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To: The Department of Broadband, Communications and the Digital Economy  
Sent by email to: [abcbsbreview@dbcde.gov.au](mailto:abcbsbreview@dbcde.gov.au)

*submission*  
**THE ABC SBS REVIEW**

**A chronology of events: Public to Commercial**

Since advertising was first allowed on the SBS in the early nineteen nineties, there has been a steady drift away from the original multicultural mandate of the SBS.

This was identified by Dr Chris Lawe Davies in a study of SBS output between 1975 and 1995 which found:

*“An overview of the market and advertising research reports carried out for SBS between 1993 and 1994 confirms anecdotal accounts of the effects of advertising culture on SBS programming outlined in the previous chapter of this thesis: that it has had a profound effect on the broadcaster in shifting the orientation of SBS away from the terms of the Charter and towards satisfying market conditions...”*

*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.”<sup>1</sup>*

What began as a slow but steady drift away from the Charter accelerated in 2006 when the SBS Board and management changed their interpretation of the SBS Act to argue that it permitted them to force breaks into programs for advertisements. Around the same time SBS changed its advertising policy to include aggressive advertisements.

SBS’s director of commercial affairs, Richard Finlayson was quoted as saying 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.*”<sup>2</sup>

As advertising has become more intrusive and aggressive, ethnic community leaders and others have become more concerned.



George Zangalis, President of the National Ethnic and Multicultural Broadcasters Council, and a former member of the SBS Board, issued 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.”*<sup>3</sup>

In June 2006, questioned on ABC radio about the new direction of the SBS, the new Chair of the Federation of Ethnic Communities Council of Australia (FECCA), Voula Messimeri responded:

*“... the intention of having the special broadcaster is so that they can be a multicultural provider, a special broadcaster in terms of being different from commercial enterprise, and I think that this will make it, increasingly, look very much like mainstream, commercial enterprise.”*<sup>4</sup>

The late Ross Warneke, media writer for the *Age*, lamented the movement of programs in languages other than English out of 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.”*<sup>5</sup>

Also in the *Age* Debi Enker writes that SBS staff have also become concerned about the impact of advertising on the SBS schedule.

*“... 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.”*<sup>6</sup>

Australian actor Chris Hayward commented 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. There 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.”<sup>7</sup>*

SBS management was reported as denying that that the series cost \$11.5 million. It was also generally reported that SBS spent all of their income from ‘extra’ revenue generated as a result of interrupting programs for advertisements for the whole of 2007 in order to commission this motoring program “Top Gear”.

### **Public Opinion**

In April of this year (2008) more than seven thousand people signed a petition, drafted by Save Our SBS ([www.SaveOurSBS.org](http://www.SaveOurSBS.org)), calling for an end to the practice of SBS disrupting all programs for advertisements; followed by amending the SBS Act to prohibit advertising and sponsorship on SBS; and, funding SBS so it is not dependent on commercial revenue nor supplementation from advertising.<sup>8</sup>

Later in 2008 a number of ethnic community leaders and key figures from public life, literature and the arts signed a public statement prepared by Save Our SBS that called for SBS to focus on the needs of viewers rather than on selling consumers to advertisers. The statement concluded:

*“The Special Broadcasting Service was never intended to be like other broadcasters and was certainly not created to mimic the look of the commercial networks. The SBS is a taxpayer funded public service broadcaster and should, as its creators intended, be both special and committed to serving its audience.”<sup>9</sup>*

The statement called for SBS to return to its original values. The signatories represented a broad range of background and opinion.

### **Languages Other Than English**

Save Our SBS submits that the need to sell audiences to advertisers has influenced SBS-TV to reduce programs in languages other than English in prime time, when the greatest number of viewers (and the greatest advertising revenue) is available. Currently only about one-fifth of programs broadcast in prime time (defined by ACMA as the period six to ten thirty in the evening) are in languages other than English (LOTE) however SBS has redefined 'prime time' as extending to midnight.

### **SBS into a digital future**

#### *Internet*

In the modern age, public broadcasting extends beyond the radio and television airwaves. The SBS website ([sbs.com.au](http://sbs.com.au)) is an important arm that ought not be forgotten.



For the main part, the SBS website assumes an English reading visitor. It does not generally contain multilingual web pages. In the digital revolution of the 21 century, the website arm of our multicultural public broadcaster should be committed to providing an informative website with more than 90 percent of the site available in a choice of languages as well as English.

It was only a few years ago that POD and VOD cast downloads were highly compressed for dial up users. It should be recognised that not everyone in the community has access to broadband and/or may be forced, economically, to rely on dial up for internet access. A pitfall of the digital revolution that SBS as a public broadcaster needs to be wary not to fall into, is to assume that everyone who attempts to download a program, has access to broadband. Currently this is not a particular problem but it should be borne in mind.

#### *Digital TV, Radio & the Web*

It is a sad fact that the role of the second SBS digital channel has more or less become the outpost of LOTE programs and only to the extent of it being a LOTE news repeats channel. SBS has hopes of developing this and two more digital television channels on free to air as well as a comprehensive web site with streaming and free downloads.<sup>10</sup> The expansion of SBS services on these digital platforms is admirable. However it would be a lost opportunity and a grave mistake if these services were yet another commercialized arm of SBS. These outlets ought to be commercial free. To this extent SBS deserves a massive injection of public funding so that it is not reliant on advertising for these services at all.

#### **The Future**

Save Our SBS is of the view that SBS ought not be reliant on advertising nor seek to be a hybrid commercial look a like. The evidence is that others in the community also support that view. Many are passionate about it in fact.

SBS will have difficulty in maintaining a vision for the future if its funding model requires it to serve two masters.

However this is not a totally negative picture. While recent trends have been negative, the SBS can be saved. The SBS remains a unique broadcasting organisation. For many years it has been a valued part of Australian life. It will not take too much to put it back on the right track.

The decision to adopt an open and merit-based method of appointment to the SBS Board, has been an important step. The requirement that members of the SBS Board should have “*an understanding of SBS’s role as a multicultural broadcaster, its Charter and its place in the Australian media environment*” is also a positive move.

The final step is the removal of advertising and the provision of adequate funding.



## **Multiculturalism In The Digital Age**

If SBS is to survive in the digital age, government needs to rescue it. It deserves saving.

### *Advice*

In consideration of all the circumstances, Save Our SBS strongly recommends that:

- The 2009-2012 triennium SBS Budget base funding from government for the SBS, be set at not less than half that provided to the ABC and indexed annually in the usual manner.<sup>11</sup>
- The Minister consult with the SBS Board with regard to the decision by the SBS to interrupt programs for advertisements, and that the Minister consider if he has power under section 11 of the SBS Act to direct the SBS Board to cease such interruptions. If the Minister is unable to act under section 11 of the Act, then the government seriously consider amending section 45 of the Act to prohibit the SBS from interrupting programs for advertisements.
- At a future date, the SBS Act be amended to prohibit the broadcasting of advertisements on SBS outlets.

Save Our SBS welcomed this government Review and was pleased to make a submission. We are happy for this submission to be posted in its entirety on the Department's web site.

A response from the Department would be appreciated.

**The Committee of Management  
Save Our SBS Inc  
11 December 2008**

For further details and comments, in the first instance please contact:-

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*This submission may also be read at*

<http://saveoursbs.org/archives/334>

*and/or*

<http://saveoursbs.org/wp-content/uploads/2008/12/sbs-dept-review-submission-save-our-sbs.pdf>