The ABC is now suffering one of the most savage attacks in the last ten years, ironically from a Labor government. We must defend the ABC, yet we also need to do some rethinking about why we should defend it, whether ratings are important and what we mean by ‘culture’, argues Marius Webb, in a paper presented at the recent conference on Culture, Arts, Media and Radical Politics.

I suppose that I would like to pose the question first. What is the ABC?
The ABC is an unfortunate conglomeration of many people’s beliefs about radio and television programs that they like best. Rarely is it a comprehensive understanding of a confusion of often competing cultural influences. Using the word “cultural” immediately leads me to an effort to define what we mean by that word.

“Culture” is one of those ingenious words that slips easily into the subconscious and gives most of us a feeling of middle class ease. But what does it really mean?

It often means High Art and everything which that entails but, then again, it has a lot more going for it than that. For instance, culture is something in which your friendly biochemist grows germs, and if I’m pressed, I think that I prefer the latter definition because it really conveys what I think culture is all about.

Culture is what we do. Culture is about what we live in, and develop in and, in the end, culture is really how we develop.

But back to the ABC. The ABC is also part of what we call the mass media. The concept of mass media doesn’t need too much analysis except to say that I think far too many people who talk about it tend to forget the word “mass”. The concept of “mass” in relation to electronic media is very important, and is, in a strange way, underestimated. In relation to the ABC, it is often quaintly reduced to the rather tiresome argument about ratings. But if we are going to talk about mass media then we have to talk about ratings. We have to understand them and we have to be prepared to argue for, and against, them. I am not a subscriber to the argument that ratings do not matter. They are inherent in the concept of the mass media — for what is it, if it
The mass media have understandably got something of a bad name, and I'm not here to argue their worth, but their importance relates to the fact that they have a mass audience.

There are very few suburban newspapers which have influenced social change in a large sense, as readers of the Murdoch press in 1975 would probably realise. However, this is not to say that small media do not have an effect (as long-time readers of The Glebe would know).

I do not think that we, that is workers in the media, can afford to ignore what is often disregarded as merely popular. I don't want to overemphasise the point, but the reality is that if the medium does not have a major audience, then it does not have impact and it therefore does not have social importance.

To translate what I'm saying to another sphere, Shakespeare, Mozart and the Beatles have all been 'popular' but not dismissed as "mass". Of course, I'm not arguing that anything that is "mass" is of the same value and importance, but that you have to take the concept of "mass" into account when you are talking about things like the ABC. This is not simply because of the impact of numbers but also because electronic media, like many other performance arts, exist only while they are going on.

In other words, you can't afford to miss the bus — which explains a lot about the neuroses of the people who program major television channels, but also something about people who make valuable and interesting radio programs which get buried in some bureaucrat's conception of a program layout.

The concept of "massness" may not seem an important consideration in relation to the future of the ABC but I think the ABC does have an important mass type of audience, and that the future is going to be dictated by the way we react and cope with our audience from now on.

To return to my original concern, we probably think about culture in rather limited terms. We do not think of sport as culture because we think in typically anti-Australo-working-class terms, but if we ignore sport, then I don't think we know much about our culture.

If we are to look to the future of the ABC, then we have to look to the almost recent past and, given what I've already said, the point at which radical change really started to happen occurred when Packer took over cricket in the late 1970s. At that point, one of the key elements of the ABC's hold on the Australian public suddenly disappeared.

There were, of course, other effects but, suddenly, a great deal had changed. Couple this with the buying of the ABC's current affairs resources and you can see that there was more than a subtle share raid going on. I don't need to comment on the situation today, except to point out that at 2-MMM, Sydney's top-rating commercial FM station, 12 hours of the radio day are currently handled by people who used to work for the ABC.

There is a great danger in defending an institution like the ABC or, in fact, any institution. Defence is likely to throw one into a reactionary mode.

Why? Two years ago we all celebrated 50 years of the ABC — which was probably not a bad thing — but what worried me at the time was an implicit assumption that 50 years was only halfway to 100, and here we all were, intact in an organisation that was going to last forever.

Now, 100 years is a long time in anyone's language. Some empires (more famous than the ABC!) have not lasted that long. I just think we should be wary of defending for the sake of defence alone. And maybe the ABC, if it's not meeting the needs of its audience, does need to change.

The future holds many challenges for the ABC, one of the most significant being the introduction of the satellite which will, among other things, continue to erode the ABC's role.

Because of the satellite, the ABC may no longer have one of the key elements which made it worth having, that is, the ability to be a national broadcaster.

The biggest questions facing the ABC, I believe, are some of the dilemmas and problems I have outlined. We have to do better in certain areas than the commercials, and that does not mean just doing the stuff that they do. It means creating new forms and having the courage to follow them through, such as the ABC's present involvement in Aboriginal broadcasting.

The present financial restrictions are perhaps worse than they have ever been, because we have not developed the appropriate reflexes to defend the ABC against a vindictive Labor government. In many ways, this aspect is perhaps one of the most understated elements in the present debate on how to defend the ABC.

Marius Webb has worked for the ABC for over a decade, including as a coordinator of Sydney's 2JJ (now 2JJJ-FM), and as a staff-elected member of the Commission. He now works in the Human Resources section of the ABC.