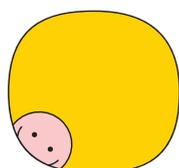


**HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES  
COMMITTEES – STANDING  
COMMITTEE ON COMMUNICATIONS  
AND THE ARTS**

**INQUIRY INTO BROADCASTING,  
ONLINE CONTENT AND LIVE PRODUCTION  
TO RURAL AND REGIONAL AUSTRALIA (2016)**

**ACTF SUBMISSION**



**AUSTRALIAN  
CHILDREN'S  
TELEVISION  
FOUNDATION**

## ***Inquiry into broadcasting, online content and live production to rural and regional Australia***

*The Committee, under its power to inquire into the annual reports of government agencies, will inquire into the importance of public and commercial broadcasting, online content and live production to rural and regional Australia, including the arts, news and other services.*

### ***Executive Summary***

Access to locally produced, distinctively Australian screen content is important for Australians everywhere, but it has particular importance for rural and regional children.

Public and Commercial broadcasting remain the most universally accessible and affordable means to access locally produced content.

Live action drama provides a rich opportunity for rural and remote children throughout Australia to engage with the diversity of contemporary Australian culture and society. It is content that children enjoy, respond to and it can leave a lasting legacy.

However, the broadcasting regulatory environment has not kept pace with rapid technological change and the globalisation of the screen content industry. As a result, the continued local production of live action drama is under serious threat.

There is a unique opportunity for the Commonwealth Government to adjust existing regulatory and support settings to increase the amount of high quality distinctively Australian content on our screens, and to improve the outcomes for child audiences.

Recognising that the ABC and commercial broadcasters remain the most universally accessible platform for children to access children's content, we make the following recommendations to increase the level and quality of locally produced live action drama available to children:

- The ABC charter should explicitly state the Australian children's content is a core obligation of the ABC. The ABC's funding for children's content should be aligned to achieving minimum levels of children's content and tied to publically reported KPIs.
- The C Drama quota requirement for commercial broadcasters to show first run programming should be amended so that 50% of the quota is live action drama.

*Australian content is VITAL in Australian classrooms. With the focus on quality Australian literature and the need for our programs to be relatable for kids I think Australian content should be at the forefront of our thinking. Only Australians can understand the Australia of today. We see the diversity and need to include that content in our teaching.*

*Jessica, primary school teacher NSW, ACTF 2014 Perceptions Audit*

*I most definitely prefer Australian content in the classroom and would actually highlight that as one of the things I really like about [these shows]. Firstly, I like that students are seeing themselves represented – their accents; their localities; their traditions; their "stories".*

*Simone, primary school teacher Canberra, ACTF 2014 Perceptions Audit*

## ***Introduction***

The ACTF is a national children's media production and policy hub and performs a wide range of functions in children's media:

- as a voice in policy matters;
- as a distributor of and investor in Australian children's content;
- as an instigator of new, innovative and entertaining children's media; and
- as a developer of valuable screen resources for the education sector.

We were established in 1982 through a commitment from the Commonwealth Government and all State and Territory Governments.

We have a proven track record in supporting the creation of quality local content for children. Our unique position in children's television – which straddles initiation, development, production, distribution and policy – gives us valuable experience, knowledge and insights into the issues facing the industry.

## ***Importance of Children's Live Action Drama***

The stories we see on our screens have a profound impact on the way we as a community see ourselves. They have an even greater impact on rural and regional children – as they are an effective means of addressing the geographical isolation and other challenges they may face.



*Ready For This*, Werner Film Productions and Blackfella films

The 13 part series follows five indigenous teenagers, all elite within their own field, who have come to the city to pursue their dreams. For some it's the opportunity of a lifetime, for others it's a last chance.

Regulatory settings and government support mechanisms have failed to keep pace with rapid changes in technology, the rise of the internet and the increased globalisation of the screen

production industry. As a result the continued creation of high quality, distinctively Australian live action drama is coming under increasing threat.

In this brief submission we highlight ways that the Commonwealth government could adjust and tweak existing policy levers to safeguard the local production of live action children's drama and deliver better outcomes for the child audience.

## ***Challenges faced by rural and regional children***

Access to locally produced screen content is important for Australians everywhere. But it has particular importance for rural and regional children.

Children growing up in rural and regional areas face many challenges.<sup>1</sup>

More densely populated metropolitan areas of Australia have benefited from significant investment in cultural and educational facilities, infrastructure and services that children living in cities can easily take for granted. The majority of art galleries, museums, sporting stadiums for example, are located in larger population centres. For rural and regional children accessing these can be difficult. At worst the prohibitive cost and distance can make them inaccessible.

***A child's capacity to engage with the cultural life of our nation should not be limited by their location.***

A child's capacity to engage with the cultural life of our nation should not be limited by their location. The opportunity to experience the range of arts, music, sports and entertainment, in addition to engaging with news and current affairs, should be available to all children.

## ***Importance of broadcasting/internet***

Public and commercial broadcasting remain the most universally accessible and affordable means for Australian audiences to access Australian content. News, current affairs, arts programming and sport, serve to inform and engage our community. Outgoing Managing Director of the ABC, Mark Scott has spoken of the ABC striving to reach more Australians more often, to 'enrich every Australian's life. To be the town square'.<sup>2</sup> It could be argued that this aspiration simply reflects the place that broadcast television, both public and commercial, occupies in our cultural lives.

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<sup>1</sup>The Australian Institute of Family Studies has conducted research comparing differences in the activities of children from 'Major Cities', 'Inner Regional' and 'Outer Regional'. Children in regional areas participated in less extracurricular art, music or dance classes than those in metropolitan areas. Although there are a range of other socio-economic factors other than geographical differences that might explain such variation, including individual and cultural preferences, a key determining factor must be the lack of access to such opportunities. Similarly, parental expectations of children's educational attainment is considerably lower in regional areas than in metropolitan areas. This may also reflect the fact that "access to services and educational aspirations are generally more limited in outer regional areas: Families in regional, rural and remote Australia, Jennifer Baxter, Alan Hayes and Matthew Gray, Facts Sheet— March 2011 <https://aifs.gov.au/publications/families-regional-rural-and-remote-australia>

<sup>2</sup> *The Fall of Rome: Media after Empire*, A.N. Smith Memorial Lecture in Journalism 2009, by MARK SCOTT, Managing Director, Australian Broadcasting Corporation, Wednesday 14 October 2009, 6.30 pm, University of Melbourne (<http://blogs.crikey.com.au/contentmakers/files/2009/10/AN-Smith-The-Fall-of-Rome-Final-14-10-09-doc-21.pdf>)

In their short history, the ABC's children's channels (ABC2 and ABC3) have revolutionised the screen content landscape for Australian children.<sup>3</sup> Compared to the indifferent and patchwork schedules offered by commercial broadcasters, the ABC has provided a consistent and reliable source of high quality content for children. And children have responded accordingly.<sup>4</sup>



*Nowhere Boys (2 series), Matchbox Pictures*

*Four boys return from a school excursion to discover they are stuck in a parallel world into which they were never born.*

As our national broadcaster, the ability to offer rural and regional children the same programming provided to metropolitan audiences has ensured that children who live outside of our cities are no longer missing out.

Maintaining high quality and accessible distribution channels such as terrestrial television broadcasting and high speed internet connections is therefore critical to addressing the geographical isolation faced by many rural and regional children, and ensuring that they have equitable access to opportunities available to their city 'cousins'.

## ***Australian Content and globalisation***

Advances in digital technology and the internet have revolutionised the way content is delivered to our screens.

Audiences that previously only had access to a handful of terrestrial analogue broadcast channels are now able to access an overwhelming choice of content via a range of platforms: digital terrestrial broadcasting, pay TV, and on the internet, an inexhaustible range of competing free and paid

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<sup>3</sup> ABC2 (for pre-schoolers) and ABC3 (for school age children) were both established in 2009 by the Rudd Government, but was first proposed by the previous Howard Government. The ABC initially received tied Commonwealth funding of \$69 million over three years.

<sup>4</sup> 65% of children nominate an ABC children's channel as their favourite, with subscription TV coming a distant second at 22% and the closest stand-alone commercial free-to-air channel "Go" at 4%. ABC2 at 39%, ABC3 at 22% and 4% nominating an ABC channel without being able to specifically name the channel. For children under 5, the preference is even clearer, with around 70% preferring ABC2. ACMA, *Children's television viewing, Research Overview*, p 10.

services, such as ABC's iView, or services such as YouTube and Netflix provide broadcast quality content via broadband connection.

In this globalised world, where viewers transcend national borders with the press of a button, it is critical for Australian child audiences, wherever they may live, to be able to view distinctively Australian content. Our broadcasters need to provide a broad cross-section of programming: news, current affairs, factual, sport and arts are critical in providing children context and knowledge about Australian society, a lens through which they may see their world.

As we will continue to be inundated with foreign content for the foreseeable future, it is essential that we see ourselves on our screens.

### ***Australian children's live action drama under threat***

Locally produced, high quality, distinctively Australian live action drama occupies a special place in the hearts of Australian audiences. But its continued creation is under greater threat than ever before.



*Round the Twist*, (4 series) A.C.T.F. Productions

The ACTF's most enduring series about strange things happening to the Twist family. First shown on the Seven Network in 1989 and still screening here and around the world!

For children these shows reflect a child's own world, stage of life, fears, hopes and aspirations and includes an Australian child's point of view. Children can hear Australian accents, and see landscapes and settings that depict the breadth and diversity of the Australian experience. They can see their communities, and those of their neighbours, friends and family, reflected on their screens to feel connected and part of our society. Live action drama provides a uniquely rich and engaging opportunity to engage with and experience the broad sweep of contemporary Australian culture and society. As a result, it is the form of content most valued by the Australian child audience and their parents.<sup>5</sup>

***Locally produced live action drama provides a unique and exceptional opportunity to tell stories and explore ideas about our society. It is a reflection of our shared culture, but it also creates a starting point for a continuing conversation about who we are.***

A golden age of locally produced live action drama entertained children's audiences from the 1980s through to the mid-2000s on commercial free-to-air channels, as well as Pay TV and the ABC.

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<sup>5</sup> Screen Australia, *Child's Play, Issues in Australian Children's Television*, 2013, pages 3-5.

In children's television, the ACTF is very proud to have been involved in several programs that have defined childhood for many generations: *Round the Twist*, *The Girl from Tomorrow*, *Mortified*, *Lockie Leonard*, and *Lift Off*.

In a global marketplace, filled with US and UK productions, Australian children are drawn to good quality programs that are made specifically for them. They expect high production standards and respond to programs that include familiar settings, characters and voices that are recognisably Australian.

There are several inter-related factors why live action drama is under threat.<sup>6</sup>

The outcome is that screens that previously showcased a range of Australian live action drama for children have now been crowded out by more cheaply made locally produced animations with generic or 'international' settings. The projects are typically co-financed by local and foreign broadcasters and aimed at a global audience. While they are an important component of our screen industry, it does not contribute to the audience's developing Australian identity.



*Dance Academy* (3 series), Werner Film Productions

Fifteen year old Tara Webster has grown up on a farm in outback Australia and has dreamt of being a dancer ever since she was a little girl. When she makes it into the National Academy of Dance - the best school in the country - she is sure her life is about to be spectacular. What Tara doesn't realise is how far behind she is in her training, and that there's a whole lot more to surviving the Academy than just dancing...

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<sup>6</sup> In brief, these interconnected factors include

- Animation counting as "drama" and loose requirements for "Australianess" under the Children's Television Standard;
- Declining commercial broadcaster licence fees;
- The Producer Offset and PDV Offset have had different impacts on live action drama and animation production;
- There is no fixed budget for Australian children's programming, including live action drama, on the ABC and no tied funding from the Commonwealth for this purpose; and
- The Pay TV sector is not contributing a fair share towards the cost of Australian children's drama.

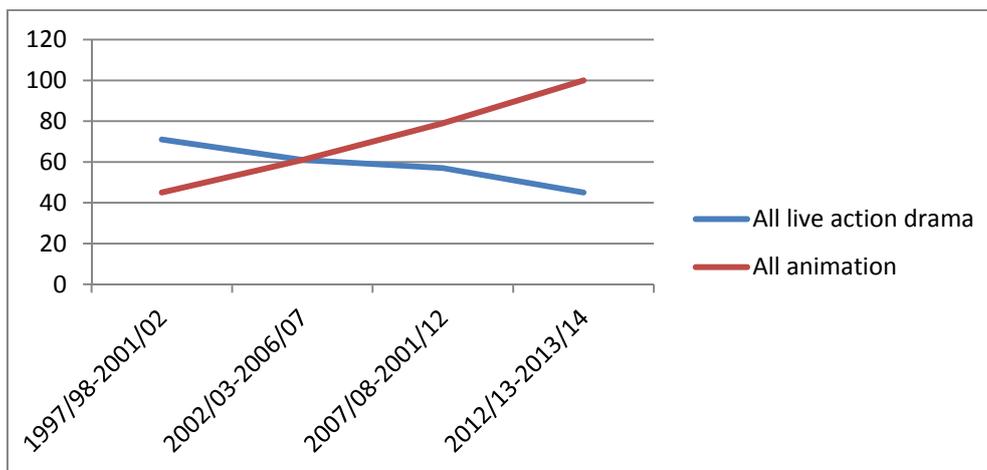
The net result is less distinctive, less engaging, less relatable, less culturally relevant and ultimately less enduring screen stories for Australian child audiences.

When the decline in the amount of Australian content is combined with the high proportion of foreign content on our screens (which is always going to be the case due to the greater resources of the US and UK production sectors, and the economic reality of a globalised industry) it results in a significant watering down of the amount of distinctively Australian content available to Australian children.

Over the past two decades, the total hours of live action drama have declined by 37%. But animation production has increased by 122%.

### *All Live Action Drama compared to All Animation - Total Hours<sup>7</sup>*

*1997/98-2001/02 to 2012/13-2013/14*



## **Regulatory settings**

Successive Australian Governments have recognised the importance of Government intervention in ensuring that Australian child audiences are able to access Australian content. This is because locally produced live action drama and factual programming would simply not exist without government funding and investment.

Government provides a range of support mechanisms aimed at giving support to the local producers of content (direct funding via Screen Australia and State film and television agencies, local content quotas imposed on Commercial broadcasting licensees, the Producer Offset providing a rebate for Australian production, and funding of the ABC and the ACTF). The objective is to foster a viable entrepreneurial industry, with the ultimate aim of delivery high quality content to Australian children. The existing framework of regulatory settings and funding arrangements have failed to keep pace with the rapid shift from an analogue broadcasting to a global digital online environment.

<sup>7</sup> Figures initially from *Child's Play – Issues in Australian Children's Television 2013*, May 2013, page 6 – revised to 2013-2014 from data provided by Screen Australia. Annual figures will fluctuate, but average figures are calculated across 5 year blocks to preserve confidentiality of projects, with the last block covering the period 2012/13-2013/14 being comprised of a 2 year block.

However, safeguarding the continued local production of distinctively Australian children's live action drama could be achieved by making adjustments to funding for the ABC and the Australian Content Standard that applies to commercial broadcasters:



*Lockie Leonard (2 series) – Goalpost Pictures*

What chance have you got when your dad's a cop, your mum's a frighteningly understanding parent, your brother wets the bed, your best friend's a heavy metal devotee and then you fall in love. It can only mean trouble, worry, mega-embarrassment and some wild, wild times. Based on the novels by Tim Winton

## ***ABC – Ensuring Children's TV is a Core Obligation of the ABC***

The delivery of high quality locally produced content to children is very dependent on a well resourced ABC that has clear commitments to delivering children's content. **In recent years the ABC's commitment to children's content has declined.**

The three year tied funding agreement that established ABC3 in 2009 has ended and the allocation of funding for children's content now depends entirely on how the ABC allocates its general appropriation. This is an entirely discretionary process as there are no KPIs that require the ABC to achieve any targets for Australian production or particular genres.

When the funding for ABC3 was first announced, the ABC set a target of achieving 40% Australian content on launch date, with a target of 50% local content by 2010.<sup>9</sup>

The ABC now hopes to achieve a target of 25% Australian content across both children's channels in 2015/16 - a significant dilution of the original 50% commitment.

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<sup>9</sup> <http://about.abc.net.au/speeches/abc3-launch/>, Address by ABC Chairman Maurice Newman AC – ABC3 Launch, 4 December 2009.

During the height of the 3 year tied funding agreement the ABC Children's Department was commissioning up to 20 hours of live action drama a year, as well as animation and significant levels of factual content. Recent presentations to industry suggest that the ABC children's department is intending to commission around 7-13 hours of live action drama in the next year, possibly one animation series as well, and that it has no plans for factual content or new pre-school content. It is obvious that the children's programming budget has been cut significantly since the end of the 3 year tied funding agreement, possibly by more than a third. This reduction is disproportionate to the overall funding cuts made by the Federal Government.



*Double Trouble*, Central Australian Aboriginal Media Association

Sixteen year old Yuma lives with her wealthy father and step family in Sydney. Kyanna, also 16, lives in a community in the central Australian desert with her mother and extended family.

Because the ABC does not commit to specific targets or allocations for the funding of children's television, such expenditure is entirely discretionary and subject to broader cost cutting by ABC management. What this means is that there is constant pressure to squeeze funding for children's content from within the ABC, at a time when the continued production and availability of high quality children's content on Australian screens is more than ever before dependent on the ABC.

To address the declining levels of Australian content on the ABC we make the following recommendations:

- *ABC Charter* - The ABC Charter should explicitly state that the provision of Australian children's content is a core obligation of the ABC.
- *Tied funding and KPIs* - The ABC should receive tied funding for children's content to provide a comprehensive service for Australian children including locally produced content for all age groups, in a range of genres, including live action drama, news and factual content. These programs should entertain, inform, engage and educate young Australians by reflecting the great diversity of states, regions and cultures in our country, contributing to the audience's developing sense of Australian identity and citizenship.

- This funding should be quarantined from the rest of the organisation’s funding, and tied to key performance indicators (KPIs) which set out explicit targets for the level of Australian content provided by the ABC to children. As a minimum these should be:
  - o 50% of content for school age children is Australian, and 25% of all content for school age children is new Australian content;
  - o New Australian content for school age children will include a minimum of 96 hours of first release Australian children’s live action drama in each 3 year funding period;
  - o 40% of content for preschool children is Australian, and 20% of all content for preschool children is new Australian content;

The ABC’s KPIs and reports against those KPIs should be publicly available.

## **Commercial Broadcasters**

Unlike the ABC, the commercial broadcasters are currently required to make provision for children via the Children’s Television Standards and the Australian Content Standard. These regulations ensure that minimum levels of Australian content are provided for Australian children on commercial television, and include an Australian “Children’s Drama Quota”.

Because animation is included within the Children’s Drama Quota, it is not always easy for the audience to tell that these programs are Australian, especially when they are actually international co-productions. Under the current rules, locally produced animation qualifies as drama and now dominates the schedules at the expense of live action children’s drama, irrespective of audience preferences.

### ***50% Live action drama requirement***

We recommend that the existing C drama sub quota of 96 hours of first run programming over a 3 year period (average of 32 hours per year) is amended to require a minimum of 50% of the C Drama quota be live action drama.

This would immediately address the dilution of children’s live action drama we currently see on the commercial broadcasters.

## **Conclusion**

Our submission outlines several changes to the existing regulatory and funding framework that the Commonwealth Government could make that would increase the level of locally produced live action drama on Australian screens, and improve outcomes for Australian children.

Locally produced live action drama has a resonance with audiences around Australia. For rural and regional children it has the potential to transcend the challenges brought about by geographical distance, and include them in an ongoing cultural conversation of what it means to be Australian.

We would be pleased to discuss any of the issues and recommendations outlined in this submission in further detail.

Jenny Buckland  
CEO