

Culture, Public Life and Democratic Resilience

A Submission to Australia's National Cultural Policy

Introduction and Context

I am an Aboriginal poet and writer living and working on Taungurung Country in regional Victoria. My background includes broadcasting, adult education, disability support work, public service and community cultural development.

Across several decades I have worked within regional communities where culture is not an abstract concept or branding exercise, but part of how people navigate isolation, disaster, grief, change and social fragmentation. I have also spent many years caring for family and giving my time and energy to my community even during periods when that was all I had left to give.

Through adult education and community-based learning environments I have seen firsthand how literacy, storytelling, public participation and access to culture can strengthen confidence, connection, critical thinking and community resilience across generations.

I was also a founding member and presenter at Mansfield Community Radio 99.7FM, established in a region officially classified as isolated. What began as a community initiative grew over three decades into an important local cultural institution and trusted emergency broadcasting service. It provided local storytelling, news, music, interviews, training, public participation and community connection in a region where many residents had previously experienced limited access to local media and cultural opportunities.

Like many community organisations across Australia, it was built through volunteer labour, collective effort, practical skill-sharing and long-term commitment rather than financial certainty or institutional security. The station weathered technological change, funding pressures, volunteer turnover, fire, natural disasters, emergencies and broader social change because communities understood its value and continued sustaining it.

That experience shaped my understanding of culture profoundly. Cultural infrastructure does not emerge automatically. It survives because people continue to sustain it, often quietly, often under strain, and often without adequate recognition or enduring support.

I welcome the development of a second National Cultural Policy because Australian culture is facing a period of profound transition. The pressures currently affecting writers, artists, publishers,

libraries, booksellers, broadcasters and educators are not only economic. They are social, technological, democratic and human.

Literature, Public Life and Democratic Resilience

Literature is not only an industry. It is part of how a nation remembers itself.

Stories, poems, essays, oral histories, archives and community records help societies understand who they have been, who they are becoming, what they value enough to preserve, and at times who they do not want to become. Literature allows complexity, moral ambiguity, memory, empathy and dissent to remain visible within public life. It creates space for reflection in a culture increasingly shaped by speed, distraction, technological acceleration, commercial pressures and disinformation.

A healthy literary culture is therefore not a luxury addition to society. It is part of the public foundations upon which democratic resilience depends.

This matters particularly in regional Australia where stories are frequently flattened into stereotypes, tourism narratives, disaster headlines or economic statistics. Regional communities contain deep histories, complex social realities, intergenerational memory and significant creative practice, yet access to sustainable literary infrastructure remains uneven.

Australian cultural identity has value both nationally and internationally. Literature, storytelling, language, publishing, broadcasting and the arts contribute to how Australia understands itself and how it is understood by others. Cultural policy therefore cannot remain isolated from broader policy areas such as education, technology, communications, economic planning and international trade.

Culture, Public Responsibility and National Decision-Making

Cultural policy should not be treated as separate from economic, trade, technology, communications or education policy. Culture is a vital and intrinsic element of national life and democratic continuity. Decisions made within other policy areas can profoundly shape what cultural knowledge, creative labour, public institutions and community systems are protected, weakened or lost over time.

Australian cultural interests must be considered as a core component of national decision-making rather than as secondary concerns addressed after economic or commercial priorities have already been determined.

As Australia navigates increasingly globalised and technologically concentrated systems, cultural considerations must remain integral to national decision-making rather than secondary to narrow economic or commercial priorities.

Public-interest cultural policy must remain sufficiently independent and robust to withstand undue influence from concentrated private, commercial, technological or ideological interests whose priorities may not align with Australia's long-term cultural wellbeing.

Australian culture is too important to be treated as negotiable collateral within broader economic and technological systems shaped primarily by short-term commercial priorities.

Across multiple sectors and decades of public life, I have observed that systems become fragile, and at times harmful, when decision-making loses contact with lived human realities, community knowledge and long-term public responsibility. Policies shaped primarily through narrow economic, technological or institutional frameworks can unintentionally weaken the very communities, cultural systems and forms of public trust they are intended to support.

In these circumstances, the greatest costs are often carried by those with the least power.

Culture is also part of national resilience. Libraries, community broadcasting, literature, local journalism, archives, schools, bookshops and community cultural organisations help societies maintain trust, continuity, communication, memory and public participation during periods of disruption and change. These systems strengthen social cohesion and help communities remain connected not only in stable times, but during crisis, disaster and uncertainty.

Sustainable Creative Labour and Cultural Participation

Yet many of the people and institutions sustaining Australian cultural life are themselves operating under increasing pressure and instability.

The challenges facing Australian literary culture are interconnected.

Writers increasingly work within conditions of financial precarity while simultaneously being expected to maintain constant public visibility, digital engagement, self-promotion and entrepreneurial labour. Many artists and writers now spend significant amounts of time performing administrative, promotional and platform-based work simply to remain visible within increasingly competitive systems.

The “passion economy” model often disguises exploitation by framing unsustainable working conditions as personal commitment or creative vocation. Many writers and artists undertake substantial unpaid labour simply to remain culturally active.

Slow-form creative work is particularly vulnerable within systems that reward acceleration, metrics, accelerated output and commercial visibility. Yet serious literary work often requires years of sustained attention, research, reflection and revision. Cultural policy must recognise that not all valuable cultural work can or should operate according to accelerated commercial models.

These pressures do not affect everyone equally. Regional creators, disabled artists, carers, older writers and people living with chronic illness or financial insecurity often face additional barriers to participation, visibility and sustainability.

As someone living with disability arising from workplace assault during my years working within disability support services, I am deeply aware that cultural participation is not equally accessible. Many experienced artists, writers and community cultural workers become partially excluded from cultural life through illness, disability, trauma, caring responsibilities or economic instability long before their knowledge and contribution lose value.

Across multiple sectors, including disability support, regional communities and the arts, I have observed how systems can gradually become dependent upon human care, labour and goodwill while failing to adequately protect the people providing them. This pattern is especially visible within creative industries where care, mentorship, cultural preservation and creative work are often expected without long-term security or sustainable support.

A sustainable cultural sector must recognise that people contribute across entire lifetimes, not only during periods of peak productivity, commercial visibility or institutional recognition.

Cultural policy must support conditions that allow creators to continue participating meaningfully in Australian cultural life across changing circumstances, technologies and stages of life.

Regional Cultural Ecosystems and Public Participation

Small and local cultural ecosystems are essential to Australian public life. Literary journals, independent publishers, libraries, bookshops, community broadcasting, neighbourhood houses, community education centres, writers' groups, local archives and regional festivals are often treated as peripheral despite functioning as essential cultural foundations.

Many Australian writers first publish in small journals. Many readers first encounter literature through libraries, schools, neighbourhood houses, community learning programs or local bookshops. Many communities maintain cultural continuity through volunteer-led organisations that preserve local memory, language, storytelling, practical knowledge and connection.

These spaces also create pathways into participation for people who may otherwise become excluded through disability, isolation, age, financial pressure, caring responsibilities or geography. They support literacy, confidence, intergenerational exchange, local knowledge-sharing and ongoing community engagement.

If these ecosystems weaken, the consequences extend far beyond the arts sector. Communities lose trusted public spaces, local memory, social connection, intergenerational continuity and opportunities for meaningful participation.

Libraries in particular should be recognised as some of the most democratic institutions in Australian society. They provide access not only to books, but to learning, digital access, local history, public participation and safe non-commercial gathering spaces. In many regional communities, libraries remain among the few places where people can gather without the expectation of spending money or proving economic value.

Community broadcasting plays a similarly important role. Trusted local broadcasting strengthens public communication, community participation and social cohesion while providing opportunities for local storytelling, skills development and cultural expression. During emergencies, fires and natural disasters, local broadcasters can also become part of essential community resilience infrastructure.

Reading itself should be recognised as part of democratic and public life rather than only an educational outcome. A reading culture strengthens empathy, concentration, critical thinking and the ability to engage thoughtfully with complexity. In an era increasingly shaped by distraction, disinformation and accelerated information systems, these capacities matter profoundly for democratic life.

Artificial Intelligence, Authorship and Cultural Sovereignty

These pressures are now being intensified by rapid technological transformation occurring faster than many existing cultural, ethical and regulatory frameworks can adequately respond to.

Not all forms of human adaptation can or should occur at the pace of technological acceleration. Communities, educators, cultural institutions and democratic systems require time to assess consequences, preserve public trust and respond thoughtfully to changes capable of reshaping cultural life across generations.

Artificial intelligence is already reshaping Australian cultural life.

AI technologies are reshaping creative industries, education, media, publishing and public communication. While there are opportunities for responsible and ethical uses of these technologies, there are also serious risks requiring urgent public-policy attention.

Current AI development models often rely upon the large-scale extraction of human creative labour without meaningful consent, attribution or compensation. Writers, artists and creators are increasingly confronted with systems trained upon decades of human cultural work while the economic and professional conditions for living creators continue to deteriorate.

This is not only a copyright issue. It is a cultural sustainability issue.

A society cannot continue drawing indefinitely from human creative labour while simultaneously weakening the conditions required for people to continue creating, learning, researching and contributing fully to public and creative life.

The long-term consequences extend beyond individual creators. Questions of authorship, trust, accountability, cultural memory, public knowledge and democratic participation are increasingly shaped by technological systems developed and controlled at global scale.

Cultural policy must support ethical AI regulation that protects authorship, attribution, consent and fair compensation. Australia should advocate for transparent licensing systems allowing creators to opt in or opt out of AI training datasets and receive compensation where their work is used commercially.

Creators must retain genuine agency regarding how their intellectual property, cultural work and professional labour are accessed, licensed and utilised.

The policy should also explore new licensing and revenue mechanisms allowing Australian creators to earn sustainable income from their intellectual property across changing technological environments. Too often creators are expected to provide cultural labour without long-term participation in the value generated from their work.

Particular care must also be taken to protect First Nations cultural and creative rights, including concerns of consent, custodianship, cultural authority and the unauthorised extraction or replication of Indigenous stories, languages, artistic practices and knowledge systems through AI technologies and digital platforms.

Ethical cultural policy must recognise that not all cultural knowledge should be treated as freely available data. Respect for First Nations cultural sovereignty requires consultation, self-determination and meaningful protections developed in partnership with First Nations communities themselves.

As cultural production becomes increasingly shaped by multinational technology platforms, data economies and concentrated private interests, Australia must retain the capacity to develop independent cultural policy grounded in democratic accountability, cultural diversity, public participation and enduring cultural wellbeing.

Public-interest cultural policy must remain sufficiently independent and robust to withstand undue influence from concentrated commercial, technological or ideological interests whose priorities may not align with Australia's long-term cultural needs.

Australia has an opportunity to become a leader in ethical cultural policy by recognising that technological innovation must remain accountable to human cultural wellbeing rather than treating creators, educators and communities as infinitely extractable resources.

AI policy discussions frequently focus on productivity, scale and economic efficiency. Cultural policy must also consider what is required to sustain human creativity, public trust, critical thinking, cultural continuity and democratic resilience across generations.

First Nations Cultural Continuity and Stewardship

Questions of continuity, custodianship and cultural stewardship are not new in Australia.

The policy should further recognise the importance of First Nations cultural leadership and continuity not as symbolic inclusion, but as foundational cultural knowledge and practice. Long before contemporary policy frameworks existed, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities maintained sophisticated systems of story, memory, custodianship, governance and intergenerational knowledge transmission.

First Nations approaches to cultural continuity offer important lessons about relationship, responsibility, collective memory and the long-term stewardship of language, story and place. These perspectives remain highly relevant within a period increasingly shaped by technological acceleration, disinformation, social fragmentation and extractive commercial systems.

Support for First Nations-led cultural institutions, language preservation, publishing, broadcasting, storytelling and community knowledge systems should therefore remain stable, enduring and self-determined.

Cultural policy must recognise that continuity itself requires infrastructure, protection, participation and time. Communities cannot sustain cultural knowledge, languages, archives, stories and artistic practice without secure systems allowing them to be carried forward across generations.

Recommendations

Strengthening Public Cultural Infrastructure

- Establish long-term investment in regional literary and cultural infrastructure including libraries, community broadcasting, neighbourhood houses, writers' centres, local archives, literary festivals and independent cultural organisations.
- Recognise libraries, community broadcasting and community education spaces as essential contributors to literacy, participation, resilience and democratic life.
- Support literary journals, independent publishers, small presses and local bookshops as critical pathways for Australian voices, experimentation and community cultural continuity.

- Ensure cultural considerations are embedded across broader national policy frameworks including economic policy, trade negotiations, technology governance, communications and education policy, recognising culture as essential to public life rather than a secondary or discretionary concern.
- Require cultural impact and public-interest considerations to form part of major national policy and trade decisions where Australian cultural infrastructure, creative industries, public knowledge systems or community cultural wellbeing may be affected.

Supporting Sustainable Creative Labour

- Develop direct support pathways for writers and creators recognising long-form and slow-form creative work, including multi-year fellowships, regional residencies and accessible grant structures.
- Expand disability-accessible participation models ensuring creators living with disability, chronic illness, trauma, caring responsibilities or geographic isolation can remain active within cultural life.
- Develop fair creator income and licensing mechanisms allowing Australian creators to participate sustainably in the value generated from their intellectual property and cultural labour.
- Recognise older artists, regional creators and community cultural workers as significant contributors to Australia's cultural life rather than focusing primarily on commercially visible or metropolitan sectors.

Ethical Technology, Authorship and Cultural Sovereignty

- Introduce ethical AI protections for creators including transparency requirements for training data, consent mechanisms, attribution protections and fair compensation frameworks.
- Establish transparent licensing and opt-in/opt-out systems for AI training data and commercial usage.
- Protect First Nations cultural and creative rights including safeguards relating to cultural authority, custodianship and unauthorised extraction of Indigenous knowledge systems.
- Ensure public-interest cultural policy remains sufficiently independent and democratically accountable to resist undue influence from concentrated commercial, technological or ideological interests whose priorities may not align with Australia's long-term cultural wellbeing.

Reading, Participation and Democratic Resilience

- Develop a national reading strategy recognising reading, literacy and cultural participation as part of democratic and public life.
- Invest in community-based cultural participation strengthening intergenerational connection, local storytelling, public trust and social cohesion.
- Recognise culture, literature, education and trusted public knowledge systems as part of Australia's enduring democratic and national resilience.

Conclusion

Australia's cultural future should not be shaped solely by market visibility, technological acceleration or short-term commercial priorities. It should also be shaped by memory, language, creativity, ethical responsibility, democratic participation and the capacity of communities to continue telling their own stories.

The health of a culture is reflected not only in what it produces, but in what it chooses to protect.

If Australia wants a strong and sustainable future, we must recognise culture as part of the nation's essential cultural foundations and democratic resilience. Literature, libraries, community broadcasting, neighbourhood houses, local archives, schools, bookshops, independent publishers and community cultural organisations all contribute to the continuity and resilience of Australian public life.

Cultural policy cannot remain isolated from broader economic, technological, educational and trade decision-making. The choices made within those systems will shape whether Australian stories, knowledge, languages, creative labour and community institutions remain strong, diverse and sustainable across generations.

At a time of technological concentration, disinformation, social fragmentation and accelerating change, cultural continuity matters profoundly. Communities require trusted public spaces, shared stories, ethical stewardship, critical thinking and opportunities for meaningful participation if democratic life is to remain healthy and resilient.

Literature and reading cultivate forms of attention, reflection and critical thinking that remain essential to democratic life and increasingly valuable within accelerated, distraction-driven and disinformation-heavy systems.

Australian culture has enduring value. Protecting it requires more than celebration. It requires long-term commitment, public responsibility, democratic accountability and the willingness to recognise culture not as an afterthought to national life, but as one of the foundations upon which it rests.

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