

# Review of options to support the independence of the National Broadcasters



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The Australian Children's Television Foundation (ACTF) welcomes the opportunity to respond to the Review of Options to Support the Independence of the National Broadcasters, ABC and SBS.

Our national broadcasters play a vital role in the life of our nation, including the provision of children's content.

## Introduction

### **How the independence of national broadcasters impacts Australian children's content.**

Today's children gravitate toward screens during their formative years, right at the time when they are developing their values, identity and self-esteem. Therefore, it is vital that Australian children are provided with screen content made especially for them; content which is genuinely representative of their communities. The ABC has long played an important role in the provision of Australian children's screen content. With commercial broadcasters now providing hardly any children's content, that role is now more important than ever. NITV also plays a significant role in the provision of content for First Nations children. It is imperative that national broadcasters receive greater support and funding security so that children's programs may be produced and broadcast as a priority.

### **Support for establishing a 5-year funding term for national broadcasters.**

The ACTF supports and welcomes the Australian Government's decision to implement a 5-year funding term for the national broadcasters – Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) and the Special Broadcasting Service (SBS) – which commenced 1 July 2023. This decision is timely, as Government support for broadcasters and producers is critical during this period of changing regulations, shifting viewing habits and industry-wide cost pressures.

This longer funding term provides the national broadcasters with certainty and enables them to engage in longer term planning and strategic decision making in challenging times. The change will lead to positive improvements within the broader screen industry and encourage further investment in the production of Australian content.

Historically, market pressures have often forced Australian broadcasters to neglect children's content, despite it being highly valued among local audiences. The 5-year funding term allows national broadcasters to better allocate their spend, ensuring that diverse content – including children's programs – can be suitably prioritised.

Three-year funding periods have typically aligned with the federal election cycle, resulting in uncertainty. Implementing a funding cycle that does not align with each federal election term will strengthen the independence of the national broadcasters and promote bipartisan screen initiatives which carry over to each subsequent funding cycle.

In consideration of the many benefits that extended funding terms will bring, the ACTF supports a commitment to *permanently* update national broadcast funding periods to a 5-year (or even 10-year) arrangement. To this end, the Australian Government should consolidate its decision by implementing processes which ensure the 5-year funding cycle will continue.

## **Recommendation: Implement greater transparency and establish periodic community reviews of national broadcaster spending.**

In addition to the extended funding term, the ACTF advocates for a regular community facing review towards the end of each funding cycle. This would give the National Broadcasters an opportunity to report back to the community on the way they have spent their funding, what it costs to meet their obligations to all audiences across all their platforms, what they see as their priorities and what they anticipate the challenges in the next 5-year cycle would be. It would also provide the community with an opportunity to respond to those reports and make submissions about the role of the National Broadcasters in their lives, and how well the community's needs and expectations are being met. These reviews would ensure greater transparency in funding processes so that Australians have greater insight into how national broadcaster money is spent. They would form the basis of negotiation of funding for the next 5-year period. Governments should be able to ask the National Broadcasters to address specific issues through the 5-year review process, and be discouraged from instituting reviews of the National Broadcasters at other times in the cycle.

Australians highly value quality Australian children's screen content being broadcast to Australian children<sup>1</sup>. Therefore, it is appropriate that Australia's funding framework utilises public feedback to determine whether national broadcasters are satisfying this expectation. As there is currently no national broadcast quota for Australian children's screen content, highlighting the allocation of funds towards children's programs will ensure that such programs are not neglected.

The constitutional basis for BBC operations in the United Kingdom is a good example of such a model. Historically, the Royal Charter runs for a 10-year period, including a mid-term review which includes a 'public consultation'. The 'BBC Charter Review – Public Consultation' paper published in 2015 states '*Charter Review is an opportunity to decide whether this is the right range of services for licence fee payers, or whether the public would be better served by a more focused range of BBC services*'<sup>2</sup>.

In addition to 5 (or 10) year funding cycles the Australian Government should be able to increase funding to the National Broadcasters outside those cycles for specific purposes or reasons which might arise between budget cycles. It should not, however, seek to conduct reviews or reduce funding outside the 5-yearly review cycle.

## **Conclusion**

The ACTF supports and welcomes the Australian Government's decision to extend the national broadcasting funding term to 5 years. This decision is timely, as it provides the National Broadcasters and the wider screen industry with increased certainty in a period of changing regulations, shifting viewing habits and industry wide cost pressures. As the 5-year funding term will no longer be tied to federal election cycles, this will ultimately strengthen the independence of the national broadcasters. Consequently, the 5-year funding term should be established as an industry standard. This would positively impact all sectors of the Australian screen industry, enabling national broadcasters to plan with confidence and allocate further investment into culturally rich and diverse programs representative of the Australian community. Furthermore, the ACTF advocates for 5-yearly community facing reviews, which would introduce greater transparency in funding processes, and promote discussion of the role the National Broadcasters play. It is important that Australians have insight into how their monies are allocated towards specific content types, such as Australian children's screen content.

<sup>1</sup> Associate Professor Liam Burke, Dr Joanna McIntyre, Dr Jessica Balanzategui, & Dr Djoymi Baker (2022), *Parents' Perspectives on Australian Children's Television in the Streaming Era*, Australian Children's Television Cultures Report 1, pg. 15.

<sup>2</sup> [BBC Charter Review public consultation – GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/428122/bbc-charter-review-public-consultation.pdf)