

Hundreds of jobs axed as Australian Broadcasting Corporation imposes government cuts

Richard Phillips
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Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) management announced last week that 250 jobs will be axed at the network by the end of July.

The previously foreshadowed job destruction, presented as part of management's "five-year plan," was in response to an \$84 million budget shortfall caused by a federal government freeze on operational funding. Between 2014 and 2022, the ABC will have suffered more than \$783 million in government funding cuts, drastically undermining network operations and destroying hundreds of jobs.

The ABC is the country's largest broadcasting and media employer, generating a wide range of programs that commercial media networks do not produce. These include arts, science, literature, music, history and education programs, as well as life-saving bushfire and other national emergency broadcasting.

The latest cuts will impact on all aspects of the broadcaster and include the elimination of journalists, commissioning editors, researchers and other key creative and production positions.

At least 70 jobs will go from news, 53 from the entertainment and specialist division and 19 from local and regional sectors of the government-funded network. According to news reports, production positions in some areas are being eliminated and replaced with workers on reduced pay rates.

The network's popular 7.45 a.m. local radio news services, which has run for 80 years, will end, the ABC Life portal is to be axed, news, documentaries, comedy and children's programs will be reduced and/or integrated into other departments, and travel expenditure is to be cut by 25 percent.

External and independent screen production funding

will be reduced by \$5 million annually. The broadcaster spends about \$90 million each year commissioning work from independent producers.

Overall, the ABC will broadcast at least 35 fewer hours of original television per year with popular programs, such as "Old People's Home for 4 Year Olds," "You Can't Ask That," and others shut down. Episodes of high-rating television programs, such as "Foreign Correspondent," "7.30" and "Australian Story" will also be reduced.

While the ABC's current number of TV and radio channels will remain, management indicated that there will be other "consolidations" and possible transmission cuts as the network is "re-oriented" towards on-demand and digital services. This, management claims, will ensure the network becomes "more relevant to more Australians."

Federal Communications Minister Paul Fletcher praised the "five-year plan" and ludicrously claimed, along with Prime Minister Scott Morrison, that government funding to the network had increased.

In real terms, however, government funding of the ABC is 30 percent below what it was in 1985–86 and 10 percent less than in 2013. In the past seven years alone, the network has been subjected to an onslaught. ABC television has axed its "Lateline" and state-based versions of the "7.30" program while "The World Today" and evening current affairs programming on its radio network has been halved.

Foreign news bureaus have also been closed or drastically reduced, international broadcasting services, such as the Australia Network, ended; short wave radio services to the Northern Territory stopped, Classic FM live concerts have been curtailed, and there have been

severe cuts to Australian drama and children's programming. Some 100 websites have been shut down, and substantial areas of production contracted out to private companies.

Federal Labor Party leader Anthony Albanese denounced the Morrison government, accusing it of an "appalling failure to value the ABC."

Similar hollow and cynical phrases were issued by the unions covering ABC workers. The Community and Public Sector Union (CPSU) declared it was "death by a thousand cuts for ABC staff," while the Media, Entertainment and Arts Alliance (MEAA) described the government funding cuts as "an act of vandalism."

This is so much hot air, aimed at covering up the role of Labor and the unions in the systematic undermining of the state-funded broadcaster.

The funding cuts and job destruction did not begin in 2013 with the Liberal-National Coalition but are part of a decades-long and escalating assault. Some of the deepest cuts occurred under the Hawke and Keating Labor governments, with annual operational funding reduced by over 25 percent—from \$1.1 billion to \$750 million—between 1985 and 1996.

In 1986, the ABC directly employed more than 6,000. Today it has a little over 4,000 workers, many of them part-time or casual. None of these cuts could have occurred without the collaboration of the CPSU and MEAA. Year after year the unions have responded to every round of job cuts by appealing to management for "voluntary redundancies," offering advice on where to reduce costs, and opposing any mobilisation of ABC employees and other media workers to fight the destruction.

The latest ABC job cuts are happening as the corporate media has seized on the COVID-19 pandemic and falling advertising revenue to radically restructure their operations and axe hundreds of jobs.

In May, Murdoch-owned regional newspapers and Nine Entertainment's newspaper and broadcasting empire announced the closure of hundreds of local and regional newspapers and the destruction of more than 1,000 jobs.

Early last month, journalists and other editorial staff at Murdoch's metropolitan daily newspapers were told that scores of jobs would be eliminated, along with pay cuts and shorter working hours. In the past 18 months over 210 newsrooms have been closed or temporarily

suspended and more than 1,500 journalists, photographers and editors thrown out of work.

Further falls in advertising revenue will see louder demands by corporate media chiefs for an even deeper assault on the government-funded public broadcasters, which they insist are impinging on "their" market share and profits.

Two days before ABC management unveiled its latest job cuts, the Morrison government announced that it had commissioned a \$200,000 report on the impact of state-funded broadcasters "on commercial operators." The report, which is due to be completed by August, will not be publicly released but given to "Commonwealth officials, relevant Ministers, and their staff."

In other words, the report will produce government "talking points" and spin to justify the destruction of more ABC jobs, in order to bolster the profits of the corporate media giants.



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