate change, and whether this issue needed to be tackled
- Whether the world had reached a tipping point and the impact of climate change was now irreversible
- A detailed discussion of some of the more extreme methods and technologies for tackling climate change

Other interviews:

In reviewing the remaining five radio interviews, there was only one significant issue of substance which had not been addressed in the 7.30 and/or RN Breakfast interviews, and that was a specific question about the Adani coal mine. This issue was raised by the Brisbane Afternoons program and also by Hack. Al Gore's response to this issue was largely a broad and non-specific one – he referred back to his general talking points about renewables being the future as opposed to coal – but there was good reason for this specific local project to be raised in a question.

But apart from that issue, the remaining differences between the interviews were either stylistic or related to chatty, non-material issues such as Al Gore's more general views on

President Trump, whether he had spoken to Hillary Clinton much since her defeat and whether he might do another movie in another ten years' time.

Comparison of all interviews:

From an examination of all the interviews it became apparent that one common thread was a repetition of the key talking points Al Gore had prepared for his Australian visit. In many cases, these involved examples, case studies or set pieces responses that were repeated in all the interviews.

The key talking points detected in most if not all the interviews were:

"In the US, in spite of Donald Trump's announcement that he wants the US to withdraw, the governors of states and the mayors of cities and the leaders of businesses have stepped up" (used in 6 out of the 7 interviews)

"The price of electricity from solar and wind, and now the price declines in battery storage and efficiency improvements of all kinds - these are economic realities that are really kicking in in a very powerful way." (used in 6 out of the 7 interviews)

Comparing the spin used by climate change sceptics now and the tobacco lobby in the past (used in 4 out of the 7 interviews)

"In the last decade, the climate-related extreme weather events have become much more common, much more destructive" (used in 6 out of the 7 interviews)

All the other 19 countries at the G20 stood firm in the face of Trump's withdrawal (used in all 7 interviews)

"The vast majority of scientists tell us that we certainly still do have time to avoid the most catastrophic consequences that we have to avoid." (used in 4 out of the 7 interviews)

Given these common talking points and the fact that the vast majority of material, newsworthy issues were addressed in either the general 7.30 interview or the more specialist and detailed RN Breakfast interview, it seems clear that seven different interviews with Al Gore were not required in order to cover off the editorial content.

CONCLUSIONS

Localisation and personalisation are important and valuable features of a significant amount of ABC content.

A 'one-size-fits-all" approach to content can do a disservice to audiences by failing to take account of local or sectional interests (for example, a youth audience for a program like Hack can require a different editorial approach). While this can sometimes lead to duplication, the reality is that when content is tailored to the needs of specific local audiences it can be more relevant and therefore more widely shared and consumed.

In particular, a commitment to localisation is a vital part of the content strategy for ABC Local Radio. Local radio presenters build a close relationship with their audience by acting as a local lens through which news and current affairs are filtered. A good Breakfast or Drive presenter has a personal and particularly local connection with their audience, filtering the world from the perspective of their city.

While flagship interviews are a key strategy in personal brand development for all high-profile presenters, for Local Radio listeners, the expectation that the news will be filtered through the voice of their presenter is particularly strong. In this sense, it is not only specific, relevant editorial content that justifies multiple, localised interviews of high-profile talent, but the very nature and purpose of the Local Radio format itself.

It is one of the ABC's great virtues that it maintains wide-ranging local and regional outlets to ensure content is as closely focussed as possible on audiences and what they are interested in. In other words, not all duplication is unnecessary or undesirable.

However, care must be taken to ensure that multiple, localised versions of content contain specific relevant editorial content to justify the expenditure and resources involved. To use an obvious example, many local ABC networks may want to explore the local impact of a rise in youth unemployment, but they don't all need to record separate interviews with the Federal Employment Minister. In a case such as that, the key quotes on the data from a single interview or media conference can be widely shared and broadcast, with each local ABC program then free to explore the local implications of a national story using more relevant local interviewees.

In the case of the Al Gore interviews, his key points were relatively broad and straightforward, they were repeated across most interviews in the form of largely prepared talking points and anecdotes and, where more local issues were raised, the responses seemed to return to broad points.

Under such circumstances, we believe that:

- If the ABC had conducted just two interviews with Al Gore during his visit (one TV current affairs interview followed by a second more detailed specialist radio interview) then all key editorial points would have been covered off, and suitable material would have been available for all interested program areas.
- This would have been effective provided an additional specific question about the Adani mine had been asked during one of these two interviews.
- There would have been no significant loss of content, since essentially the same talking points were repeated in the seven interviews that were done.
- There would have been a loss of 'localisation' in that each local presenter would not have had their own personal encounters with Al Gore. However, this was already the case in most local markets who did not do their own interviews anyway.
- The saving in time and resources by sharing one or two interviews with Al Gore instead of seven interviews would have provided opportunities for other diverse local perspectives to be included off the back of the shared Al Gore material.
- In order to achieve this outcome, it is essential that news, current affairs and topical programming across Radio, News and (potentially) Regional are able to share information and coordinate planning to ensure that a coordinated and agreed approach can be taken for key interviews to eliminate unnecessary duplication.
- During the course of preparing this review, discussions were held with staff and/or managers from both the Radio and News Divisions. News indicated that the decision to conduct a single key interview and then share it among all programs was a conscious one, and the result of their planning processes. However, Radio indicated that other valid factors contributed to their decision to run a range of separate interviews. Their response, together with a response from the Managing Director, follows.

Editorial Review of ABC Interviews with Al Gore – Managing Director response

I support the conclusions of the review. While localisation is important, it must be counterbalanced with the appropriate allocation of resources. In addition, there can be new ways of preserving and enhancing localisation. For example, sharing one in depth interview conducted by RN and followed by the relevant local radio presenter conducting a follow-on conversation, critiquing that interview. I also note, that the intention of the renewed content team organisation is to reduce unnecessary duplication

Michelle Guthrie

Managing Director