



Children's television, a model for taking the child consumer's needs seriously

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Article 17 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child says that children have a right to media that is made especially for them. I've put it up on the screen because it includes some really interesting words that I'd like to draw your attention to.

First of all it recognises "the important function performed by the mass media". But it doesn't paint this as a scary thing to be avoided. It confirms children's right to "access" to mass media, and specifically, access to information and material from a "diversity of cultural, national and international sources".

In other words, it suggests children should have access to materials from their own country, as well as around the world. It talks about the "social and cultural benefits" to be achieved from those programs. It even talks about the needs of indigenous children and the linguistic needs of children – perhaps in Australia we would consider that to include stories told in our own Australian accent and reflecting our diverse, multicultural society.

And yet, when children and the media are discussed, as they so often are, we are usually focussed on the last bit of the Article – sub section (e), which talks about protecting children from harmful material. Or we are concerned about how much time they spend with media, or the content of the advertising that is directed at children, not what they are doing with media or the quality of the programs they are watching.

We reduce the potential of children's media when this is all we do. I suppose we do this, because as a community we don't really trust the media to do anything other than exploit its audience.

In UNICEF's child friendly, simplified version of the Convention, Article 17 is reduced to:

"Children have the right to reliable information from the media. Mass media such as television, radio and newspapers should provide information that children can understand and should not promote materials that could harm children."

In the 1970s and 1980s children's television codes were being drafted all around the world, and mostly in that UNICEF way of thinking.

In France they had regulations that said that programs aimed at children and adolescents must "help facilitate their entry into adult life."

In Canada they said that programs for children should reflect the moral and ethical standards of contemporary Canadian society and encourage pro-social behaviour and attitudes.

In the United States the Children's Television Act required that core children's programs must serve the educational and informational needs of children.

Those motherhood statements are kind of hard to disagree with.



But imagine if the only requirement we had of adult programming was that it must provide us with reliable information that can't harm us. If we removed the potential to be provoked, challenged, and entertained. If we introduced such a high bar of "worthiness" for adult programs that anything a little bit funny was in danger of being disallowed because it didn't carry with it a didactic pro-social message. If we only allowed the media to patronise us with reliable information that they could be sure we would "understand."

Not only does that sound dull, it sounds like something George Orwell wrote.

In Australia, more than 30 years ago, we did something a little bit different than the rest of the world for children. Something that I would suggest is more in the spirit of the Convention itself, but which is quite unique.

Our Children's Television Standards were written to say that children's programs should be:

- child specific
- entertaining and
- well-produced

We also said they should enhance children's understanding and be appropriate. But you can't have everything.

Furthermore, the Australian Content Standards, which required broadcasters to transmit minimum levels of Australian content, included reference to Australian children's drama.

To the best of my knowledge, the two things that make our children's television regulations truly unique in the world are the inclusion of the word "entertaining" and the requirement that broadcasters screen Australian children's drama. (Because drama is the most expensive kind of content to produce.)

These regulations were developed in response to community expectations that the commercial broadcasters should provide programs for children. (And I would like to acknowledge Barbara Biggins, who is here today, as one of those people all those years ago whose advocacy resulted in these unique regulations.)

When they were conceived the regulations also included provisions dealing with concerns about advertising content and viewing time zones and the like. But we didn't leave it there.

We embraced the positive by acknowledging the right of children to actively consume media. By putting children's needs right at the centre of that discussion, we came up with regulations that gave voice to children's rights to have media in which they could see themselves, and issues and stories relevant to them, on the TV.





Thirty years later, and Australia has quite a legacy of Australian children's drama to celebrate.

Singing the *Round The Twist* theme song is the ultimate sign that you grew up in Australia in the 1990s.

Round The Twist, perhaps Australia's most famous children's drama, is associated with the ABC now, and it's also on Netflix, but it was originally commissioned by the Seven Network as a children's drama quota program.

Other well known children's dramas that the commercial networks were responsible for commissioning include *Crash Zone*, *Ocean Girl*, *Escape to Jupiter*, *The Wayne Manifesto*, *Spellbinder*, *Mortified* and *Lockie Leonard*.

These shows had a profound impact on the generations that grew up with them. A man in his late 20s recently told a colleague at the ACTF that arriving in Australia at the age of 5 and growing up in a home in Sydney where English was not the first language, these children's programs taught him where he was, how we spoke, what we thought was funny, how we saw the world. He said "I learnt to be an Australian watching Australian kids shows."

All of these quintessentially Australian series have been exported all over the world. They got to travel so widely because for a very long time we were one of the only countries that made children's live action drama for children. Our regulations created a market for content that children wanted to watch, and an industry of production companies making those programs in response to market demand.

It was based on respect for the children's audience. And I think I was asked to tell you about this today because it's a story that demonstrates that it is possible to align children's rights and the rights of commercial enterprises – in this case of production companies – to do something worthwhile and successful.

But now we are at a very interesting juncture.

The children's television regulations were created in an era when you only had free to air television. You had the public broadcaster, and the commercial broadcasters.

It was a very protected market and having a licence from Government to broadcast was considered a massive privilege. So it was possible to argue that in return for that privilege broadcasters had to accept certain responsibilities and obligations, including the obligation to broadcast Australian content and children's programs.

All these years later, the free to air broadcasters are in competition with the pay television sector and now the Video On Demand and other internet services, who aren't regulated in the same way. So the ground on which those regulations were founded is looking pretty shaky, and the commercial broadcasters are pointing out that it's not a level playing field any more.

Indeed a lot of the media regulations are looking antiquated, and governments these days like to do their bit for business by removing regulations and cutting red tape, rather than propping them up with subsidy.

Meanwhile, children's audiences are drifting away from the commercial free to air television networks, to dedicated destinations and platforms where they can find children's programs when they want them. The ABC children's channels are the most popular free to air destinations for children, and children's programs are consistently the most watched iView programs. And it's fair to say that most parents welcome that – very happy to have the kids tuning into advertising free services. But children are also watching the pay TV children's channels and looking for content on YouTube, Netflix, Stan and elsewhere, where there is not a lot of Australian material. As the number of platforms increase, the levels of Australian content drop, and we lose access to our own cultural products.

While we become more laissez-faire about media regulation, and at the same time, more uptight about children's screen time and the effect of media upon them, I worry that the outcome of these two points of view colliding is that children's audiences will be duded altogether of their right to their own local content made especially for them.

Local content is expensive to produce, costing far more per episode to make, than it does to import a program. So without specific regulations or financial incentives to do so, we can expect to see very little Australian content for children on the commercial broadcasters, pay television or the internet platforms in future.

We'll be left with one source of local content, and that will be the ABC.

But the ABC is not actually formally required to support children's programs and it might surprise you to know that it commissions very modest levels of Australian content. About 25% of the content on the ABC for pre-schoolers is Australian and 35% of the content for school aged children is Australian. And none of that is guaranteed. The children's drama quota, requires only the commercial broadcasters to screen 32 hours of first release Australian children's drama a year. The ABC has no such quota, and currently commissions 13 to 20 hours of live action children's drama a year.

That's not a lot.

So why does it matter that children are able to see themselves represented on screen? To answer that question, I would first like you to watch the trailer from a recent series produced by Gristmill, the same people who made *Upper Middle Bogan*. This is their first foray into children's television, *Little Lunch*.

(Watch trailer)



And here is the response the series is getting from around the world:

The German public broadcaster has issues with the children wearing sunhats in the playground. Sunhats at school are not recognisable to German children.

The Italian public broadcaster is concerned about the school uniforms. Italian children don't wear school uniforms to school.

The Swedish public broadcaster is aghast with Rory being sent to sit in the Principal's office when he misbehaves. Children in Sweden do not get punished in that way for misbehaviour. (Indeed the Swedish public broadcaster gave the impression that Swedish children do not misbehave. Full stop.)

The Canadian broadcaster is not able to show the episode where Rory bites Melanie's hand and is sent to the Principal's office, because Rory's behaviour might promote anti social behaviour in Canadian children.

The Belgian public broadcaster thinks eating play lunch outside would seem very peculiar to Belgian children.

The American broadcasters do not think any of it would be recognisable to American children, especially the accents. However, a little bit of a break through there, in that the digital disruptors at Netflix in the US think it's adorable and are willing to give it a go. Let's hope their subscribers are, too.

All these very parochial, local reactions to this show demonstrate to me why live action children's drama is so culturally valuable. It's particular to us. It's relatable to us. It shines a mirror on us and our ways. It reflects our values, and our sense of humour.

Why shouldn't our children see sunhats in the playground?

In an increasingly global world, 30 years after our regulations were conceived, live action children's drama is more important than ever.



The story of children's television in Australia to date has been a great example of putting the needs and rights of children, as consumers of media, at the centre of our policy thinking. We've taken a broad minded approach, to ensure that children get to participate and have access to media especially for them.

Now we need to continue that dialogue.

A question that we need to consider as a community is whether or not we are happy for all the locally produced children's programs to come to the audience via the ABC?

If so, should the ABC be funded appropriately to enable them to present a truly comprehensive and local service for Australian children, and shouldn't that funding be tied to children's programs so that it can't be taken away and spent on adult shows at management's discretion? That's the situation we've got right now.

We might also expect that the ABC have transparent obligations to report to tax payers on how it is spending that money for the child audience.

Those of you who are concerned about children's exposure to advertising and the freeing up of time zones for PG material on the commercial networks might find this a neat solution. And it could be, but only if the ABC is both funded appropriately and required to take it all on.

As adults, though, we don't want all our media to come from one source.

Competition drives quality for one thing.

If we think children's media should also come from a diversity of sources, as the Convention suggests, we need to consider what we are prepared to do to encourage and incentivise commercial operators on any platform to invest in locally produced children's content. If we can't regulate all platforms in the same way, can we provide financial incentives for Australian children's production through tax breaks and could these put a higher value on kids content? If Government is considering lowering the licence fees commercial broadcasters pay for the spectrum they use, can a commitment to Australian children's content be part of that deal? Can we permit greater flexibility around advertising models in order to encourage more content for children? Do we permit the commercial broadcasters to screen less children's content overall, but ensure that what they do screen is the more expensive, culturally distinctive live action drama?

There are a lot of questions to consider here. But I would like to encourage you to think about this angle as you kick off this national conversation about children as consumers. They should have a right to participate and access to quality content. But there is always a cost, and we can't protect them from everything.

It's all a balancing act.

As all discussions about protecting, parenting, supporting and encouraging children must be.

