

Transcript from Media Watch 17 October 2022 with Paul Barry

PROF CORDELIA FINE: People engaged in contemporary debates about sex and gender identity have been harassed, intimidated, verbally abused, gratuitously offended, viciously smeared and forced from positions, roles or other professional opportunities. Some of our participants have been targets of these tactics.

- Pride and Prejudice in Policy, University of Melbourne, 4 October, 2022

Hello, I'm Paul Barry, welcome to Media Watch. And to a difficult conversation we need to have.

Two weeks ago on a Tuesday evening, around 100 people went to Melbourne University for a panel discussion chaired by former ABC radio host Jon Faine. The subject: Pride and Prejudice in Policy.

But what promised to be a quiet night turned out to be anything but. As Faine lamented in The Age:

... eight or nine noisy trans activists tried – but failed — to shut down a forum I was chairing ...

It ... came as something of a shock ... to find myself being aggressively accused of transphobia, of creating a risk to other people's health and safety, simply for wanting to have a discussion.

- The Sunday Age, 9 October, 2022

In the days leading up to the debate, two trans activists had pulled out of the discussion, because they refused to share a platform with people they claimed were anti-trans activists.

And the ABC's Paul Barclay had also stepped down from hosting the debate after getting slammed on Twitter when he tweeted he was looking forward to it:

Good to know you're looking forward to cheerfully discussing trans elimination with a bunch of cis people, you dick.

- Twitter, @eleanorevenstar, 21 September, 2022

... why would you participate in normalising transphobic hate speech ..?

- Twitter, @nick_nobody, 21 September, 2022

Importing UK TERFism into Australia. Shame.

- Twitter, @engagedpractx, 22 September, 2022

So, what exactly was the debate they wanted shut down? And why is this on Media Watch?

Well, around a year ago, two British broadcasters, the BBC and Channel 4, pulled out of a workplace diversity program run by the UK charity Stonewall, which champions LGBTQ rights, with the BBC's Director-General Tim Davie issuing a statement to say:

“... over time, our participation in the Programme has led some to question whether the BBC can be impartial when reporting on public policy debates where Stonewall is taking an active role.”

- BBC Statement, Tim Davie, BBC Director-General, 10 November, 2021

The BBC's withdrawal came one month after high-profile BBC radio host Stephen Nolan published a 10-part podcast — which topped the charts on Apple and Spotify — examining whether the BBC's editorial output had been affected by its relationship with Stonewall.

This had reportedly turned up:

... numerous instances of BBC internal policy and editorial output that appeared to breach the corporation's own impartiality guidelines ...

- Variety, 10 November, 2021

These included Stonewall being consulted on the BBC's style guide and recruitment language and a BBC reporter presenting a Stonewall video on TikTok.

But Nolan's key concern involved the BBC's participation in Stonewall's Workplace Equality Index, which is essentially a competition for employers in which the BBC became a diversity champion.

As Nolan's colleague David Thompson explained:

DAVID THOMPSON: ... the BBC said that some of the things that had helped them move up Stonewall's equality index was that they had appointed the first-ever LGBTQ+ news correspondent and first gender and identity correspondent in BBC News; we've corporately adopted the term LGBTQ+, Stonewall's term, and that we've been raising awareness of the importance of gender pronouns. That they're all issues that Stonewall have lobbied on and that BBC has moved on, so that is prima facie evidence of Stonewall having some success influencing the BBC's editorial. And I know some journalists in the BBC saw it exactly that way.

- Nolan Investigates: Stonewall, BBC Sounds, 13 October, 2021

Many will say those changes are good.

But according to one BBC journalist, Samantha Smith, there was still a problem: that the BBC was in bed with a lobby group. And paying money to it and seeking its approval.

As a presenter, she said, she had often been asked to do things for charity, but:

SAMANTHA SMITH: ... I said no to everything. You know, I was absolutely clear on it that this is what the organisation expected of me personally, not to align myself to any cause or political position, however noble, however kind, however well meaning it seemed to be.

- Nolan Investigates: Stonewall, BBC Sounds, 13 October, 2021

And why had she turned down all those good causes? Because the BBC's absolute core principle, she said, was impartiality:

SAMANTHA SMITH: And this is the difficulty I have with the BBC lining itself up with Stonewall in the way it has, being part of the Stonewall club, being marked by Stonewall ...

DAVID THOMPSON: Paying money to Stonewall?

SAMANTHA SMITH: And paying money for Stonewall and using Stonewall's language. How is that independent? How is that impartial?

- Nolan Investigates: Stonewall, BBC Sounds, 13 October, 2021

And why is all this relevant to Australia?

Because the ABC and SBS belong to a near identical workplace diversity scheme run by the AIDS Council of New South Wales, or ACON. And like the BBC they pay thousands of dollars a year to do so.

In fact, the ABC is a star employer, winning gold in this year's Australian Workplace Equality Index awards, where CEO David Anderson — who is also the ABC's Editor-in-Chief — also won gold:

"I am honoured to receive this award and accept it on behalf of all of my colleagues at the ABC."

- TV Blackbox, 28 May, 2022

David Anderson, who's done a great job in boosting the broadcaster's diversity, was nominated for the award by the ABC.

So, what does the ABC have to do to achieve this ranking?

Documents released under FOI reveal the broadcaster wins points in a number of ways for providing a safe and inclusive workplace. And we should celebrate that because its commitment to diversity and inclusion is laudable.

The ABC also scored points for providing Sydney news presenter Jeremy Fernandez — who MC'd the 2022 Australian LGBTQ Inclusion Awards — for pro bono work and for sending delegates to LGBTQ conferences. And for having ABC staff march in Mardi Gras, which ABC News reported:

LYDIA FENG: There were 190 floats in the parade, including the first ever from the ABC.

- ABC News (NSW), 1 March, 2020

The ABC also scored points for having ABC boss David Anderson on the Mardi Gras float, but it was denied two further points it sought in the category of CEO speaking, with ACON ruling:

Marching in MG [Mardi Gras] isn't evidence of speaking at events

- Australian Workplace Equality Index 2021

But the index is not just about diversity in the workplace.

The ABC also wins points from ACON for positive programming. For example, it picked up three points with its series First Day, about a trans child starting high school.

And it won a 2022 LGBTQ inclusion award for:

... the ABC podcast series, Innies and Outies ... The series tells the LGBTQIA+ stories of those choosing to either come out or stay in, presented by ABCQueer's Mon Schafter.

- ABC Media Release, 27 May, 2022

What's more, emails obtained under FOI by a women's anti-trans group called ACON Exposed also show ACON's ABC relationship manager offered editorial tips, including adding a help number, to boost the ABC's Australian Workplace Equality Index score:

Just a thought for future LGBTQ related content and there are AWEI points in it too.

- Email, Chris Nelson, ACON Pride in Diversity Relationship Manager, sent to the ABC, 25 August, 2020
ABC Classic presenter Russell Torrance was speaking to Ed Ayres on the importance of Wear it Purple Day ... I think this is AWEI worthy.

- Email, Chris Nelson, ACON Pride in Diversity Relationship Manager, sent to the ABC, 28 August, 2020

And this is surely where the problems start.

Because regardless of how good or worthy these programs are — and First Day won prizes around the world — having them scored by a lobby group raises questions about ABC impartiality.

Imagine, for example, the ABC paying thousands of dollars to Greenpeace and winning prizes for running stories attacking the fossil fuel industry. Or paying money to the Australian Republican Movement and being rewarded for a series criticising the monarchy.

How would that be defensible or impartial?

And what if the ABC also steered clear of debate on contentious matters, as it arguably does on transgender issues?

In August, Media Watch pointed out that the ABC had failed to cover the controversial closure of the UK's famous Tavistock gender clinic.

And that it had given scant coverage of the High Court case against the clinic from Keira Bell, who alleged she had been rushed into treatment with puberty blockers without due care:

MINNIE STEPHENSON: When Keira was a teenager she desperately wanted to be a boy. Now 23, she regrets the transition she underwent and says instead she was struggling with a complex identity issue.

KEIRA BELL: I was lost and confused and, you know, I thought that was the solution to my problems and, you know, they led me to believe the same thing.

- Channel 4 News, 2 December, 2020

We also noted that the ABC had ignored legitimate medical debate about caution and safeguards in treating gender dysphoria in children.

Two days later, ABC Sydney's Josh Szeps invited Dr Philip Morris, who urges caution, to talk about these matters. This was his reaction:

DR PHILIP MORRIS: It's wonderful to be invited by the ABC to put a point of view ...

I feel, you know, the people on, who've been looking at this from the perspective of what's best for children have been sort of standing, it's like a, being at a dance hall and been waiting for the ABC to offer to take us for a dance. So I'm hoping I can do a few twirls with you today, but it's great to be here.

- Afternoons with Josh Szeps, ABC Sydney, 17 August, 2022

One week later, the ABC came under fire again as Q+A put together a panel to talk about inclusion in sport, and social media lit up with complaints from women about the lack of balance:

This weeks @QandA on @ABCAustralia is on trans inclusion in Women's Sport. A panel of MEN & one woman who is openly pro trans. Where is OUR VOICE? The stories of WOMEN directly impacted by sex self ID?

- Twitter, @angijones, 22 August, 2022

Surely your announcement on the panel for this discussion is satire

@QandA? Of course you'd include sportswomen affected by this.

- Twitter, @AstraNiedra, 22 August, 2022

ABC then added a female athlete to its panel at the last minute to meet those concerns.

And last week there was criticism of another story from April this year on transgender athletes in women's sport:

ABC chairwoman Ita Buttrose said she regrets "serious editorial lapses" in a "misleading" ABC story about trans women in sport which did not include research that showed they can retain physical advantages.

- The Daily Telegraph, 14 October, 2022

Those comments were in response to a letter to the ABC chair from campaigning Liberal senator Claire Chandler, who wrote:

“I suggest that this series of errors and breaches of standards could only have occurred in circumstances where the author set out to make a predetermined case ...”

- The Daily Telegraph, 14 October, 2022

Following a review, the ABC story was updated to include:

... more research, including a study showing transwomen in the US Air Force ran on average 12 per cent faster than biological women.

- The Daily Telegraph, 14 October, 2022

Now, we have not conducted a full audit of the ABC’s editorial coverage, but the concern here is that it is not impartial but one-sided.

So does the ABC believe that that’s so? And does it accept that its partnership with a lobby group, ACON, could be a problem?

In short, the answer is no and no. It told us:

Participation in benchmarking indexes has no bearing on content commissioning processes and no influence on editorial content.

- Email, ABC spokesperson, 17 October, 2022

With a spokesperson highlighting the ABC’s “independence and integrity”, insisting the newsroom remains in control of all content and stating that editorial decisions are “not improperly influenced” by outside interests. Adding:

The ABC has rigorous and independent pre- and post-publication processes to reinforce these standards.

- Email, ABC spokesperson, 17 October, 2022

We also approached ACON for comment. And it’s worth noting their representative pulled out of that Melbourne debate, claiming it was unsafe to take part.

But we’re glad to say they did engage with Media Watch and answered all our questions. They told us:

We have not, and do not, provide any advice or guidance whatsoever on any editorial matters at the ABC, including on direction, coverage, policy, language or style or anything else related to the ABC’s editorial processes.

- Email, Nicolas Parkhill, ACON CEO, 14 October, 2022

We also asked ACON if the ABC had ever lost points in the Australian Workplace Equality Index for critical or negative editorial coverage. And they told us:

The manner in which the ABC covers LGBTQI issues editorially, or the tone or angle in which they are presented, does not impact their AWEI assessment.

- Email, Nicolas Parkhill, ACON CEO, 14 October, 2022

However, the ABC has won points and awards for positive programming.

And emails from 2020 — obtained under FOI — show an ABC journalist seeking and receiving advice from ACON on the correct definition of the word family.

That may well be an isolated example.

But even if there is no editorial interference, changing the language and internal culture of a media organisation may still influence editorial values and programs' story selection.

As Professor Alan Davison of the University of Technology Sydney told that controversial Melbourne University discussion:

ALAN DAVISON: When you sign up to any kind of scheme, particularly a ranking scheme that's highly competitive that comes from an advocacy organisation, in a way you're signing up to a partnership and an allyship with the values and the truth claims of that advocacy organisation.

- Pride and Prejudice in Policy, University of Melbourne, 4 October, 2022

Now, we're not suggesting the ABC should abandon its commitment to diversity and inclusion.

And the BBC certainly has not. After cutting ties to Stonewall it put another diversity scheme in its place.

The problem here is a media group partnering with and being rewarded by a lobby group — any lobby group. And how that can lead to perceptions of bias in coverage or to bias itself.

We think the ABC should review the arrangement.

We look at the relationship between the ABC and ACON, which runs the Workplace Equality Index Awards — a national benchmark on LGBTQ inclusion.

Can the ABC remain impartial when it partners with a lobby group and gets ranked in a competitive index?

[Response from an ABC spokesperson.](#)

[Response from Nicolas Parkhill, ACON CEO.](#)

LINK

<https://www.abc.net.au/mediawatch/episodes/acon/101544378>