

ABC Editorial Review no.6: Content, conduct and panel composition of the Q&A program (February – June 2015)

Background

The ABC Board has a statutory duty under section 8(1)(c), *Australian Broadcasting Act 1983 (Cth)* to ensure that the gathering and presentation of news and information is accurate and impartial.

The ABC Editorial Policies set out the editorial and ethical principles and standards fundamental to the ABC's gathering and presentation of content. The five standards pertaining to Principle 4 (Impartiality and Diversity of Perspectives) are:

4.1 Gather and present news and information with due impartiality

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.

4.3 Do not state or imply that any perspective is the editorial opinion of the ABC. The ABC takes no editorial stance others its commitment to fundamental democratic principles including the rule of law, freedom of speech and religion, parliamentary democracy and equality of opportunity.

4.4 Do not misrepresent any perspective.

4.5 Do not unduly favour one perspective over another.

As explained in the principles underpinning the standards in section 4, in applying the impartiality standard, ABC content-makers are guided by a number of hallmarks including fair treatment, open-mindedness and balance following the weight of evidence. These, and other key concepts are explained and illustrated in the Impartiality Guidance Note accompanying this brief. The Guidance Note may also be found here:

<http://about.abc.net.au/reports-publications/impartiality-guidance-note/>.

Scope and Subject

This Editorial Review will focus primarily on the performance of the ABC program Q&A against the impartiality standards.

- Time span of sample: 2 February 2015 – 29 June 2015.
- Number of programs in sample: 23 (This list includes a special program on the history of gay rights in Australia, broadcast 18 June 2015). All programs can be downloaded from the program home page at: <http://www.abc.net.au/tv/qanda/> (although files of each can be provided if requested by the reviewers). Full transcripts, biographies of all panellists and other information is also available on the website.
- Time span of review: The stages of the review process are described in detail on page 3. The ABC expects to receive an initial report from the reviewers, outlining their assessment of the 23 programs and any recommendations, within 12 weeks of the commencement of the review.

Reviewers

Shaun Brown commenced his long career in broadcasting with the ABC in Perth in 1970, and subsequently worked as a news and current affairs reporter, producer and presenter with the BBC and Television New Zealand. In 1994, he was appointed as Managing Editor, News and Current Affairs for TVNZ, later becoming the Head of Television. He joined SBS in 2003, and served as Managing Director from 2006-2011.

Ray Martin worked for the ABC from 1965-1978, including 10 years as a news correspondent in North America. He was a founding presenter with Channel 9's 60 Minutes in 1978, and was later the host of The Midday Show, A Current Affair and The Ray Martin Show. He was awarded an Order of Australia in 2011 for his illustrious career in journalism, his commitment to Aboriginal Reconciliation and extensive charity work.

Research Questions

The research questions to be answered are:

1. Featured topics for discussion. Over the relevant time period, were a suitably broad range of subjects canvassed on the program, such as would encourage a desirable diversity of perspectives and reflect the varied interests and experiences of the Australian community?
2. Was the composition of the panels such that over the course of the period assessed, Q&A met its obligations under Section 4 (particularly including the obligation to present a diversity of perspectives over time as outlined in standard 4.2, and to not unduly favour one perspective over another as outlined in standard 4.5)? In your view, does the method currently used to identify panellists work well, or do you believe there might be ways to improve selection processes?
3. Were panel discussions moderated in a way that ensured fair treatment was achieved, both in relation to the panellists present and the topic under discussion (with particular reference to standard 4.1)?
4. Did the questions from the public featured in each program provide an appropriate diversity of topics and perspectives (with particular reference to standard 4.5)? In your view, does the method currently used to solicit and choose questions from the audience work well, or do you believe there might be ways to improve selection processes?
5. In your opinion, did the behaviour and responses of audiences influence your perception of the program's impartiality? Did the composition of the audience seem predictable from week to week (if not, were there any obvious factors involved, perhaps including broadcast location)? In your view, does the method currently used to identify audience members work well, or do you believe there might be ways to improve selection processes?
6. In your opinion, did the Twitter stream which runs across the screen throughout the program either augment or detract from the overall performance of the program (with particular reference to standard 4.1)? Can you see ways in which social media could be better used to increase audience engagement with this program?

Method

Reviewers will be provided with a copy of the ABC Editorial Policies, with their attention specifically drawn to section 4 (Impartiality and Diversity of Perspectives). They will also receive a copy of the Impartiality Guidance Note and production notes from Q&A on protocols for panel, audience and question selection.

Reviewers will be asked to assess the first 23 programs of 2015 Q&A. In addition to their considerations against the official research questions, reviewers are also invited to make whatever additional comments they regard as relevant in relation to the programs, the audit methodology, or the Editorial Policies and Guidance Note.

The reviewers are requested to provide their assessment to the ABC in the form of a draft report to be provided to the Acting Head, Editorial Policies by the agreed date.

The draft findings will then be forwarded to the Director, ABCTV who will be given a reasonable period in which to prepare and submit an official response. This will involve a draft copy of the report being shown to affected staff on a confidential basis. The divisional response will then be forwarded to the reviewers, who will have the option of revising their report in light of any issues raised. At the conclusion of this process, the final review and the divisional responses will be forwarded to the Board for approval, prior to external publication on the ABC website.

A draft standard independent contractor agreement will be sent to each reviewer by the ABC prior to the commencement of the review, covering all other general terms and conditions including agreed remuneration.