

National Cultural Policy Submission

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Mark Gibson is Professor of Media in the School of Media and Communication at RMIT University. **Tony Moore** is Associate Professor of Media and Communication in the School of Media, Film and Journalism at Monash University. They have worked recently together, with Chris McAuliffe and Maura Edmonds, on an Australian Research Council funded project, *Fringe to Famous*, investigating contemporary Australian culture and the cultural industries. The research for this project involved interviews with artists, commissioners, festival directors and cultural ‘animateurs’ across the fields of rock music, television comedy, digital games, street fashion and Indigenous screen. It was also informed by our own practitioner experiences in broadcasting, publishing, youth cultural policy and music scenes. Associate Professor Moore, in particular, has past careers as commissioning editor of Pluto Press Australia, a documentary maker at the ABC, and has served on the ABC National Advisor Council, as an elected Director of the Society of Authors and President of the NSW Fabian Society.

We are making this submission as researchers on contemporary Australian culture and the cultural industries.

We wish to frame the submission as advocating attention to crossover and hybridisation between small ‘fringe’ scenes and mainstream cultural production. We have found substantial evidence of the benefits of such crossover in ensuring democratic participation and the vitality of Australian arts and culture.

Our position might also be described as a ‘post-creative industries’ perspective on cultural policy. We define ‘creative industries’ as an approach that seeks to minimise differences between cultural and economic value. It is an approach that has been very influential in arts and cultural policy, both in Australia and internationally, over the past twenty years. We suggest, however, that the National Cultural Policy should now seek to move beyond it.

We emphasise that a post-creative industries perspective is not an *anti*-creative industries perspective. There are many cases where a ‘win win’ between cultural and economic aspirations can indeed be found. The creative industries idea has led to a very considerable amount of work identifying such cases – by governments, academics and peak bodies in the arts and cultural sector. The positive contributions of this work should not be denied.

We believe it is a mistake, however, to represent cultural and economic perspectives as always harmoniously aligned. There is widespread evidence of tensions and conflicts between these perspectives in contemporary Australian cultural production. Such evidence can be found not only in fringe arts practice, but also in the mainstream cultural industries. To fail to recognise this fact is to distort our understanding of the field.

Our research suggests, furthermore, that differences between cultural and economic value are *productive*, even in economic terms. The cultural industries depend on ideas of cultural value to engage audiences, sell products, motivate their workforces and maintain public trust – ideas, that is, of what is funny, insightful, edgy, ethical, uncomfortable, beautiful or original. Yet such ideas do not emerge from economic calculations. They are generated by engagement between artists, peers and audiences, particularly in small ‘fringe’ scenes, in the cultural domain.

We define a ‘post-creative industries’ approach, therefore, as one that recognises: i) that cultural and economic value can be divergent as well as convergent; and ii) that the divergences are important for the cultural and economic health of the sector. Australian arts and culture have been most vital when there has been hybridisation between cultural and economic values, but hybridisation is only possible if the difference between these values is recognised.

The approach might be seen as recapturing aspects of earlier moments in Australian cultural policy when a certain balance between cultural and economic perspectives has been found. A twin focus on culture and economy was embraced in the 1994 Creative Nation policy and was briefly revived under the 2013 Creative Australia policy introduced by the last Federal Labour government. The attempt of cultural policy to balance commercial and cultural imperatives had genuine successes, such as SBS Independent, connecting new and diverse work and talent with audiences.

First Nations

We suggest that policy in relation to Indigenous cultural production should both: i) recognise and support small-scale, ‘fringe’ forms intended for limited audiences (often themselves predominantly Indigenous); and ii) facilitate crossover between such forms and mainstream cultural industries. This dual focus may sound contradictory, but many of the most of successful First Nations contributions to Australian arts and culture over the last forty years can be traced to such an approach.

For example, the international breakout by directors such as Warwick Thornton (*Samson and Delilah*) in the early 2000s drew on twenty years of experimentation in screen production in remote Indigenous communities, through organisations such as the Central Australian Aboriginal Media Association (CAAMA). Yet it also built on a long-term program of screen policy initiatives expressly designed to establish a commercially successful Indigenous screen sector in Australia.

We recommend that the National Cultural Policy pick up and reinforce the strongest aspects of this tradition. Past models that remain worth referencing are the Indigenous unit in the ABC, which provided a base for talents such as Paul Fenech and the Indigenous Branch at the Australian Film Commission which, as Sally Riley has suggested, acted as a ‘mini film school’ compensating in part for the historical absence of Indigenous students at NIDA and AFTRS.

A Place for Every Story

In relation to this pillar, we would emphasise the importance of the public broadcasters in offering a cultural commons and clearing house, enabling circulation from diverse margins into the mainstream of Australian popular culture. Our research has consistently confirmed the importance of outreach and hothousing by the ABC and SBS, often in concert with non-government organisations such as the Big Day Out, the Melbourne International Comedy Festival and, at times, the commercial broadcasters (eg. the contribution of Channel 7 to the development of Australian comedy).

The Centrality of the Artist

We support the recognition in this pillar of the dual identity of the artist – ie. as ‘worker’ and as ‘creator of culture’. We believe it captures well the general approach we advocate for, recognising both cultural and economic values.

At the same time, we have some reservations about a focus on ‘the’ artist, in the singular. Our research has found that artists depend crucially on interactions with peers and audiences. Examples

include the theatres and clubs that have provided the seedbed for much of Australian comedy; the small venues that have launched rock bands; and the fringe festivals that have catalysed exchange around digital games.

It should be noted that a focus on 'the' artist as individual can work to screen out more collective practices of working class, migrant and Indigenous communities. It can also lead us to overlook the contribution of the collaborative effort involved in what the great American scholar of cultural production Howard Becker called 'art worlds'.

We recommend, therefore, that a focus on the centrality of the artist be tempered in the National Cultural Policy with a recognition of the importance of scenes that form around arts practices, such as has been urged in the music industry in policies to support venues.

Strong Institutions

We suggest that thought might be given to the kind of support given by arts and culture beyond direct funding – important though funding is. Our research suggests that another crucial support is in providing spaces in which artists can develop their practice and begin to engage with audiences and readers. Examples include the provision of infrastructure by educational institutions, affordable art and performances spaces, fringe festivals and outreach initiatives such as those undertaken by Triple Jay at the ABC or the Melbourne International Comedy Festival.

The paradox of the cultural domain is that economic value is often generated in spaces in which economic calculations have been moderated, muted or suspended. This is why many artists seek, and canny cultural businesses and entrepreneurs create, safe havens for risk, experimentation and the free play of artistic value. Cultural potency feeds economic potency, but it cannot do so if there is no space in which to think about the cultural in its own terms.

We recommend therefore that consideration be given to institutional support for 'sheltered spaces' – ones not immediately subject to the pressures of the market. This might include policy interventions within larger organisations such as SBS Independent inaugurated under the Keating Government's Creative Nation policy or the ABC's Indigenous unit.

Reaching the Audience

In relation to this pillar, we suggest that the audience be thought of not only as an endpoint or consumer of cultural 'products'. Our research has found that audience responses have been crucial to the development of artists, particularly at formative stages in their career. Audiences are therefore value 'adders' as much as value 'receivers'. This has been recognised over the last twenty years in relation to digital media, through concepts such as the 'produser' developed by Australian media scholar Axel Bruns. But it is also true of older media such as broadcasting.

We suggest, again, that public service broadcasters may have an important role to play in audience development. Rather than thinking of the ABC and SBS as distributing culture to end users, they might be thought of rather as 'gathering' audience inputs. Precedents can be found for this in groundbreaking audience-centred programming such as the *Argonauts*, *Beat Box*, *Race Around the World* and Triple Jay's *Unearthed*. The digital media transition offers many opportunities to deepen and extend this general approach.