

Online and Direct-to-Audience Storytelling Must Be Central to Australia's Cultural Future

Submission Response to the New National Cultural Policy

Australia's screen industry is changing rapidly, but our cultural and funding frameworks have not fully evolved alongside it.

For millions of Australians, storytelling no longer begins through traditional broadcast television, cinema schedules, or subscription streaming services. Stories are increasingly being discovered, shared, discussed, and consumed through TikTok, YouTube, Instagram, podcasts, livestreams, and direct-to-audience digital platforms. These spaces are no longer fringe or secondary forms of engagement. They are now central cultural meeting places, particularly for younger Australians and underrepresented communities.

If the purpose of a National Cultural Policy is to protect, reflect, and strengthen Australian culture, then online and direct-to-audience storytelling must be recognised as a legitimate and essential part of Australia's screen ecosystem.

As a Western Australian writer, director, producer, queer creative, and first-generation Australian, I have experienced firsthand the power that storytelling has to create connection, empathy, identity, and belonging. I have also experienced the structural limitations that continue to exist for online and direct-to-audience practitioners, particularly in Western Australia, where pathways have historically been significantly more limited than in many other states.

This submission advocates for stronger national recognition, support, and integration of online and direct-to-audience storytelling within Australia's cultural and screen policy frameworks. Not simply as a funding category, but as a vital cultural infrastructure that supports emerging voices, workforce development, community connection, innovation, accessibility, and the future sustainability of Australian storytelling itself.

Australian Audiences Have Already Shifted

Australian audiences are already engaging with stories online every single day.

For many younger Australians, digital platforms are now their primary gateway into storytelling, comedy, identity exploration, news, education, and cultural participation. TikTok, YouTube, Instagram, and other creator-led platforms have become spaces where audiences actively seek out stories that feel immediate, authentic, community-driven, and reflective of contemporary life.

Yet despite this shift in audience behaviour, online storytelling is still frequently treated within institutional frameworks as secondary to traditional television and film production models.

This disconnect creates a growing cultural gap between where audiences actually are and where many funding and policy structures still focus their attention.

Online storytelling should not be viewed as competing against traditional film and television. Instead, it should be recognised as an expansion of Australian storytelling itself.

The future of Australian culture depends on our ability to meet audiences where they already engage with stories, conversation, identity, humour, and community.

Online Storytelling as Cultural Infrastructure

Online and direct-to-audience storytelling has become one of the most accessible and democratic forms of cultural participation in Australia.

Historically, access to storytelling infrastructure was limited by geography, gatekeeping, funding access, broadcaster relationships, or economic privilege. Digital platforms have lowered many of these barriers and created opportunities for communities that have often been excluded from traditional pathways.

This includes:

- LGBTQIA+ communities
- multicultural Australians
- first-generation Australians
- regional practitioners
- disabled creators
- lower socioeconomic communities
- emerging artists without industry connections

For many people, online spaces are where they first see themselves represented honestly.

They are where communities find connection, humour, understanding, and validation.

As a queer first-generation Australian, this has been deeply personal to me. Growing up, authentic reflections of queer life, multicultural households, or culturally specific Australian experiences were still relatively limited within mainstream screen culture. Online spaces have helped change that.

Digital storytelling allows communities to speak in their own voice, at their own scale, and often with an immediacy that traditional systems cannot always accommodate.

Importantly, online storytelling also creates shared cultural understanding between communities. Storytelling remains one of the few tools capable of building empathy at scale. When audiences engage with stories outside their own lived experience, it strengthens social cohesion, cultural understanding, and collective identity.

A strong national culture is not created through a single type of story or platform. It is created through the ability of people from different backgrounds to see themselves, and each other, reflected within the broader Australian narrative.

Western Australia and Structural Barriers

The challenges surrounding online and direct-to-audience storytelling are particularly visible in Western Australia.

For many years, Western Australian online practitioners have operated with significantly fewer structured pathways compared to practitioners in other Australian states. While other jurisdictions increasingly embraced online production and audience-first storytelling models, Western Australian creators were often left navigating inconsistent or limited support structures.

This has had real consequences for career sustainability, workforce retention, and creative progression.

Many Western Australian practitioners work collaboratively across multiple productions simultaneously, not because of oversaturation, but because limited opportunities have historically made collaboration necessary for survival and progression.

The lack of consistent online pathways also impacts the ability of practitioners to:

- develop sustainable careers
- build audiences over time
- test new IP
- scale productions gradually
- and transition into larger national and international markets

This is not simply a Western Australian issue. It reflects a broader national challenge around how Australia values emerging forms of screen storytelling and audience engagement.

National cultural policy has an opportunity to help address this imbalance by recognising online storytelling as a legitimate production ecosystem rather than a secondary or experimental space.

Online Storytelling as Workforce Development

Online production plays a critical role in workforce development across the Australian screen sector.

Lower-budget direct-to-audience productions often allow emerging and mid-career practitioners to step into creative leadership roles earlier than traditional production systems typically allow.

This includes opportunities for:

- writers
- directors
- producers
- editors
- cinematographers
- production designers

- composers
- animators
- marketing creatives
- and digital strategists

Online productions also encourage innovation, adaptability, audience engagement, and entrepreneurial thinking. Creators are often required to understand not only storytelling, but audience behaviour, discoverability, platform optimisation, marketing, analytics, and community building.

These skills are increasingly essential across the broader global screen industry.

Importantly, online storytelling also allows practitioners to test concepts, genres, audiences, and formats at lower financial risk before scaling projects into larger television, streaming, or feature opportunities.

Rather than viewing online storytelling as outside the screen industry, it should be understood as one of the industry's most effective development and incubation spaces.

Australia cannot future-proof its screen sector without investing in the environments where the next generation of practitioners are already learning, experimenting, building audiences, and developing intellectual property.

Cultural Representation and Community Cohesion

Australia is one of the most multicultural countries in the world, yet many communities still struggle to see their realities reflected authentically within mainstream screen culture.

Online storytelling has helped create space for more nuanced and specific perspectives to emerge.

Stories about migrant households, queer identity, regional life, disability, economic insecurity, nightlife culture, family expectations, online labour, and changing Australian identity are increasingly finding audiences online because audiences are actively seeking authenticity and specificity.

This is culturally significant.

When people see themselves reflected in Australian storytelling, it reinforces a sense of belonging within the broader national identity.

Equally important, when audiences engage with stories outside their own lived experience, it strengthens understanding between communities and reduces cultural isolation.

At a time where misinformation, social fragmentation, and political polarisation are growing global concerns, storytelling remains one of the most powerful tools available for fostering empathy, conversation, and connection.

Online storytelling should therefore be viewed not only as an economic or industrial opportunity, but as a social and cultural investment in Australia's collective future.

The Need for Sustainable Pathways

One of the greatest challenges facing online practitioners is the absence of stable and clearly defined pathways.

Many online creators currently operate between industries rather than within one. They are often considered "too online" for traditional screen systems, while simultaneously creating work that far exceeds the scale, professionalism, and cultural impact associated with hobbyist content creation.

This creates instability for emerging and mid-career practitioners attempting to build sustainable careers.

Australia needs clearer pathways that recognise:

- online production as legitimate screen production
- audience-building as a valid form of market engagement
- digital creators as cultural practitioners
- and online storytelling as a long-term growth area for Australian culture and industry

Importantly, pathways should exist across all levels of the industry.

Not every project needs to begin at broadcaster or streamer scale. Sustainable industries require development ecosystems that allow creators to experiment, fail, grow, pivot, and evolve over time.

Online storytelling provides precisely this type of ecosystem.

Recommendations

To strengthen Australia's cultural future and support the sustainability of the screen sector, this submission recommends:

1. Formal Recognition

Recognise online and direct-to-audience storytelling as a legitimate and essential component of Australia's screen and cultural sectors.

2. Dedicated Funding Pathways

Establish and maintain dedicated online and direct-to-audience development and production funding pathways at both state and federal levels.

3. Year-Round Accessibility

Create year-round application systems with clear assessment timelines to better reflect the speed and responsiveness of digital production environments.

4. Audience-First Eligibility Models

Modernise eligibility criteria to better recognise audience engagement, discoverability, and creator-led distribution models alongside traditional market attachments.

5. Workforce Development

Support online productions as workforce incubators that allow emerging and mid-career practitioners to step into leadership and creative decision-making roles.

6. Diverse Storytelling Support

Prioritise culturally diverse, LGBTQIA+, regional, disabled, and first-generation Australian storytellers within online funding and development frameworks.

7. National Alignment

Encourage stronger alignment between federal and state agencies to ensure equitable online production opportunities exist across all Australian jurisdictions.

8. Research and Data Collection

Improve national data collection around online storytelling, audience engagement, creator economies, and digital cultural participation to better inform future policy decisions.

Conclusion

Australian culture no longer exists only within cinemas, broadcast schedules, or traditional television systems.

It exists in phones, feeds, livestreams, group chats, digital communities, and creator-led platforms where millions of Australians engage with stories every single day.

Online and direct-to-audience storytelling is not the future of Australian culture. It is already part of its present.

The question now is whether our national cultural frameworks will evolve quickly enough to recognise its value.

If Australia wants a screen industry that is innovative, representative, globally competitive, culturally connected, and accessible to future generations, then online storytelling must be treated as an essential part of our national cultural infrastructure.

The future of Australian storytelling should not be defined by platform.

It should be defined by connection, accessibility, representation, and the ability to reflect the full diversity of modern Australia.