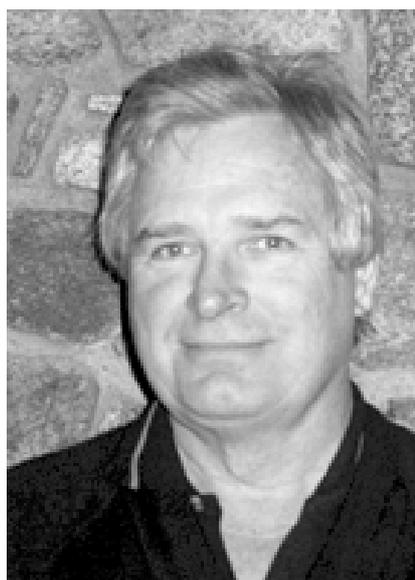


# Dumb, Dumber & Really Dumb at the ABC

Is a National Cultural Institution growing senile?



Ken McLeod worked in Search And Rescue for 30 years, all the time bewildered by psychics, until he retired to his boutique farm on the NSW south coast

In the Spring 2005 issue, we asked “what is going on at the ABC?” We went on to say that following on from the decidedly daft program *Second Opinion*, Rachael Kohn’s program *The Spirit of Things* claimed that so-called ‘forensic psychic’ Alison DuBois had helped police and the FBI solve murders, and we showed that this claim is demonstrably false. One would have thought that our ridicule would persuade the powers-that-be in the ABC to be more careful in future not to arouse the ire of *the Skeptic*.

Alas, there’s no fool like an ABC fool. Hardly had our ink dried, but your ABC, at great expense to the poor bleeding taxpayer, ran a complete series called *Psychic Investigators*, from 30 November 2006 to 8 February 2007. Now call me a skeptical old curmudgeon if you will, but surely one would expect that the ABC would have run some sort of accuracy rule over programs on offer, if only to ensure that the ABC runs programs that conform to the *Australian Broadcasting Corporation Act 1983* Section 6 which says that the:

***Charter of the Corporation (1)***

*The functions of the Corporation are:*

*(a) to provide within Australia innovative and comprehensive broadcasting services of a high standard...*

and the *ABC Code of Practice* which says in Section 5:

***Factual Programs.***

*5.2 Every effort must be made to ensure that the factual content of such programs is accurate and in context and does not misrepresent viewpoints.*

Suspecting that the ABC had not run some sort of accuracy rule over the series, I offered to the editor to view the entire series and analyse it to see if it was of a high standard, was accurate and did not misrepresent viewpoints. “Yes please” said your editor, “just let me get back to the Ashes Series.”

So I recorded the series of *Psychic Investigators*, and what did I find? I found:

- Nowhere in the series did a ‘psychic’ solve a crime. Every crime depicted here was solved through ordinary police work, the developments of new technologies such as a national computerised fingerprint database and DNA profiling, and through the confessions of people involved in the crimes.
- Nowhere in the series was any ‘psychic’s’ claim subjected to any verification. In every episode, ‘psychics’ claimed to have special insight into the crimes and the perpetrators, in one case claiming 120 hits, but the program makers never subjected these claims to any sort of scrutiny. Everything they said was accepted without a quibble. In some cases, the claims were made in interviews 20 years after the crime; surely that would raise some

suspicion that the 'hits' were made after reading newspapers.

- Nowhere in the series did a policeman concede that a 'psychic' helped to solve a crime, although in two episodes they did come close to that. However, they would say that wouldn't they: in one case the detective married the 'psychic' and in the other the detective was subjected to such ridicule in the office that I suspect she said that to justify her involving the 'psychic'. Even then all she said was that the 'psychic' 'enhanced the investigation', whatever that means.
- In Episode 2, a policeman being interviewed said 'Would we have solved the crime without consulting the psychic?' Without anyone answering the question, the scene and the narration went elsewhere. The viewer is left to make his or her own assessments, which if one is rather gullible, the selective presentation of facts might lead him or her to a 'yes.'
- Nowhere in the series did the producers specifically claim that a psychic solved, or helped solve, a crime. By interweaving two sets of facts, (psychic claims and crime scene facts) the producers imply that they are related, a poor example of logic, and a misrepresentation that can easily dupe the viewer. In Episode 9, after a long series of claims by the 'psychic', the narrator asked "Would the crime have been solved without psychic help?" No answer is given, that is left to the gullibility of the viewer.
- Police were always 'baffled', yet nowhere do the police ever say they were baffled, and in several episodes police had identified the culprit early in the investigation, but did not have sufficient evidence to make an arrest. Later developments did provide the extra evidence needed, but not from any 'psychic.'

## Conclusion

What are we left with after all this? A pile of unverified claims from psychics, spooky music with heavenly choirs, blurry visions of bare trees and ghosts, and not one single verified claim. At first glance, the

series could persuade the gullible that 'psychics' helped police solve serious crimes, but a careful analysis does not show that.

So, was the series of a high standard, accurate and did it accurately represent viewpoints? No, it was absolute trash, was inaccurate, and did misrepresent, so it did not conform to the *Australian Broadcasting Corporation Act* and the *ABC Code of Practice*.

None of this would matter much, except that duping people into believing 'psychics' solve crimes and locate missing people, as I learned early in my 30 years in Search And Rescue, further traumatises the bereaved and wastes the time of police and searchers.

The ABC has done a great mischief here, compounding the mischief of Rachael Kohn's program *The Spirit of Things*. The ABC should show a series which scrutinises the claims of 'psychics', the result would lead to less trauma for the bereaved, but that is clearly not what the ABC is interested in. The ABC claims to be conforming to the *ABC Code of Practice* which says in Section 5:

5.1 *The ABC is committed to providing programs of relevance and diversity which reflect a wide range of audience interests, beliefs and perspectives.*

So that's all right then, even if a program is absolute trash, is inaccurate, does misrepresent, and does not conform to the *Australian Broadcasting Corporation Act* and the *ABC Code of Practice*, the *Code of Practice* has a contradictory escape clause that commits the ABC to programs which reflect any interest, belief and perspective, no matter how bizarre, and no matter how much trauma they cause. It's only money after all; why waste it on schools and hospitals. Following on from *Psychic Investigators*, we will soon be seeing a steady stream of whackos sprout their cases for paedophilia, aliens building the Moon, and my old favourite, the Flat Earth.

On the *7:30 Report*, during a piece on global warming and coral bleaching, Professor Ove Hoegh-Guldberg, of Qld University said: ... *well, there are places for flat-earthers...*

How right he was, but I don't think the Professor had the ABC in mind. Pity.

## Furthermore

On a related theme, on February 26, the long-running and usually excellent ABC programme, *Australian Story*, aired a piece about the still unsolved disappearance, in 2003, of 13 year-old Sunshine Coast boy, Daniel Morcombe. It was a heart-wrenching story, cataloguing the pain and suffering of a family losing a child under mysterious circumstances, consisting of interviews with the parents and police officers who had been involved with the case.

During the course of the programme, the officer in charge of the investigation, Detective Superintendent John Maloney, said "We have hundreds and hundreds of stories there that come in and we investigate them all, try and substantiate whether there is any truth in them." However, as we learned from Bret Christian's *Skeptic* article

"Murders and Clairvoyants" (24:1), it is highly likely that many of the stories the police heard would not have come from witnesses who might have seen something, nor from people who might have known something about possible perpetrators, but from self-proclaimed psychics.

People whose unsubstantiated 'feelings' or 'visions', no matter how well-meant, could only have added to the distress of a grieving family and to the work load of an over stretched police force.

It's a pity that the ABC which, in the face of many complaints so strenuously defended its decision to show *Psychic Investigators*, could not have included information about how psychics behave in real investigations in a real documentary about real people.