



Australian Historical Association Statement on the ABC Archives Proposal

The Australian Historical Association (AHA) is deeply concerned by the proposal to abolish 58 positions of ABC librarians and archivists, with additional contract positions also to be ended. It is also reported that journalists will take responsibility for performing work previously undertaken by archivists and librarians, including the search for items and, most worryingly, tagging of items for the purposes of future findability. The ostensible justification for this change, we understand, is the recent digitisation of a substantial part of the ABC archives.

Although the AHA applauds the investment in digitisation, we believe the workforce proposal to be based on a misconception about the role of archivists and librarians. These are highly qualified professionals with specialised technical skills and knowledge. We recognise that jobs at the ABC are evolving and changing due to technological advances but that does not mean that librarians and archivists are now redundant. Indeed, the opposite is true. The move to digital has not reduced the importance of such skills; it has rather increased the challenges involved in a range of tasks including the storage of materials so that they are easily locatable for future reference. We point out that where digital items are tagged in idiosyncratic ways – which seems inevitable if the work is undertaken by people without specialist archival and library training – it will be as if the content has been destroyed. We believe that this will detract from the quality of future ABC programming.

This proposal, however, has implications beyond the ABC itself. The ABC's archives are a national asset and it is especially regrettable that the ABC has failed to articulate any vision for the future of this critical part of our national estate, which it holds in trust for the Australian nation. The ABC's rich archival holdings, stretching across a range of formats, are used by journalists and other researchers in creating first-class program content. But they are also of importance to historians engaged with almost any subject, from political and social history through to the history of the media and of the ABC itself. It is especially lamentable that the ABC should make such a decision at the same time as celebrating its 90th anniversary. The loss of these positions also threatens the institutional knowledge of the ABC in the future.

We regret the lack of consultation with interested organisations and the general public over these matters. We would be willing to participate in any consultations that might now occur.

We call on the ABC Board, and the Managing Director, Mr David Anderson, to ensure that these positions continue and that the ABC archive is built, maintained and made accessible to both present and future generations as the ABC builds towards its centenary in 2032.

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President, Australian Historical Association

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