



There have been major changes to the SBS since the introduction of advertising, but they have not happened overnight. While the impact was subtle in the early years, the volume and stridency of advertising has grown with time. Previously advertisements did not interrupt programs. They now do. We can chart developments at the SBS since strictly limited advertising was introduced in 1992-3 to the current full-blown interruption into all programs for commercial breaks commencing late 2006.

1992

SBS Managing Director Brian Johns moves programs in languages other than English (LOTE) out of prime time as advertising is about to start. ⁽ⁱ⁾ Subsequent chief executives maintain the practice of English language domination of prime time, with LOTE programs broadcast either in the mornings, afternoons, or late at night, when many people would be at work, asleep, or otherwise occupied.

1999

Dr Chris Lawe Davies (now Senior Lecturer in Journalism, University of Queensland) completes a PhD thesis on SBS program policy. He concludes that there has been a "relative failure" of the SBS to follow its Charter.

From evidence cited thus far in the thesis, the social outlook for SBS appears gloomy. The English language issue; the mismatch between languages spoken in Australia and those on SBS; the 1994-95 marketing campaign which positioned SBS for social ABs, and so on, all point towards a relative failure by SBS to address its Charter by providing programming which reflected cultural diversity in Australia, and offered exciting and different perspectives on Australian society. Instead, [it is] argued, SBS programming provided to Australia perspectives from and about other places.

1999

A study of public service broadcasters in 19 different countries, commissioned by the BBC and carried out by McKinsey and Co, concludes:

Our analysis shows that an increased dependence on advertising has led inexorably to a more populist and less distinctive schedule. ⁽ⁱⁱ⁾

March 2003

SBS management is involved in a dispute with its own journalists over the introduction of advertising into news programs, which had previously been exempt. The NSW secretary of the Media Entertainment & Arts Alliance says forty journalists had written to management claiming that sponsorship of news and current affairs programs compromised editorial integrity and could result in reporters being disciplined or fired for airing unfavourable stories about advertisers. ⁽ⁱⁱⁱ⁾

November 2003

More key staff to leave.

Since the arrival in January of former Television New Zealand (TVNZ) executive Shaun Brown as the head of television, there has been a succession of changes on and off screen at the Special Broadcasting Service. At first they seemed incremental. But over the past few months, long-established people and programs have been removed or relocated, new



line-ups have been launched and pivotal programs reshaped. Since August 2002, the head of television has left, the chief programmer has resigned and the head of internal production has been told his job no longer exists. ^(iv)

December 2003

The Federation of Ethnic Communities Council of Australia (FECCA) says that SBS has lost its way. FECCA Chairman, then, Abd Malak, claims: *"The only people who like SBS-TV now are the cappuccino crowd - well-educated, middle-class people, it's mainly sex and soccer, I think".* He added that his organisation was *"very close to giving up on SBS TV. . . In the last three or four years they have separated themselves from ethnic communities. They don't come to our functions or religious festivals."* The dismissive, not to say insulting, response from then SBS Managing Director Nigel Milan was *"We're not going to cover the clog dancing from Brisbane Town Hall."* ^(v)

January 2004.

The Age's media writer the late Ross Warneke comments on the banishment of non-English programs from prime time. *"The bulk of its 'ethnic content' these days is its morning news marathon, with hour after hour of foreign language news services relayed from everywhere from Manila to Madrid"*. ^(vi)

May 2004

Staff become disenchanted. The Age's Debi Enker writes that SBS staff fear *"that the search for a broader audience is leading to the acquisition and commissioning of programs that are 'safer and blander', that SBS will become 'a poor man's version of a commercial network rather than providing a challenging alternative'. The harshest critics fear SBS will end up looking like a second-rate cable-TV station, running reality TV shows and English-language drama series that the free-to-air channels have rejected as either being too limited in their appeal or too provocative."* ^(vii)

June 2004

SBS joins with commercial broadcasters to oppose the tightening of restrictions on tobacco advertising through the insidious practice of product placement. ^(viii)

October 2004

As an associate member of Commercial Television Australia now Free TV Australia (the industry body representing commercial television) SBS joins with the existing commercial stations to restrict competition and to argue against the granting of an additional free to air TV licence. The reason - more competition would impact on their advertising income. ^(ix)

November 2004

Veteran SBS film critic Margaret Pomeranz, who together with co-host David Stratton deserted SBS for the ABC comments:

I think that the current management has a much more commercial bent than any previous management. They seem to be after the young female demographic, and I worry about this, because this is a demographic already catered to in excess on the commercial television stations. SBS was meant to broaden the scope of television in this country, extend what was already available, or that was always my vision of it. And I think it was the vision of a



lot of people there as well. We were so little we didn't rate very well, although during the '90s under Peter Cavanagh, our ratings increased at really a remarkable rate. And for all of this new direction towards a more commercial bent, young female demographic, SBS is appealing to less viewers than it did before. ^(x)

June 2005

George Zangalis, President of the National Ethnic and Multicultural Broadcasters Council, and a former member of the SBS Board, issues a media release criticizing the direction of SBS-TV.

The SBS was established as a multicultural broadcaster, but has been moving away from its original charter. Programming in community languages has shrunk, while English programming has grown. Advertising has increased and become increasingly strident. Rather than focusing on different cultures, the SBS seems to be moving towards mainstream sports like cricket and now AFL. There is plenty of this type of programming on the ABC and the three commercial channels. ^(xi)

August 2005.

When first introduced, advertising on SBS is limited to five minutes per hour, and does not interrupt programs. It is only used to top and tail programs. There are media reports that the SBS Board wants these restrictions lifted, and the then Managing Director Nigel Milan commissions a confidential survey on possible audience reactions to interruptions into program for advertisement breaks. ^(xii)

February 2006.

The SBS confirms the complaint made by George Zangalis, President of the Ethnic Broadcasters Council, in June 2005, that SBS advertising has increased and become increasingly strident. SBS's director of commercial affairs, Richard Finlayson says that the broadcaster has reviewed *"the type of ads it will and will not accept. In the past SBS has been reluctant to carry some ads, such as hard-hitting, in-your-face retails ads. That's changing"* ^(xiii)

June 2006

In a revised interpretation of the SBS Act, the SBS Board claims that the provision in the Act for the SBS to insert advertisements during 'natural breaks' authorises the network to interrupt programs with advertisements. The Board directs SBS management to implement this policy over the next six to twelve months. Later the then Shadow Minister for Communications, Senator Conroy, says that Labor does not accept this interpretation.

2007 to now

SBS-TV no longer resembles the special broadcaster its creators intended. All programs including news, documentaries, cinema release movies are now interrupted throughout, for fully fledged commercial breaks. Many in the community say that SBS television has been 'dumbed down' chasing the advertising dollar. Highly respected long time nightly news presenter, Mary Kostakidis, departs SBS-TV and there is mass public outcry about the commercialisation of the SBS. Thousands of people sign a petition at www.SaveOurSBS.org to stop the advertising on the SBS. The magazine of the broadcasting & television advertising industry, 'B&T' reports that the SBS was



out "to position SBS as Australia's fourth commercial network". B&T quoted Richard Finlayson head of SBS commercial affairs. ^(xiv)

January 2008

Despite the public outcry SBS-TV continues to interrupt programs for advertisement breaks and gears itself to look more commercial than before. Australian actor Chris Hayward comments on the decision by the SBS to devote a large budget to a locally produced motoring program.

After 37 years as an actor I believe the decision of the management to spend \$11.5 million dollars on a motoring program is so far off the mark that the board and senior management should all be sacked, or the station sold.

SBS's role without our society is crucial towards maintaining a greater understanding and awareness of the complex and diverse society that we as Australians are.

Indigenous issues need far greater exposure than that are getting, detailed examination though drama and debate in our society are much more important than the fuel consumption of the latest offering from Ford. This is nothing wrong with motoring programs - I am as much a petrol head as the next average Australian - but let one of the commercial channels or even the Australian Broadcasting Corporation produce such a program. ^(xv)

References

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- (iii) Kylie Walker, SBS clashes with journalists over ads, The Age, 9 March 2003
- (iv) Sydney Morning Herald, 11 November 2003
- (v) Christopher Kremmer, Ethnic groups find SBS sex and soccer a turn off, SMH 20 December, 2003
- (vi) Ross Warneke, Public broadcasters face big year, The Age, 8 January 2004
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- (xii) Errol Simper, Borrowed time up for Milan, The Australian, 11 August 2005
- (xiii) Neil Shoebridge, FIFA world cup kicks off SBS ad sales, Australian Financial Review, 27 February 2006
- (xiv) Quentin Dempster "Come Clean On Commercialisation" Walkley Magazine July 2007
- (xv) Australian Financial Review, 3 January 2008