

The Death of Public Broadcasting in Australia: Culling Season at the Australian Broadcasting Corporation

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In May, the ABC's first female managing director Michelle Guthrie was introduced by the ABC Board as bringing "business expertise, international contacts, a record in content-making across an array of platforms, a deep understanding of audience needs and corporate responsibility for promoting issues like diversity".

If the ABC fact-checking unit, which Guthrie expurgated, were still in operation they might have this to say: Guthrie, former managing director for Fox, Murdoch and Google agencies, has never worked for a public broadcaster, lacks media or journalism qualifications and has never produced content.

Guthrie's first order of business was: monetize the ABC, cancel the ABC's fact-checking unit, cancel the Drum and begin a culling season at the ABC.

So who is Guthrie? And, how was the appointment of a former Murdoch player made to the \$5 million, five-year managing director position?

Michelle Guthrie's CV shows a corporate work history lacking experience in public service, journalism, current affairs or media content creation. Guthrie is best known for the billion-dollar commercial disaster when Murdoch's Star News, which she headed, collapsed in China. There is no further public record of Guthrie's commercial successes or failures.

After Mark Scott announced his retirement last year, global talent firm Ego Zehnder began a \$400,000 transnational search for the next ABC head. As well as local candidates from SBS, ABC, News Corp and Radio National, candidates from the global talent pool were approached.

After the CV and selection criteria were met, candidates were tested for IQ, emotional intelligence and personality. Two News Limited candidates were shortlisted: Guthrie and Ken Williams.

According to former ABC journalist Quentin Dempster, the process was flawed and preordained. Letters of complaint were lodged, with one applicant saying: "I was told 'You don't scale' — meaning I hadn't run a billion-dollar operation employing at least 5000 employees. This wasn't in the advertised criteria."

For Dempster and the applicants, this was a captain's pick, intimately politicised by the Prime Minister's office. The prime minister, under the *Australian Broadcasting Corporation Act (1983)*, has the right to author the selection criteria. The other candidates claimed that in this case the criteria were made to fit the "Google lady".

Turnbull intervened to list media qualifications as the least important criterion. (It is interesting to note that close Turnbull friend, Bruce McWilliams of Channel Seven, worked with Guthrie at a Sydney law firm.)

The criteria and process were so suspect that even Murdoch's own *Australian* newspaper thundered: "It almost defies belief that a background in news and journalism was listed as the least important of 15 selection criteria the corporation used in choosing its new managing director/editor-in-chief.

"The specifications made as much sense as a major bank downplaying the value of financial experience in selecting a chief executive or the CSIRO regarding scientific expertise as an optional extra."

Controversy from the selection process shadowed Guthrie in the Senate when Labor and the Greens questioned the ABC boss about advertising, cost cutting and local content.

Labor Senator Sam Dastyari raised the question of ABC board member Kirsten Ferguson, being investigated by ASIC for allegedly forcing out the whistleblower of a multimillion-dollar bribery scandal at Leightons. Ferguson, like Guthrie, was seen as a Turnbull political appointee.

Dastyari asked why the board had not taken action or discussed the issue. Guthrie's responses tellingly broke the Senate rules: "We don't discuss [in public] board matters". Guthrie refused to claim public immunity in the Senate and headed off for a meeting with Dastyari behind closed doors.

In public, Guthrie prefers to enthusiastically discuss other in-house policies. Guthrie has talked of the aim of monetising the ABC digital platform and allowing advertisements to be screened on the ABC's website. She spoke of the need to curtail spending and live within the confines of the budget. In one of her first acts as managing director, Guthrie would swing the axe on one of the most acclaimed hard news digital platforms of recent times: the ABC fact-checking unit.

Three days after the election, Guthrie axed *The Drum* opinion pages as a budget saving measure. Director of News Gaven Morris announced the decision saying there would be no redundancies and "ending *The Drum* as our online brand in no way reflects on its quality. The excellence of its work is shown in its strong audience numbers and its loyal following."

In early July, a *Catalyst* reporter was suspended and rumours flew that *Catalyst* would suffer the same fate as *The Drum* website. Classic FM is also facing severe cuts. The ABC audience went ballistic and complaints flooded in.

Senior ABC sources revealed that News Limited and *Crikey* complained that *The Drum* was monopolising audiences and taking them away from traditional print sources. The *Australian* wrote: "At the start of Michelle Guthrie's term it is smart to end this farcical market distortion [*The Drum*]. But it is merely a beginning."

That the announcement of the axing of *The Drum* came from Morris — and not from Guthrie — was significant. Outgoing director Scott had thrust Morris into editorial responsibility for the purpose of blocking criticism and shielding Guthrie.

Guthrie has been appointed with many safeguards and sweeping powers to implement “diversity” and “transitional change” at the ABC. She has openly criticised the ABC for being colour blind and ageist.

Friends of the ABC suggest this is a red herring for implementing a neoliberal agenda of cost cutting and a purge of alternative opinion. The diversity pledge is seen as a signal that a merger between the ABC and SBS is likely and that there will be a tactical reformation of its governing legislation — bringing in advertising and ultimately privatisation.

For now, Friends of the ABC and other critics foresee an ABC future where Kerry O’Brien has a “reality” TV show, News Limited presenters host the News and Andrew Bolt fronts 7.30.

The “culling season” subplots will be known on July 28, when Guthrie delivers her maiden speech — not on ABC TV or at the Press Club, but at Creative Country, a News Limited conference. At \$500 a head, critics will not be there and will struggle to find excerpts of the speech under Murdoch’s paywall.

Meanwhile, the plot thickens. Former ABC managing director Mark Scott has imitated Guthrie — effortlessly and seemingly without any educational qualifications or experience, Scott secured the plumb role of head of the NSW Department of Education.

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