

ABC Editorial Policies - Quality Assurance Project 2: Accuracy

October 2007

Description and Method

1 Introduction

The ABC aspires to the highest standards in all its work, and the standard of its news and current affairs work is of particular importance because of the large role played by the national broadcaster in the practical functioning of Australian democracy.

Of central importance to the health of any democracy is trust in those who wield public power. These include journalists and media outlets. That trust cannot exist without professional and institutional accountability. Although the ABC already has well-developed internal mechanisms of journalistic accountability, it is increasing its commitment.

The role of the ABC Director Editorial Policies includes the development of fair and rigorous methodologies to verify that content is meeting the standards required by the *ABC Act* and Editorial Policies, and to contribute to continuous improvement.

The second quality assurance project will examine the accuracy of news reporting. The project has been designed in conjunction with a qualified independent consultant, Dr Denis Muller, who is also an experienced journalist. Dr Muller will manage the project and provide a report to the Director Editorial Policies on the implementation of the methodology and its findings. When tested and refined, the methodology for assessing the accuracy of news reporting is intended to be re-used routinely.

2 Objectives

The objectives of the project are to:

1. Create a rigorous and fair method of gathering and assessing data on the standard of factual accuracy in ABC news and current affairs content on radio, TV and online.
2. Trial a model for the further development of quality assurance processes in the ABC.

3 Six guiding principles

The approach taken in designing and carrying out this work has been guided by six principles.

Principle 1 -- Respect for editorial independence

Section 27 of the ABC Act requires the ABC to develop and maintain an independent news service. The word “independent” is crucial both as a general principle and as a principle of particular application to this project.

Section 2 of the ABC’s Editorial Policies gives independence the status of a key value in the ABC, applicable generally across the organisation.

Independence in the context of this project refers particularly to editorial independence. This is a contested term, having been interpreted by some outside the media as meaning journalistic licentiousness, and by others as an essential element of ensuring reasonable diversity of media content in a country in which the ownership and control of the commercial media is highly concentrated. Of greater relevance to the ABC is the concept of independence for the national public broadcaster from the government of the day (section 8 (1) (b) *ABC Act*).

From the ABC’s Editorial Policies it is unambiguously clear that when related to the ABC’s news service, the term means journalists must be able to make decisions on editorial content free from improper or undesirable influences:

Para 5.1.7 of the Policies states that news programs should depend fully on public funding. This means they are independent of commercial interests and pressures.

Para 5.1.6 refers, if somewhat obliquely, to the requirement that decisions on content be based on the professional expertise and judgment of staff and not on personal opinion.

Para 5.2.2 (d) states that editorial judgments will be based on news values, not on political, commercial or sectional interests or personal views.

From these we have distilled what we conceive to be the essence of editorial independence as it relates to the ABC’s news and current affairs programs:

News and current affairs content will be decided by the ABC’s professional journalists applying established news values and public-interest considerations, unconstrained by political, commercial, sectional or personal interests, and conforming to the Editorial Policies of the ABC.

This definition is broadly consistent with other definitions of editorial independence, for example *The Age Charter of Editorial Independence*.

The first guiding principle of this quality assurance project is that those conducting it recognise and respect the editorial independence of ABC journalists.

Everything done in this process is directed at strengthening that independence, not weakening it. For that reason it is considered of paramount importance that those carrying it out be accountable to the ABC’s Director Editorial Policies and, through him, to the Managing Director, who is also Editor-in-Chief.

Principle 2 – Professional accountability

Journalists, including ABC journalists, should be accountable for the way they exercise their powers and meet the responsibilities that come with them. At the same time, mechanisms of accountability must not inhibit the proper exercising of editorial independence.

Principle 3 – Natural justice

The quality-assurance process must adhere to the requirements of natural justice. No adverse findings will be conclusively made until the program team concerned have had a full and proper opportunity to respond to any draft finding. That response will then be taken into account in arriving at the conclusive finding.

Principle 4 – An educative focus

This is an educative and developmental accountability process, not a censorious or punitive one. Individual journalists' identities will not be used in association with the results.

Program-by-program results will be reported to the Director Editorial Policies in aggregate form. The purpose is to provide the basis for education and professional development across a program team, a Division and, where relevant, across the whole ABC. The purpose is not to single out individuals for criticism or praise.

Principle 5 -- Reasonableness

Data will be assessed in light of what was reasonable to achieve in the circumstances, particularly by reference to the time or other practical pressures under which the material was gathered, produced and broadcast or published online.

Principle 6 -- Transparency

The design and operation of the process will be transparent and made available to the News Division in advance of implementation.

4 Design and methodology

The Editorial Policies quality-assurance system is in its formative stages, and this methodology has been devised as a pilot.

4.1 Scope

The scope of this quality assurance project is confined to:

- Factual and contextual accuracy, and to the use of stereotypical labels of groups and individuals.
- Items broadcast on the ABC Radio news and current affairs programs *AM*, *The World Today* and *PM*.

It was considered important to pilot this project on one of the long-established programs of news and current affairs at the ABC. Content on new platforms, which are still in their early days of development, may be the subject of future projects using a suitably adapted methodology.

Radio and television news and current affairs:

- have long histories of professionalism and experience;
- have the largest proportion of ABC journalists;
- produce a large proportion of ABC output in news and current affairs;
- attract the largest audiences for ABC news and current affairs, and
- exercise the powers and responsibilities which come with those resources and that exposure.

In choosing between radio and television, it was considered that, for the purposes of a pilot project, it was sensible to keep the semiotic or signal-sending complexities to a minimum. Television combines sound and vision, multiplying the semiotic complexities.

For that reason, radio has been chosen as the less complex medium for this pilot.

Aside from news bulletins, ABC Radio's news and current affairs effort is largely directed at *AM*, *The World Today* and *PM*, meaning they:

- have long histories of professionalism and experience;
- have access to a wide range of ABC journalists;
- produce a large proportion of ABC Radio output in news and current affairs;
- attract a large proportion of the audiences for ABC Radio news and current affairs, and
- exercise the powers and responsibilities which come with those resources and that exposure.

If the performance of ABC Radio news and current affairs is to be assessed, then assessing these programs provides the broadest and most substantial base on which to do it and will yield a good indicator of the overall performance of ABC Radio news and current affairs because they represent such a large proportion of the output.

4.2 Assessment criteria

The assessment will be confined strictly to accuracy, which will include contextual accuracy and accuracy in labelling of groups and individuals. Explicitly this pilot project will not cover balance, fairness or impartiality, which are matters that will be the subject of future quality assurance projects.

Balance, fairness and impartiality are complex concepts. They are important and journalists are required by the Editorial Policies to ensure that their work exhibits those qualities, but making quality-assurance assessments of the extent to which content displays those qualities is a complex exercise.

This pilot project will address the less complex notions of accuracy and labelling in order to test the methodology without over-reaching.

Factual accuracy is something that can largely be checked by a comparison between what was broadcast and the material upon which the broadcast was based. Contextual accuracy is more complex, but still amenable to assessment against the available sources.

Labelling is amenable to assessment against the requirements of the Editorial Policies.

It is acknowledged that there will be some element of subjectivity in the assessments, and a system of inter-assessor reliability will be used to minimise it.

The importance of factual accuracy and context, and standards for the assessment of performance in these matters are to be found in Sections 5 and 11 of the ABC's Editorial Policies, specifically:

Para 5.1.4: News records what is happening. Facts and context dominate.

Para 5.1.6: Context, analysis and comment included in news and current affairs content should be backed by demonstrable evidence . . .

Para 5.2.1: All news and current affairs content will be accurate . . .

Para 5.2.2 (c) (i): Every reasonable effort, in the circumstances, must be made to ensure that the factual content of news and current affairs is accurate and in context.

Para 5.17.1: The overriding objective for the ABC is to report the facts clearly, accurately.

Para 5.17.2: The ABC does not label groups or individuals except where labels provide valuable information or context. Labels, if inappropriately applied, can be seen as subjective, over-simplistic or as portraying stereotypes.

Para 5.17.3: Where labels have been ascribed to an individual or group by a third party, this will be made clear within the broadcast.

Para 11.8.1: The presenting content, the ABC has a responsibility to treat all sections of society with respect and to avoid the unnecessary use of prejudicial content.

Para 11.8.2: To avoid discrimination, content should not use language or images which:

- (a) disparage or discriminate against any person or group on grounds such as race, ethnicity, nationality, sex, age, disability or sexual preference; marital, parental, social or occupational status; religious, cultural or political belief or activity.

Section 11 also refers to risks of stereotyping arising from the use of terms such as “mental illness”, warns against gratuitous references to people’s physical characteristics, cultural practices or religious beliefs, and generally requires staff to avoid stereotypes.

The Code of Practice, which is derived from the Editorial Policies and under which complaints may be made to the Australian Communications and Media Authority¹, contains similar provisions relating to accuracy (Code, section 3.2) and stereotyping (Code, section 2.7).

4.3 Data base

The assessment will be carried out on items broadcast by the three programs *AM*, *The World Today* and *PM*, but confined to:

Items on domestic Australian news prepared wholly within Australia and those elements of the item based on documentary sources material.

The probable available data base was calculated using an analysis of items broadcast on the three programs in a randomly chosen week – 1 to 5 October. It showed the following numbers of items in each program, categorised as domestic Australian and overseas stories:

Date	Program and sources of items								
	AM			TWT			PM		
	Aust	O’s eas	Total	Aust	O’s eas	Total	Aust	O’s eas	Total
1 Oct	5	4	9	10	2	12	8	2	10
2 Oct	6	4	10	9	2	11	9	2	11
3 Oct	5	4	9	8	3	11	9	2	11
4 Oct	6	3	9	8	3	11	9	3	12
5 Oct	5	4	9	10	2	12	8	2	10
Totals	27	19	46	45	12	57	43	11	54

The proportion of Australian stories is considerably smaller on AM than on TWT or PM for the obvious reason that AM is broadcast at the start of the day in Australia and little new has happened locally since PM the evening before.

Even so, AM generates considerable new Australian material by taking forward stories that have appeared in the morning papers. This then plays into the news cycle of the day, frequently in quite significant ways. As such, it is an important regenerator of the news cycle.

Despite the fact that AM is only a 30-minute program compared with the 50 minutes allocated to TWT and PM, it covers a rounded average of 9 stories, compared with 11 by TWT and 11 by PM.

Stories from the three programs will be sampled in those proportions.

¹ Part 11, Division 2, *Broadcasting Services Act 1992 (Cth)*.

The stories will be sampled at random from a randomly chosen four-week period dating back no further than three months from the date of selection, but excluding federal election periods. Election coverage creates abnormal patterns of coverage and anyway is subject to its own auditing procedures. Stories will be drawn from weekday editions only.

We have said that the study will be confined to Australian domestic stories. Based on the figures for the week beginning 1 October, the data base of these stories will break down accordingly:

AM	23%
TWT	39%
PM	37%

Over a four-week period, based on the figures from the week beginning 1 October, the total number of Australian domestic stories is likely to be $115 \times 4 = 460$.

A random sample of one-third of these stories will be drawn. The items drawn will then be assessed to ensure that their content does rest to a significant extent on documentary sources.

If a sampled item has to be discarded because it fails this initial screening test, it will be replaced by the next Australian domestic story broadcast after it, and if that also fails the test, the next story before it in the broadcast.

A total sample of no fewer than 150 stories will be used.

The sample will be broken down proportionally among the three programs so as to reflect the actual distribution of stories as shown in the week 1 to 5 October 2007. This means that the number of items in the sample will break down as follows:

AM (23%)	36 items
TWT (39%)	59 items
PM (37%)	56 items
Total	151 items

A screening of AM transcripts for Friday 5 October indicates that there are likely to be 10 stories per week that are sufficiently based on documentary material to be included in the study. Over four weeks that would make 40 stories, from which 36, or 90%, will be sampled.

A similar screening of TWT stories from that week indicates there are likely to be 20 stories per week which over four weeks would give 80 stories from which 59, or 74%, would be sampled.

The numbers for PM are 15 per week, 60 for the month, from which 56, or 93%, would be sampled.

These figures indicate that this study would be extremely comprehensive inasmuch as it would cover a very high proportion of the stories that qualify for inclusion.

4.4 Definitions and dependent variables

The first dependent variable is accuracy. It is necessary to define this with some precision.

For the purposes of this study, accuracy has two elements:

1. Plain facts: names, titles, dates, amounts, and so on.
2. Contextual accuracy: the fidelity of the broadcast material to the context in which the facts were presented in the documentary source material, and the use of facts in a way that does justice to the range of factual material available from the documentary sources.

Factual content is defined as:

Material which conveys bare information directly verifiable by reference to a source other than the item under investigation, and not containing explanation, interpretation, analysis, or opinion.

This definition is consistent with, although not exactly the same as, that used by the Australian Communication and Media Authority.

The study will not go beyond these boundaries. It specifically will not make judgments about the overall impression created by the item, nor will it make judgments about interpretation, comment, tone or semiotics.

The second dependent variable is labelling. Where labels are applied to groups of individuals, they will be assessed for whether they portray stereotypes and the extent to which these are factually and contextually accurate.

Stereotypical labelling refers to gratuitous references to race, ethnicity, nationality, sex, age, disability, sexual preference; marital, parental, social or occupational status; religious, cultural or political belief or activity, or other personal characteristics in a way that tends to stereotype the subject of the description.

Gratuitous labelling is defined as:

Referring to a person's race, ethnicity, nationality, sex, age, disability, sexual preference; marital, parental, social or occupational status; religious, cultural or political belief or activity, or other personal characteristics when these characteristics have no apparent relevance to the story.

4.5 Process of assessment

Each item will be individually reviewed by two experienced journalists from outside the ABC. Their reviews will be conducted independently of each other, and then be compared by the project manager. Where the assessments are discrepant, he will review the item himself.

The reviews will consist of initially listening to the sound track and reading the transcripts from the broadcast items and comparing their content with documentary source material referred to in the items.

From that, the reviewers will assess each item overall for plain-fact and contextual accuracy on the following scale:

Wholly accurate
Substantially accurate
Immaterially inaccurate
Materially inaccurate

These are defined as follows:

Wholly accurate: *No apparent errors at all.*

Substantially accurate: *No more than one apparent error which makes no substantial difference to the overall accuracy of the information conveyed.*

Immaterially inaccurate: *An error or errors that are not reasonably likely to result in harm to those directly affected by the report, a material misunderstanding among listeners, or damage to the ABC's reputation.*

Materially inaccurate: *An error or errors that make a substantial difference to the overall accuracy of the information conveyed in that it is reasonably likely to result in harm to those directly affected by the report, material misunderstanding among listeners, or damage to the ABC's reputation.*

This scale will be used for assessing the plain facts and contextual accuracy.

It is recognised that there are varying degrees of harm. The threshold for the harm referred to in these definitions is that the harm would not be inconsequential. For instance, an inaccuracy may not harm a company's share price, but it may be reasonably likely to cost the company considerable time and expense to rectify the effects of the inaccuracy.

Reasonableness test

The assessment will use a reasonableness test, taking into account the following factors:

- How much time did the program team member/s have to prepare the report?
- At what time of day was the report prepared?
- How much prior knowledge about the subject was available to the program team member/s at the time of preparing the report?
- What was the status of that knowledge?
- How much expertise did the program team member/s have in the subject-matter?
- What steps were taken by the program team member/s to verify the facts?
- What constraints, if any, existed within the program for the ventilation of the item?
- If there were constraints, to what extent did they lie within the control of the program team member/s concerned?

The application of the reasonableness test will not mean that the existence of inaccuracies will be ignored, unreported or excused. It will mean that the circumstances in which any inaccuracies occurred will be able to be described. This is an important aspect of ensuring that quality assurance projects produce results that can be fed back into continuous improvement.

4.6 Data analysis procedures

A simple count will be done of items falling within each criterion, and these will be reported both in raw numbers and as a proportion of the total number of items from each program.

Results will be reported for each program individually and summed across the three programs as well.

Where issues concerning contextual accuracy arise, a comparison will be presented between the source material and the broadcast version. The discrepancy will be described but readers will have the benefit of the evidence upon which they may form their own judgment.

The existence of any stereotypical labelling will simply be noted as an incidence. These incidences will be counted and described in the analysis according to which particular characteristic it drew attention to and from which program.

4.7 Further procedures

Where any kind of perceived inaccuracy or stereotypical labelling is found, the program team involved will be shown the draft findings in advance and invited to comment. These comments will be taken into account and appropriately included in the report.

The data from this pilot will be used for benchmarking for future quality assurance projects as well as for assessment of the sample of work reviewed.

The report is for the quality assurance purposes of the ABC and will not be used for any other purpose.