

Jonathan Holmes - 19-2-22

Recording starts at 11:00

Introduction

Sue Noske: Good morning, everyone. Thanks for joining us today. My name is Sue Noske from the Blue Mountains ABC Friends group. We do begin today by acknowledging the traditional owners of the land on which we are hosting our webinar today, the Dharrug and Gundungurra, people and paying our respects to elders past, present and emerging.

Now a very big welcome to our special guest today, at last, it's been a long time coming! And it's Jonathan Holmes, chair of the ABC alumni, Jonathan will tell you a little bit about that shortly, but just about Jonathan:

Bit of history and context. Jonathan began his career with the BBC in 1969, working as a producer on programs like *24 Hours*, *Nationwide* and *Panorama*. In 1982 he was invited to Australia to become Executive Producer of ABC's *4 Corners* and since then he has served as Executive Producer of ABC's *4 corners* and since then he has served as head of ABC documentaries, Executive Producer of *Foreign Correspondent* and the 7.30 report and for many years as an on-camera reporter for *4 Corners* and *Foreign Correspondent* reporting from more than 40 countries as well as two years as an ABC correspondent in Washington. He's perhaps best known for his five years as presenter of *Media Watch*. Jonathan's work has been recognised by awards including the Logie, several Walkley nominations, top prize at the Banff World Television Festival, Hoddle Street documentary that was, and a special award from the United Nations Association of Australia for 25 years of distinguished journalism. He continues to write on media affairs and is the author of *On Aunty*, written in 2019. So, over to you Jonathan.

Presentation – Jonathan Holmes

Thank you, Sue, and I'm speaking to you, unfortunately in the sense that I wish I could be with you in the Blue Mountains, from Gadigal country, as you can see every night on the ABC news, and I also pay my respects to their elders past and present. ABC Alumni, you can see it there in the poster [behind] which doesn't have the ABC logo (and Friends are going to have a little bit of strife over that, during the election because the ABC have been pressured by people in the Liberal Party to ensure that no other organisation, including ABC Friends, is allowed to use the ABC logo, since the Liberal Party and all other political parties are not allowed to use it. But that's another issue.) Anyway, ABC Alumni is a collection, basically, of two or three hundred former ABC staff members who feel we still have something to contribute in terms of trying to lobby for a strong and well-funded public broadcaster.

One of our more prominent members, in fact, probably *the* most prominent member, is Kerry O'Brien. I worked with Kerry for a couple of years as Executive Producer of *The 7.30 Report* (as it then was) when Kerry was presenting the program. Kerry is speaking this year quite a lot at forums convened by Cathy McGowan and the 'Voices Of' Independent Candidates movement. Kerry, of course, started his career in the ABC in the early 1970s, so it's significant that at these forums he says, and I'm quoting, "At no point in my lifetime has the ABC been more important than it is today. The time has come for people who say they love the ABC, who say they rely on the ABC, to stand up and be counted. Our vote is one of the most precious things we have and so is the ABC."

Why is Kerry saying that at no point in [his life] has the ABC been more important? I'm going to try and explain that today. I'll be speaking for around 30-35 minutes and there'll be plenty of time after

that to ask questions of any kind, it doesn't have to be related to what I've been talking about. And you can do that by clicking on the Q& A button that should be at the bottom of your screens and writing your question in there and Sue will be able to read that and put the questions to me afterwards. Or in fact you can use the other thing, I think it's called Chat.

Anyway, I want you to turn your minds back to January 6, 2021, and those frightening scenes on Capitol Hill in Washington. Ugly, frightening scenes in the building that houses the legislature of the oldest, true democracy on the planet. What fuelled those people?

We've all seen the analysis of what drives a Trump supporter, ah, the stagnant pay of the working class of America for thirty or forty years, the off-shoring of jobs, the feeling that Democrats these days only care about identity politics – black people, Hispanic people – and not about white working-class people, and so on. But as much or more than all of that, those rioters, and I think one can call them that, were there because of a massive disinformation campaign.

Trump himself, of course, started it and fuelled it. But it was amped up by social media: by troll factories in Russia and elsewhere and by the whole network of right-wing disinformation organs like Breitbart News in the United States itself. And especially, as Sarah Ferguson made clear in her *4 Corners* show last year, by Fox News.

As a result of all these influences, something like two-thirds of Republican voters still now, today, believe that Joe Biden's election was illegitimate, the result of electoral fraud, despite the fact there was absolutely no evidence whatsoever of any such thing. And those people on the Capitol – January 6th – certainly did believe that.

But I disagreed with Sarah's program in one important way: she based the program largely on former Fox luminaries like Gretchen Carlson and Chris Stirewalt who agreed to take part in the program. They left Fox News around the time that its dark eminence, the sinister Roger Ailes, was forced to leave because of multiple sexual harassment suits. But Sarah allowed her star interviewees to claim that while Ailes was in charge Fox News had been a legitimate news organisation - it was only after he left and Rupert himself took over, briefly, as the boss of Fox, that it sold its soul to Donald Trump and became a propaganda machine. Well, I'm sorry, Sarah, but I profoundly disagree.

Before Roger Ailes was recruited by Rupert Murdoch to head up his new cable news network in the 1990s, Ailes had been a Republican party election guru, specialising in television advertising, negative attack advertising for a couple of decades. Murdoch saw an opportunity to do with Fox News what he'd successfully done with *The Sun* in the UK back in the 1970s: to create a right-wing working-class audience that nobody else even knew was there - although in the US radio shock-jocks such as Rush Limbaugh had already discovered it.

It was Ailes and Fox News, more than any other single phenomenon, that created the deep split in the Republican party, and the gradual right-wing populist take-over that culminated in Donald Trump. But for decades before that Fox took the dark conspiracy theories of the Web, well at least a decade I should say, it took the conspiracy theories that bubbled up on the Web and legitimized them as if they were real news. And there are plenty of examples of that long before Donald Trump rolled up. Roger Ailes allowed Fox to become the magnifier and the mouthpiece for many of these conspiracy theories, you know, even going to allegations that Hilary Clinton had masterminded the murder of an aid and those sorts of things.

Ailes did something else too. Fox's mottos "We report. You decide" and "Fair and balanced" were, of course, pretty cynical. But to create its own news bubble, Fox deliberately set out in the late 1990s

and ever since to discredit the mainstream American media – newspapers and television – and especially its rivals CNN and the two most, as it were, reputable newspapers in world almost, the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post*. They were hopelessly biased to the Left, said Fox presenters, purveyors of fake news, champions of East and West Coast elites, of political correctness, of the ‘woke’ culture. And it worked. Americans now are so deeply divided that they really cannot talk to each other any more.

The *New York Times* and the *Washington Post* which are among the world’s great newspapers with a solid commitment to truth-telling, are regarded by half the population as purveyors of fake news. Or even, in Donald Trump’s words, ‘enemies of the people.’ And CNN, which has stuck more or less to its old-fashioned idea that news should be politically impartial, rates far less well than Fox News and its left-wing equivalent MSNBC both of which deliberately cultivate and play to the extremes of their parties.

And US politics, of course, is divided in a way that it never was, partly as a consequence of the creation of this right-wing element in the Republican party. Republican members of Congress, even the most moderate ones, dare not seek compromise with the other side because if they do, they will be challenged in the Primaries by Trumpist or further right candidates, and they will probably lose. And remember the House of Representatives in the United States has an election, and therefore its members can face primaries challenge, every two years.

Now we’re seeing the same tactics being adopted here in Australia. The Murdoch newspapers, of course, are far more powerful here than in the United States. Whereas there Rupert Murdoch owns the *New York Post* and the *Wall Street Journal*, which admittedly is a very influential newspaper, but his real political power comes from Fox News on television. In this country, as we all know, something like 65-70% of newspaper readership, although that is declining dramatically, read News Corp Australia newspapers. In Queensland, for example, they virtually have a complete monopoly of every paper up and down the state - every substantial newspaper from the Gold Coast to Cairns, as well, of course, as the Brisbane *Courier Mail* and *The Australian*.

The Australian used to be rather like the *Wall Street Journal*, in the sense that it had a right-wing editorial page, but its news pages were extremely respectable and respected. More and more it’s become a vehicle for uncritical support of conservative Australian governments and for espousing Rupert Murdoch’s own pet-hates like the Greens and market-based emissions reduction policies and so on. And you have to pick your way through *The Australian’s* stories - they still have some good journalists and they still have some breakthrough news stories - but I find you have to be very careful what you believe in *The Australian* these days.

But the important thing is this – in 2018 News Corporation Australia bought Sky News. People forget that Sky News used to be owned by a consortium of Nine, Seven and the British cable channel BSkyB, which was managed by News Corp globally, but only 30% owned by it. Sky News Australia, from its founding, was a very efficient and effective operation run out of the Macquarie business park in Sydney, specializing above all in federal politics because there’s no point in doing State-based politics for a national audience. You walk into any Canberra Parliament House Office of either party and you would see David Speers spouting away in the corner for Fox News. It was the House channel of Parliament House and to some degree it still is. And discussion programs on Sky News in those days certainly favoured the right but they had a smattering of former Labor people, they had some attempt to look at both sides. Kristina Keneally, for example, partnered Peta Credlin. As soon as News Corp Australia took over in late 2018, and in fact for a few months before that, Sky News changed. The token left-wing presenters were dumped. Sky News after dark, as we know, became a

wall-to-wall carpet of right-wing hosts, their views indistinguishable from each other and many of them like Chris Kenny and Peta Credlin had a gig at *The Australian* as well.

Now in my view, Lachlan Murdoch, a man who's not talked about nearly enough, has been crucial to this. He runs Fox in the United States. He is the Executive Chairman and CEO of Fox. And he's theoretically just a non-executive Chairman of News Corporation; his father, Rupert, is the Executive Chairman and the CEO is Robert Thompson who is based in New York. But ever since Lachlan became the Head of News Corp Australia, or in those days News Limited, in the late 1990s, Australia has been regarded as his patch within News Corp. And I believe he is still the most influential voice in the broad strategy of how News Corp Australia is run. Lachlan, for example, promoted Paul 'Boris' Whittaker first to the Editor-in-Chief of *The Australian*, and then to Sky News – the CEO of Sky News, Whittaker is said to be as close to Lachlan as Chris Mitchell, the former Editor-in-Chief of *The Australian* was to his father, Rupert.

And Lachlan is said to be more right-wing than his father. Chris Mitchell's autobiography has a much-quoted passage to describe the meeting between, at one of those big conferences that News Corp held in the United States with all its editors around the world and they would all convene at this place, I think it was in Aspen, or it might have been somewhere else on the west coast of the United States, and James, who at that time was very powerful within News Corp especially in the UK, invited Al Gore to come and – this is like, 2005 or 6 – to talk about his new doco on climate change. After Gore had done his thing Andrew Bolt, who was there, got stuck into Gore, questioning all his statistics, pouring scorn on what he did, and Mitchell describes in this book Lachlan Murdoch sitting in the audience grinning all over his face obviously absolutely loving it. [Shrugs] just a little story...but we actually know very little about Lachlan, very little about what he believes and so on.

However, it's not all that important who's driving it, what's important is that Sky News is using the same tactics in Australia as Fox News is in the United States: support one side of politics and vilify the other. Persuade the public that the rest of the media is not to be trusted and in Australia overwhelmingly, that means the ABC.

Public broadcasting in America, of course, is a minority business: the national public radio and PBS have got very tiny audiences and very little government funding. But Murdoch has always hated public broadcasters. His father, Sir Keith, was a bitter opponent of the ABC back in the 1930s – especially of ABC News which challenged his own radio audiences. In the UK, Rupert and his son James brutally attacked the BBC for decades and indeed the Murdoch press in Britain have been encouraging the Conservative government to withdraw the licence fee from the BBC. And here in Australia the Murdoch press have always encouraged the view that the ABC is infested with mad Trotskyites and inner-city sandal wearers.

Australia, as Kevin Rudd keeps telling us, is the most concentrated media market in the world. There are only really four major suppliers of news left, 'mainstream', as it were. Of course, we've got others like *The Guardian* and so on, but basically it's News Corp, it's Nine TV and newspapers, it's Kerry Stokes' Seven, which is dominant in Western Australia because he owns most of the newspapers there, and the ABC. And for Sky News the ABC is Public Enemy Number One. Sky News is now free-to-air in some parts of regional Australia thanks to deals with WIN-TV owned by another overseas billionaire, Bruce Gordon, and Southern Cross Austereo. Not huge audiences, but Sky News Australia is immensely successful online: little snippets of right-wing propaganda on YouTube and Facebook have a huge following in the US but here as well. Encouraging the use of Ivermectin as a cure for COVID, supporting vaccine mandate opposers, and wall-to-wall every night of the week its

hosts and guests pour scorn on the ABC. Hard to exaggerate how concentrated that attack is, every night.

And it's having an effect. The ABC is still the most trusted news organisation in Australia by far, but the percentage of those who strongly disagree with the view that the ABC is fair and impartial or trustworthy is growing. I haven't checked the figures about what it was like in the 90s recently, but my memory is that if you looked at the figures in the late 90s about 5% would say they had no trust at all in the ABC and that figure's gone up to nearer to 10%. You look at those massive demonstrations in Canberra just a week or so ago. You know, a lot of people, a lot of Australian flags. And that's where you'll find all those people who just don't trust the ABC. And many of them will tell you that they do trust Sky News.

Now this deliberate attempt to divide the country into silos, which worked so well in the United States, was a money-making tactic for Rupert. He made a fortune in the United States from Fox News. With Lachlan it seems to me it's more of an ideological battle than it was with his father. That really doesn't matter because what matters is the effect. Because among those 10% or among the 20-30% who don't have much trust in the ABC, are the people who go along to Liberal Party and National Party branch meetings, who urge their MPs to sell off the ABC, who every five years or so vote for Pauline Hanson's One Nation, or who are now being lured to vote for Clive Palmer's United Australia Party. All of them regard the ABC as a theft of their money to fund an ideological enemy.

News Corp Australia also lends its stars to the IPA, the Institute of Public Affairs, and its attacks on the ABC. The Menzies Research Centre, the Liberal Party think-tank, is headed by Nick Cater – he's a former editor of *The Weekend Australian* – and like Chris Kenny and Gerard Henderson he's been trotting out anti-ABC tirades for decades – almost obsessively. The Menzies Research Centre's dodgy research about the ABC made use of a super-dodgy polling company which I won't name but it's very small and the polls are, or the use to which they're put, are extremely weird. They are used by the IPA in its latest five-part podcastⁱ against the ABC.

Others on that podcast include Chris Mitchell, the former Editor-in-Chief of *The Australian*, Rowan Dean the extreme climate-denier and editor of *The Australian Spectator*, Chris Kenny of course, and the familiar ABC haters with Tony Abbott - Craig Kelly, George Christensen, James Bragg, Mark Latham, Matt Canavan and Alex Antic. One's almost tempted to use Mark Latham's disgusting phrase 'a conga-line of suckholes'.

You may think only a tiny number listen and you're right. 12,000 listened to the IPA podcast – slightly less than saw my four-minute video that I made attacking itⁱⁱ. But again, these podcasts give the ABC haters a sense of legitimacy. "If a respectable-sounding think-tank like the IPA thinks the ABC is a waste of money, I can too."

And the IPA's influential among top Liberals, not just Tony Abbott – Mitch Fifield for example, former Communications Minister, was a member. It must have been awkward for him when, at the Liberal Party's Federal Council in 2018, the delegates voted overwhelmingly for a motion calling for the ABC to be privatised, exactly as the IPA had been urging for thirty years. Fifield was the one who had to tell the Conference that that was not Government policy, and that the Liberal Party doesn't make Coalition Government policy. But the fact remains that privatisation of the ABC is still Liberal Party policy and that not a single speech was made at that conference in opposition to the motion.

And while this is going on, of course, the crisis in the business models of commercial media continues – I'm sure you're all aware of what that's about – migration of classified ads to online sites, the fact that Facebook and Google are able to target advertising much more accurately than

advertising in newspapers...and so on. As a result, we have the closure of local newspapers. News Corp actually bought a bunch of them and then closed them two years later, all across Australia. And almost news deserts in some parts of regional Australia. Sky News is an alternative to the local paper that used to be there. Of course, it's not local it's all out of its studios in Sydney.

The ABC is the other alternative, where it can be reached. And as Friends have pointed out, it's not always the case that you can get a good signal from the ABC everywhere. But the ABC websites *do* do local stuff and are doing it more and more. So, the ABC has become more crucial than ever as a source of accurate fact-based non-political news.

You know the importance of emergency broadcasting much better than me: in the Blue Mountains during the fires it was crucial. Look at the Pandemic. Premiers suddenly have unprecedented power over our lives. Gladys Berejiklian (and others) are household names. How many of us could have named the Premier of Western Australia before the last couple of years? But we have no state-based current affairs on the ABC to hold these Premiers to account, make them answerable to their electorates. There's no state-based *7.30 Report*: that was abolished way back in the mid-90s. There's no *Stateline* or weekly, state-based version of *7.30* - they were abolished after the Abbott government cuts in 2014. Look what happens now when Leigh Sales in Sydney tries to hold Dan Andrews to account. Because she's not Victorian, at least in part at any rate, she's vilified in social media by his supporters just for doing her job.

And – look overseas, look at our region. Southeast Asia and particularly the Pacific. The Australia Network was supposed to be an overseas television network servicing those foreign audiences. The ABC was given a ten-year contract by one of the outgoing governments – Rudd government or it might have been Gillard but anyway that contract was abandoned, only one year in, by the Abbott government in 2014. About \$200m would have gone over the following nine years to the ABC to support the Australia network. Gone. There ensued the fiasco of giving the job to the commercial channels who didn't want a bar of it, who were pumping out daytime soaps and *Married at First Sight* and so on to Fiji, Tuvalu and Samoa.

ABC International is now dependent on local broadcasters to distribute its TV programming or on satellite streaming which reaches tiny audiences. China spends an estimated A\$3b on overseas broadcasts; France, Germany, Britain about half a billion dollars each. ABC International costs the taxpayer about A\$11.5m per year. As David Anderson said at Senate Estimates this week, the biggest complaint he hears from Pacific broadcasters is that they're being pressured by their governments to broadcast more and more Chinese programsⁱⁱⁱ. They don't particularly want to but what else have they got?

So, it's not just in Australia that the ABC is vital for democracy, it's in our neighbours in the Pacific too.

'Vital to democracy?' mocks the IPA. 'No-one listens to or watches the ABC any more'. What a bizarre notion! It's true TV ratings are falling everywhere. The average age of people who watch ABCTV news live is well over 70. But that's because the age of linear radio and TV is coming to an end. It's all about mobile devices: tablets, laptops, YouTube on your big screen on the telly. Watching stuff when you want to watch it.

And in that sphere the ABC is flourishing. It's the number one digital news provider in Australia. It's number one on Apple News, it's no.1 on Instagram. Triple J's YouTube channel has four million people watching it in the average month. Four million! 27 million ABC podcasts are downloaded

every month. This is where the ABC has to go on looking for its audience. And it is. And it's done it very successfully.

And of course, it's not just news. The streaming services, the Netfixes and Stans and so on Apple, Prime, they dominate with American drama mainly, although they are putting some effort in to Australian drama, but the ABC is the prime producer of Australian drama. Because commercial free-to-air television can't afford it anymore. ABC won 22 AACTA Awards this year. Best Drama, Best Mini-series, Best Documentary. About three different kinds of comedy. Not to mention, of course, children's. *Bluey* is *the* most successful children's show the ABC has ever produced. It's selling worldwide.

If you want to know more about that stuff, I really recommend David Anderson's book that came out this week: it's very short – it's really just an essay. Takes about an hour to read, you can access it online. *Now more than ever*^{iv} is the title, and I really recommend having a quick check through that because he does a good job of talking about what the ABC does.

'Well maybe' say the critics, 'but it costs a fortune: a billion dollars a year.' Sounds a lot. But here's what you tell people who say that. First, the ABC's operational budget, the money it has to make programs and do online stuff is less than \$900 million. Nearly \$200 million every year goes into the transmission costs that the ABC has no control over at all.

But here's the real kicker. You might remember back in the 1980s David Hills' Eight Cents a Day campaign. 'The ABC costs you just 8c a Day'. And what you got for your eight cents back then was one television channel, and four radio channels: local radio station, Radio National, ABC Classic FM and Triple J. What do you get now? Six TV channels: News 24, ABC TV, ABC Kids, ABC TV Plus, ABC Me, ABC Australia for International viewers. Twelve Radio networks: analog and digital ABC News radio, Radio National, ABC local radio, ABC Classic, Triple J, and then on digital Double J. Kids listen. Radio Australia, ABC Country, ABC Jazz, ABC Grandstand...And then there's ABC Online: News, multimedia stories, blogs (News, Science, Religion, Kids, Arts, Sports, Lifestyle) – thousands of pages, millions of pages every year. And you can access it all through iView, the ABC Listen app or your podcasts app or whatever. You can access it any time you want anywhere you've got a phone signal for free.

And what does all that cost? In 1987 terms four cents per person, per day. Half what the ABC cost in real terms back in the late 1980s. So don't let anyone say that the ABC isn't value for money.

The ABC is crucial to our democracy. Imagine Australia without it. Where would we get our reliable news? Murdoch would like us to rely on him. God help us if we have to.

Your job is to help persuade people not to vote for a candidate who doesn't support a well-funded ABC. You have to decide how you're going to do that, but I hope I've given you some fresh thoughts about the arguments you could use and why Kerry O'Brien believes that never in his lifetime has the ABC been more important. So good luck and go get 'em.

Questions not transcribed

ⁱ <https://ipa.org.au/ipa-today/new-podcast-their-abc>

ii Jonathan Holmes on the IPA podcast “Their ABC” <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PT9UOdr-sqs>

iii <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2022-02-15/pacific-public-broadcasters-concerned-about-chinese-pressure/100833518>

iv <https://publishing.monash.edu/product/now-more-than-ever/>