

Ensuring Australian Screen Stories Remain Central to Australia's Cultural Life

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Revive articulates a welcome commitment to “a place for every story”. Australian TV drama and children’s programs have historically played a vital role in reflecting national identity, supporting cultural participation, and connecting audiences across the country. However, recent trends indicate a significant divergence between *Revive*’s objective and current outcomes. Hours of Australian television drama production **declined** by 57 per cent between 2001 and 2024. Last year just 191 hours in total were made, down from 276 the year before. Meanwhile production sector subsidies **increased fourfold** between 2010 and 2024. To make matters worse, by 2024, more than half of the television drama produced with as much as 40% public funding was located behind a streamer paywall.

This growing misalignment between elevated levels of public investment and the limited availability of Australian stories to the broader community highlights a significant policy concern. Australian drama plays a critical cultural role in situating audiences within their national context: reflecting shared identities, histories, and experiences. Ensuring its accessibility is essential to realising the public value of that investment. The forthcoming iteration of *Revive* presents a timely opportunity to strengthen the alignment between public funding, cultural objectives and equitable public access to Australian screen content.

Over the past two decades, networks 7, 9 and 10 have increasingly prioritised live-to-air programming such as news, sport and reality television. Their investment in Australian drama and children’s content has fallen to historic lows. This shift has weakened a primary pathway for producing and freely distributing Australian stories to local audiences.

Government support mechanisms have not kept pace with these structural changes. Screen Australia funding and tax incentives such as the Producer Offset now favour production sector activity and international competitiveness over cultural outcomes. The expansion and uncapping of the Location Offset accelerated this trend as it operates without any cultural objectives and absorbs a growing share of public resources. The cost of this uncapped rebate scheme is growing — with dubious cultural benefits for Australian taxpayers. Similarly, although streaming Australian content obligations have secured production investment, they do not ensure any cultural specificity, and access remains restricted to subscribers.

The ABC is now the primary commissioner of freely available Australian drama and children’s content. The ABC’s Charter commits it to reflecting Australia’s cultural diversity, however no clear, enforceable requirements oblige either the ABC or SBS to invest in minimum levels of Australian content.

As the government develops the next National Cultural Policy, screen policy should deliver stronger value to Australian taxpayers by increasing the availability of free-to-air Australian drama. It should also ensure public investment supports stories that authentically reflect Australian life, alongside productions set elsewhere but filmed in Australia.

This can be achieved by:

- Expanding Screen Australia supports for culturally specific Australian screen stories, especially drama and children's content, and assessing their value as cultural goods, not economic tools. Only 21% of the \$2.15B the government spent in support of television drama between 2007/08 to 2022/23 had any on screen cultural requirements.¹
- Reallocated funding to ensure Australians have access to 50–75 hours of new, varied, culturally specific drama per year made available on free-to-air TV and a non-subscription on demand service such as YouTube.
- Requiring Producer Offset recipients to provide a window of free-to-air access within two years. Australians pay 30–40% of production costs under the Producer Offset scheme and then are increasingly required to pay to access the content their tax dollars have funded.
- Placing Australian content obligations on the ABC and SBS for high-cost forms of local programming such as drama and in the ABC's case, children's programs. Crucially, policy that requires the ABC and SBS to provide such content **must also guarantee dedicated, adequate funding**.

For more detail refer to

- Making Australian TV in the 21st Century Research Team. (2024). Australian Television Drama's Uncertain Future: How Cultural Policy is Failing Australians, Report, Queensland University of Technology, DOI: <http://doi.org/10.5204/rep.eprints.248187>
- Lotz, Amanda D. and Potter, Anna. (2025). Why is Australian-made media important?; <https://research.qut.edu.au/dmrc/why-is-australian-made-media-important-explainer-paper/>
- Potter, Anna, and Marion McCutcheon. (2025). *Australian Cultural Policy Unravelling: The Digital Demise of National Television Drama*, Routledge.

¹ Making Australian TV in the 21st Century Research Team (2024), p8.