

AUSTRALIAN AND CHILDREN'S SCREEN CONTENT REVIEW

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Executive Summary:

Since 1979, the policy instrument The Children's Television Standards (CTS) has placed local children's content obligations on Australia's commercial free to air networks Seven, Nine and Ten. Currently the CTS also include a sub-quota for the transmission of 32 hours annually of first-run Australian children's (or C) drama. Without this quota system, Australia's commercial networks would be extremely unlikely to invest in quality Australian television to serve the child audience.

The CTS led directly to the establishment of an Australian children's television production industry with a global reputation for excellence. Its outputs include iconic live action drama series that situate Australian children in their own national landscape, society, and cultural context while selling well in global television markets. The rich period of live action children's drama production that began in the 1980s¹ has ended however, with fewer and fewer live action series now produced for contemporary children.

This decline in production is largely because Australia's free to air commercial networks Seven, Nine and Ten increasingly use animation, rather than live action drama, to fill their C drama quotas, which the terms of the CTS allow. These animated series may be Australian-produced (with international partners), but are made for an international market and frequently will not look or sound Australian, or be based on Australian stories. The ABC, meanwhile, is under no specific statutory obligation to produce and broadcast content for the child audience. While the ABC took a leadership role in Australian children's television in 2009 with the establishment of a dedicated children's channel ABCME, it has since diverted funding that it had set aside specifically for children's television.

If we believe Australian children deserve access to quality screen content, including drama series that reflect their own lives back to them, a policy framework is required that ensures all major content providers including networks Seven, Nine and Ten are obligated to invest in local screen content for the Australian child audience. Further, public funding for children's television must be safeguarded, particularly at the ABC.

¹ This period included titles such as *Round the Twist* [1989,1992, 2000–2001], *Ship to Shore* [1993–1996] *Ocean Girl* [1994–1997], *Mortified* (2006–2007), *H2O: Just Add Water* (2006–2010) and *Lockie Leonard* (2007–2010).

Introduction

Many Australians have fond memories of the television they watched as children, including home-grown series such as *Mortified*, *Playschool*, *Blue Water High* and *Round the Twist*. Indeed, in 2015 when asked to name their favourite television characters from their childhood, of the thousand people surveyed, most chose *Round the Twist* siblings Linda and Bronson, followed by *Mortified*'s Taylor Fry. Australian children's programs were valued for their humour, relatability, quirky storylines and characters, their portrayal of a range of Australian lifestyles, and their values, including mateship and egalitarianism:

When asked what they particularly liked about such series, typical responses included such sentiments as:

I absolutely loved seeing familiar countryside and schools that looked like my school (unlike schools on US/UK programs).

These programs showed me other parts of Australian life, as I grew up in a town in the desert and didn't know much about coastal or urban environments².

The survey data suggest that these programs had a significant role in shaping and reinforcing children's perceptions of Australian life, and that they held a special place in the imaginations of Australian children when compared to imported programs. The majority of these iconic live action drama series aired on networks Seven, Nine and Ten during the 1990s and 2000s, as part of their children's C drama quota obligations.

The Decline of Live Action C Drama

Children's programming is not an attractive proposition to Australia's free-to-air commercial networks, due to its high costs and the lack of advertising revenue associated with the genre. The networks simply would not produce local television for children without the content quotas enshrined in the Children's Television Standards (CTS) in place.

There are two main problems with the CTS quota-system as it currently exists however. First, it is worth questioning how stringently these standards are policed, with the ACMA rejecting only one show for C drama classification, of the 78 applications submitted between 2008 and 2012 and only two programs of the

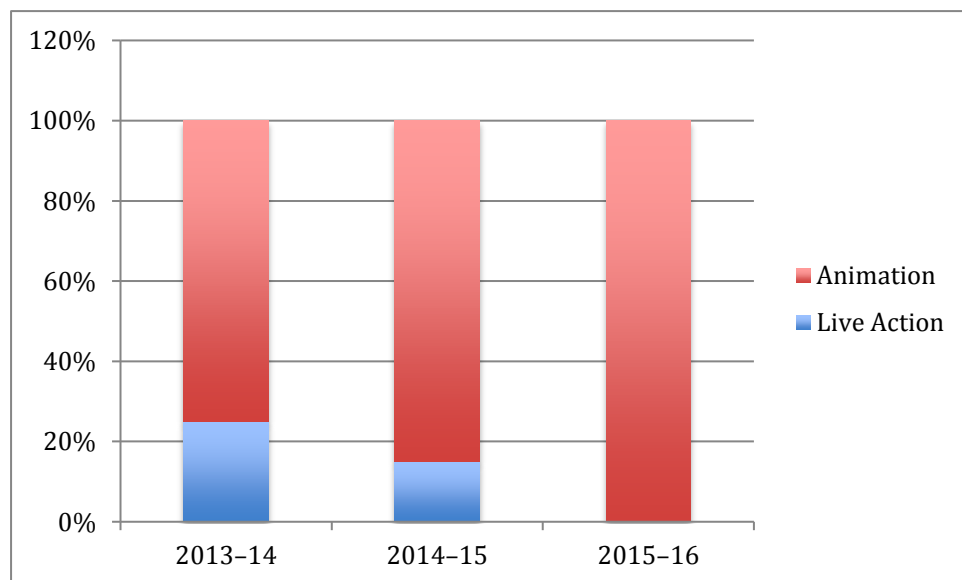
² The Memory Project see [www. http://actf.com.au/news/10249/lasting-memories-of-australian-children-s-television](http://actf.com.au/news/10249/lasting-memories-of-australian-children-s-television)

38 submitted between 2013 and 2016³. Second, because the ACMA does not specify the medium of storytelling used for Australian C drama, since 2009 the networks have increasingly filled their quotas with animations rather than live action series.

The Rise of Animation

Over the period 1997 to 2016, Screen Australia data indicates that the average annual average number of hours of live action drama produced in Australia fell by nearly 50%, and expenditure on live action fell by more than \$10 million. Meanwhile, animation increased its average annual budgets by \$19 million, and increased its average annual production by more than 55%⁴.

From 2013–2015, animation made up on average 77% of the networks’ C drama hours. The share of C Drama taken up by animation is likely to increase based on the programs that have recently been submitted to ACMA for Australian C drama classification. These figures show a downward trend in the live-action share: in the reporting year 2013–2014, 25% of the hours submitted were live action, in 2014–2015 it was down to 15% live action, and in the last reporting year, 2015–2016, not one live action program was submitted for classification as children’s drama⁵.



Australian Children's Drama Classified by ACMA 2013–2016

³ ACMA Annual Reports 2009-2016

⁴ Data provided by the Screen Australia Policy and Research Unit 2017

⁵ <http://www.acma.gov.au/theACMA/programs-granted-c-and-p-classification>

Of course, animation is a perfectly legitimate genre, enormously popular with children all over the world, and some exemplary Australian-made animations have been produced in recent years. Some, like *Botthersnikes and Gumbles* (Netflix's first ever children's Original) or the latest reboot of the venerable *Blinky Bill* are based on Australian stories and have an Australian look and feel. But these are exceptions to the norm. Most animated series produced to fill the CTS quota carry no recognisably Australian content. They are Australian in their production context only.

The switch in emphasis to animation is because of the commercial networks' refusals (with some notable exceptions, particularly at Network Ten) to pay the licence fees required to fund the production of live action drama. Minimum levels of license fees are also needed to trigger Screen Australia funding subsidies, another important component of their production budgets. Since the early 2000s, as Australian television made its transition to a digital regime, networks have steadily reduced their investment in the children's television they are obliged to commission. At a time of reduced investment in children's television, animation has a significant competitive advantage as it is cheaper to make, and can be easily re-voiced for other markets⁶.

A recent example is Network Ten's submission for C drama classification in 2015–2016: the second season of US pop superstar Gwen Stefani's animated girl group spin-off project *Kuu Kuu Harijuku*. A synthesis of California pop and Japanese "kawaii" (cute) culture which screens on Nickelodeon in the US and internationally, *Kuu Kuu Harijuku* doubtless appeals to contemporary Australian children, but does nothing to situate them within their own landscape, society, and cultural context. Because it was partly produced in Melbourne *Kuu Kuu Harijuku* was duly classified by the ACMA as Australian children's C drama⁷.

The ABC and Children's Television

The ABC continues to produce quality Australian content for children including live action drama. It cannot however be relied on to pick up the slack as the commercial networks withdraw from this space, because the ABC has no specifically legislated responsibility to provide children's television. It is exempt from the quota obligations imposed by the CTS. In a recent commentary piece for the journal *Media International Australia*, the ABC's former Director of Television (2006–2013) Kim Dalton warned that the ABC has an uneven record when it comes to interpreting its obligation to children's television. During Dalton's tenure a dedicated children's channel, ABC3 (now ABC ME) was set up, funded with a specific additional allocation of government funding of \$27 million

⁶ Potter, A 2015 *Creativity, Culture and Commerce: Producing Australian Children's Television with Public Value*, Intellect, Bristol.

⁷ <http://www.acma.gov.au/theACMA/programs-granted-c-and-p-classification>

a year. The ABC promised to use this money for a comprehensive channel of offerings to school-aged children, and to set an objective (NB not a quota) of 50% local content. Less than four years later, says Dalton, the ABC's overall children's budget had been cut by 50%, "an amount disproportionate to any cut it has received from the government." In fact, this cut to the children's budget came *before* the cuts to the ABC outlined in the 2014/15 budget took effect. The Australian content objective for the dedicated children's channel was slashed from 50% to 25% in 2014⁸. Dalton summarises the situation thus: "the reality is that the ABC has over the years demonstrated that it does not have a commitment to its children's services or programming"⁹.

Globalisation

The challenge of ensuring supply of identifiably local children's television in contemporary television systems is not confined to Australia of course. Children's television has long been subject to powerful globalising forces, with US conglomerates such as Disney and Nickelodeon controlling both content and carriage in fiercely commercialised operations that see children all over the world embracing their offerings and associated merchandise. Internet-based providers including Netflix, Amazon Prime and YouTube now supplement these services. Neither are the transformations that are occurring within the Australian screen industries, which see more and more independent producers of children's television either abandoning the genre entirely, or allowing their companies to be bought up by very large, transnational production companies, unique.

In New Zealand, a country with no state-funded system of public service broadcasting where all public funding for children's content is contestable, culturally specific children's content is a rare commodity. The pressures associated with reduced funding for children's content are compounded in New Zealand by a de-regulated media system with no dedicated public service provision. Local children's television competes for funding from state body NZ on Air with other genres at risk of market failure, meaning most local children's content is inexpensive, magazine style programming with a short shelf life¹⁰.

In the UK, content quotas were removed from commercial free-to-air broadcasters ITV, Channel Four and Channel Five in 2003. Local screen

⁸ <https://theconversation.com/no-dramas-what-budget-cuts-signal-for-homegrown-childrens-shows-on-abc3-50004>

⁹ Dalton K 2017 'The ABC of Trust', *Media International Australia*, Vol 163, issue 1, May 2017.

¹⁰ Zanker, Ruth 2017 'The future isn't coming; the future is here: The New Zealand Children's Screen Trust's engagement with media policy for children' *Media International Australia*, Vol 163, issue 1, May 2017.

production for children was decimated, along with its associated industries. Spending dropped from £59m to £3m between 2003 and 2014. In April 2017, a House of Lords amendment to the Digital Economy Bill gave Ofcom the power to re-impose quotas on commercial free to air broadcasters ITV, Channel Four and Channel Five¹¹. The re-imposition of quotas is a luxury Australia does not have under the terms of the 2005 Australia-US Free Trade Agreement. Further, in June 2017, the BBC announced an extra £34m in funding for UK-made children's content and digital services over the next three years, to counter the influence of US-based streaming services.

These international comparisons illustrate the risks to the production of local children's screen content when quota obligations are removed, risks compounded in Australia's case by the ABC's willingness to divert funding from children's content when it sees fit, as part of its opaque decision making processes.

Conclusions

The Children's Television Standards appear outdated in a digital environment where children are accustomed to consuming their television content on demand, on multiple devices and on the move. Without the CTS content quotas however, it is unlikely that locally produced children's drama will be seen on Australia's commercial networks again. Meanwhile other content providers operating in Australia including Netflix continue to operate without any obligation to invest in local content. The provision of children's content cannot be left to the ABC because without content quotas, the public service broadcaster is free to withdraw funding from its children's services without public consultation or scrutiny.

In order to ensure that high quality, identifiably Australian television made specifically for them remains available to Australian children, all content providers including networks Seven, Nine and Ten should be obligated to fund, produce and distribute minimum levels of children's content including live action drama. On the ABC, children's funding should be protected, with transparent processes ensuring minimum levels of local children's content are met, ideally 50%, (which was the ABC's target for its children's channel at its 2009 launch). The New Zealand and UK experiences should serve as a cautionary tales, because of what they reveal about market failure and high quality, culturally specific children's television in the absence of quotas.

This submission outlines some of the elements that have eroded the production

¹¹ Steemers, J <http://www.thechildrensmediafoundation.org/archives/5278/joined-thinking-significant-boosts-uk-childrens-tv-production>

of culturally specific drama for children in Australia, and internationally. Australian children's drama clearly plays a significant role in children's lives, as The Memory Project revealed, particularly in terms of situating them in their own cultural context. I would welcome the opportunity to discuss any part of this submission in detail.

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