

National Cultural Policy Submission

Anonymous

Submitted: As an artist; As an individual

What challenges and opportunities do you see in the pillar or pillars most relevant to you?

First Nations

The stories of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait islander people are a cornerstone of our national culture and identity. The Uluru Statement of the Heart cannot be fulfilled without our First Nations people being guaranteed their own voice, the opportunity, self-determination and control over telling their stories their way on screen. They are a fundamental part of the cultural and historical fabric of our nation and their story telling must be supported. In particular it is vital for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island children to see themselves and their lives on our screens, and the only way to ensure that is with specific quota requirements imposed on broadcast platforms. To ensure all of the above there must be specific, and considerable, investment in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island screen stories covering all stages of the process from development, production to distribution and marketing. Ownership of these screen stories must be retained by First Nations people and copyright not assigned to international entities.

A Place for Every Story

It is the fundamental right of every Australian to see their lives, culture, and identity expressed on screen. A sense of national identity cannot be achieved without a rich and varied expression of that via screen stories, which are one of the most popular and accessible ways to achieve this. Australians are entitled to have readily accessible, diverse, high quality productions which reflect and nurture what it means to be Australian. These productions must cater for all sections of our society, to include drama (in all forms from webisodes, series, to feature films), documentary and critically, children's content which has been decimated by the removal of industry quota for such.

A new National Cultural Policy must urgently address the serious demise of local production and screen content. Our screen stories are an important part of our national cultural heritage and define who we are as a nation – there can be no national identity unless it is seen on screens as an expression of cultural identity. Government support to ensure this is critical, via incentives, funding, tax benefits and critically, quotas on all broadcast platforms obliging them to invest in local production. There can be no expansion in local screen production without that support and increased quotas, as the last few years has demonstrated with the abject decline in local production. All screen platforms should be obliged to reflect Australian culture to their Australian audiences by investing in local productions, and the only way to do that is by introducing quotas. An investment of 20% of major streamers Australian revenue (like those imposed in Europe on streamers there), earned from Australian subscriptions, to be spent on newly commissioned Australian stories, must be a key initiative in our National Cultural Policy.

In addition, the deregulation of Australian free-to-air requirements for children's and adult drama has led to a sharp drop in these stories and this must be addressed. It is proof that industry self-regulation in regards to maintaining robust levels of local production is a failure, and has been replaced by industry self-interest. Government regulation to ensure the production of cultural content and expression is therefore necessary on both free to air and subscriber platforms.

This regulation must also ensure that all audience demographics are catered for with local stories instead of permitting broadcast platforms to chase the alleged holy grail of the 18-35 age group. Children and over 65s are audiences that platforms openly refuse to cater for. Equally diversity of cultural background, race, religion, gender and sexuality must reflect contemporary Australian society.

The Centrality of the Artist

Despite the arts sector generating more income than mining and sports industries combined, it has been undermined and under supported for years, most glaringly so during the pandemic – which showed breath taking disregard for how millions of Australians coped with lockdown, by bingeing screen content. Hundreds of art practitioners were forced to leave the industry during the pandemic due to the lack of industry support. It will take decades to recover from that, so government investment in the sector is needed now more than ever.

Many many people are involved in any one screen production. The screen industry is an enormous employer across a wide range of professions, all vital in delivering screen content. In the 30+ years I have worked as a screen creative, I have seen opportunities for on the job training severely eroded. Long running series were able to accommodate trainees who then became the new key producers, directors, writers, crew, and performers – not to mention all the ancillary businesses screen production involves. With the demise of local production, such training opportunities are lost – the only long running drama series now is Home and Away. Those seeking training must either head overseas, or rely on ad hoc and unreliable career paths. This is not a basis for a robust and competitive screen industry.

Screen professionals must be able to work and pursue and develop their craft within an economic framework that enables them to create, participate and prosper within the sector. The screen industry cannot survive without professional opportunities, advancement and remuneration enabling screen artists to pursue their craft and their vision. There will be no industry without viable and sustainable professional options. The challenges of doing so are under pressure from a global market where larger markets such as America are able to dominate the production sector are all the more reason for government to support local creatives and production. Any arguments about tariffs and protection are irrelevant when considering creative content – this is not a conversation about making fridges or cars, but about product that defines a nation. The hoary old argument that if the content was any good it would find an audience ignores the realities of producing content competitive with larger markets and enormous budgets. Market forces will inevitably swallow up smaller producers given the influence and reach of larger producers – we are seeing this in Australia with the number of local production companies now bought out by American parent companies. When another country dictates the stories we tell, we are in deep deep trouble.

This is why it is absolutely justifiable to support the screen industry and its practitioners, at all stages of their careers, via strong public institutions, government funding and a path to private investment. It goes without saying that all those initiatives must provide a commitment to deliver fair wages and working conditions for screen creatives.

Strong Institutions

The Australian screen industry cannot survive without strong, stable and well-funded institutions enabling the industry to generate Australian stories and support diverse stories and creators. Screen funding bodies must be capable of delivering the best possible support to generate this content, which means at the very least that incumbents of these funding bodies have considerable real and lived experienced as active screen creators. Not just as assessors, academics and administrative professionals in the arts sector, but a real understanding and demonstrable experience of what goes into creating screen content. Herein lies the challenge as those busy creating the content are not inclined to work in such agencies yet are best positioned to understand the workings of the industry. These organisations must have a broad range of active creative practitioners in order to adequately represent the professions these agencies are designed to support.

Equally, broadcast platforms must be available to commission the content being funded. The utterly ludicrous situation of providing the ACTF with development funding for projects that have no home, given the abolition of the quota for children's drama, exposes the dire failure to understand the needs of the sector.

Funding cuts to the ABC and SBS, and the severe reduction of drama quotas for free to air networks, have been detrimental to production levels for Australian stories, and for training opportunities to secure the future of the screen industry.

Tertiary institutions and programs aimed at the screen industry must also be adequately funded to ensure the long term future of the industry, by setting up a clear path between training and on the job experience, with sustainable jobs and fair wages ensuring a perpetuation of a robust industry and not one relying on gig economy instability.

Reaching the Audience

It should go without saying that Australian audiences must be able to discover and locate Australian stories on all platforms, including streaming. There is no point in creating content if the intended audience cannot find it.

Yet this is exactly what has happened particularly in the children's content sector, in recent years. Laments by the free to air broadcasters that children were favouring streaming content over their offerings failed to acknowledge the fact that their children's viewing scheduling paid scant regard to when the intended audience was actually watching, a paucity of content and considerable content of poor quality – it's no surprise when you provide so little funding for a sector that it's almost impossible to make quality content, that the audience seeks it elsewhere. This is a self fulfilling prophecy that should never have been rewarded by abolition of the childrens' content quota but rather a reinforcement of the requirement that quality, varied content was created. It is galling in the least to see such incompetence and planned obsolescence rewarded.

The resulting message to Australian children? You don't count as an audience. It is an appalling indictment of our cultural identity when our children, our future, are not even considered worthy of local content.

As with European regulation, we must ensure algorithmic prominence on streaming platforms to ensure Australian audiences see Australian content.

Please tell us how each of the 5 pillars are important to you and your practice and why.

First Nations

Our First Nations people and their stories must be seen on our screens, be it streaming, free to air or the cinema. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children especially must see themselves in local content.

A Place for Every Story

With the continued decimation of the screen industry over recent years, in particular the severe downgrading of the quota system under the spurious excuse of the covid pandemic, the creation of Australian screen stories has been severely compromised.

Whereas the ABC once produced considerable local content, that has now been degraded to a paltry amount of local stories, the difference made up by

abundant overseas dramas and documentaries.

The winding back of quotas for free to air channels has led to the massive plunge in local production – proof that quotas work and are vital to ensuring the future of our screen industry and stories. Without implementing considerable quotas across free to air and streaming (in line with what many European countries are doing) Australian audiences are nothing more than a dumping ground for international content, with streaming platforms reaping the rewards of the millions generated by subscription fees with no obligation to re-invest those vast profits into the Australian screen industry.

More funding must be invested, as well as quotas imposed on all broadcast platforms, to increase investment in Australian cultural stories.

The Centrality of the Artist

It is frustrating that government continues to be seduced by the short term gain of Hollywood productions shooting in Australia without having any understanding of the long term impact on the local screen industry.

In wooing Hollywood productions and the like, the benefits to local industry are brief and illusory, and also damaging. They set a precedent for wages far higher than local productions can afford, thus robbing those productions of valued crew and creatives (I have worked on productions adversely affected by precisely this scenario); but worse still, none of the profits from any of those productions returns to be invested in Australia. It is simply a "rental" scenario of local screen professionals (and in most cases, involves none or very few creatives) and does very little to foster the development of Australian screen practitioners and the industry.

Strong Institutions

All institutions that nurture and support screen talent must be supported and adequately funded. Restoring funding to the ABC and SBS so that they are able to commission far more local content than they can at present is only the start. Imposing quotas on any streaming platform operating in Australia, as well as restoring the previous far more stringent requirements on free to air networks to produce more local drama content, are key. It should be incumbent on those with a broadcast licence to bear the responsibility that brings, which is not just to make a profit, but to make a meaningful contribution to Australian screen culture and production.

Reaching the Audience

As a long term creative in the childrens' drama sector I am appalled by the excuses, the cynicism, the disregard and the sheer contempt for enforcing production of content for future Australians. It says much about Australia – and nothing good – that we tolerate, nay permit, complete neglect for our children to be able to view stories that depict their own culture, society and place in the world. Why is it okay for our children to be raised on a constant screen diet of stories about children from other countries, and other cultures, and to be only given scant access to depictions of their own lives? How can they have any pride in being Australian when they so rarely see that depicted on screen? The massive success of Bluey proves there is a ready and willing market for such content. Quotas and funding will make more Blueys possible.

I'd also like to address the other hoary old argument that Australian shows aren't as good as the rest of the world. The fault for that lies not in the screen professionals making the content – we are not less talented than the rest of the world and to suggest otherwise is a serious case of outdated cultural cringe – but in the restraints within which we work. We produce extraordinary work for fractions of the budgets of international productions. Imagine what is possible if the playing field was only marginally levelled in our favour.

Are there any other things that you would like to see in a National Cultural Policy?

I worked on one of the most widely sold drama series across the world that Australia has made. I feel proud that our stories touched the lives of so many people internationally. Our screen content is one of our best exports, advertising and promoting Australia. The benefits in return for that are innumerable, demonstrating why the screen industry sector must be adequately funded and supported. To that end, the most important requirement to support the production of local screen content is to make streaming companies obliged, given the vast profits they make in Australia, via quota, to invest in creating stories that are about us. That can only benefit them as well.