

Australian Children's Television Cultures: Submission to the Office for the Arts

Consultation on renewed National Cultural Policy

Australian Children's Television Cultures (ACTC) is a research group based at Swinburne University of Technology in partnership with the Australian Children's Television Foundation and RMIT University. ACTC is undertaking a four-year project (2021-2024) to investigate the cultural and industrial impacts of Australian children's television at a time of significant flux. The project's findings are designed to inform strategies across the Australian children's television sector as it navigates major changes in audience habits, industry practices, and policy related to the rise of streaming video services.

ACTC's four Chief Investigators, Dr Jessica Balanzategui (Swinburne University of Technology), Dr Djoymi Baker (RMIT University), A/Professor Liam Burke (Swinburne University of Technology) and Dr Joanna McIntyre (Swinburne University of Technology), have prepared this submission as researchers specialising in Australian and global children's media. We welcome the opportunity to highlight the significance of Australian children's television as part of the National Cultural Policy (NCP) consultation process.

Current state of Australian children's television

Since the establishment of the Australian Children's Television Foundation in 1982, a combination of regulation, investment, talent development, and international distribution and promotion has contributed to a domestically treasured and internationally well-regarded Australian children's television sector.ⁱ

Yet the sector is currently in a precarious position. The removal of local children's content quotas for commercial television networks in 2020 combined with the rise of streaming video services has created a perfect storm of uncertainty and instability.ⁱⁱ At this juncture, there are **no specific obligations** for any television broadcasters or streaming video services to invest in or screen Australian children's television. The NCP provides an opportunity to rectify this significant regulatory gap.

Reaching the audience

Our nationwide study, *Parents' Perspectives on Australian Children's Television in the Streaming Era*, evidences the importance of Australian children's television to families. 69% of parents surveyed deemed it moderately, very, or extremely important that content is specifically Australian. The qualities parents most identified as key to 'good' Australian television were unambiguously Australian settings and relatable, authentic depictions of local culture such as Australian accents, family dynamics, and iconography.ⁱⁱⁱ

Australian children's television is a key means of ensuring 'Australian creativity thrives here and abroad in the digitally enabled 21st century.' The most watched show in our study, *Bluey*, is also the most watched show in the history of the ABC's streaming service, iView^{iv} and is now being enjoyed in over 60 countries.^v So far-reaching is *Bluey's* success that it is reportedly changing how children around the world talk.^{vi} As well as reaching global audiences, our research illuminates how Australian children's television assists families who have migrated from overseas to successfully participate in Australian life:

Little Lunch helps me understand the local culture better, not only Australian culture but Melbourne culture when it comes to kids, and it also helps me understand how the school system works here. We started watching that before [my son] started primary school earlier this year, and of course every country has a different system, but school seemed to be familiar when he started because we had watched that show together.

– César from VIC (originally from Mexico), two children under seven

While our audience research substantiates the importance of distinctively Australian content, parents also noted that Australian children's television can be difficult to find across the various streaming platforms.

This problem became particularly pronounced for children over 12, who gravitate towards YouTube (80%) and subscription video on demand services, primarily Netflix (77%). All of the top 10 most popular 'channels' to watch Australian children's content were streaming services, the most popular being ABC's offerings (89%), primarily iView (69%), followed by Netflix (77%), YouTube (69%), and Disney+ (65%).^{vii}

Recommendation: The NCP should account for the central role of streaming services in children's media consumption in Australia and overseas, and the need for Australian children's television to be both available and discoverable across these platforms. Overseas, quotas^{viii} and expenditure obligations^{ix} for subscription streaming services have ensured they commission and screen local content.

First Nations and a Place for Every Story

Our nationwide study found that 50% of parents deemed 'diverse representation' in children's television extremely or very important. 21% identified diversity of representation as a core strength of Australian children's television, as it allowed children to see themselves on-screen.

Australian children's television is contributing to diverse production and representation practices that have received national and international recognition. Along with an International Children's Emmy, *First Day* has received prestigious international awards for its ground-breaking commitment to gender diversity, including the GLAAD Media Award (2021) and Prix Jeunesse Gender Equity Prize (2018). Furthermore, *Little J & Big Cuz* is an Indigenous-led children's animation and the first Australian animated show made specifically for an Indigenous audience.^x *Little J & Big Cuz* foregrounds First Nations creatives as part of a broader First Nations creative ecology. Awards the show has won include the Logie for Most Outstanding Children's Program (2018), the Australian Teachers of Media SAE ATOM Award for Best Children's Television Program (2017), and the inaugural Screen Diversity and Inclusion Network Award (2018).^{xi}

To continue to facilitate opportunities for such industry leading innovation by diverse creatives in children's television, stable investment alongside maintenance and creation of talent development pathways are required. We detail this in relation to the NCP consultation's final two pillars below.

Strong Institutions and the Centrality of the Artist

The Australian children's television sector is internationally acclaimed despite the current precarious conditions it faces. In 2020-21, Australian shows have been awarded some of world's most prestigious children's media awards, including International Children's Emmys (*Bluey*, *Hardball* and *First Day*), and Prix Jeunesse International Awards (*Hardball* and *Bluey*). Strong international distribution partnerships with major streaming services and television networks have enabled audiences around the world to enjoy Australian children's programs such as *Bluey* and *The InBESTigators*. This was highlighted by our research with children's television producers, which included interviews with practitioners such as Robyn Butler:

The [*InBESTigators*] fan mail that you get from everywhere ... from Poland, Mexico, Chile, Ireland, just everywhere. And kids see themselves in all those characters. I mean there's diversity on screen, which is useful, If they can see them, if they have access to them, it doesn't matter where it's based. The advantages just of the reach are amazing. And then of course, you have access to making more things once you've been seen on that global stage. So that's a really big advantage.

- Robyn Butler, Gristmill production company (*Little Lunch*, *The InBESTigators*)

To maintain this level of quality and international success, stable and secure pathways must remain in place for talent development in the sector. As long-running series such as *Neighbours* exit Australia's screen production ecology,^{xii} investment in children's television productions creates vital opportunities for emerging screen professionals. Our research with screen producers has found that Australian children's television productions provide pathways for new talent to break into Australia's screen industry:

There's such a gap from graduating from film school to being able to direct, you know, a Netflix show, that is such a huge gap and you really do need people, like mentors in the industry.

– **Nina Buxton, director, *The InBESTigators***

As a young person who's trying to learn and trying to dip my toe into everything, it's hard to get opportunities... it's supporting people to make art and to make us all as good as we possibly can be, because it's really hard in Australia to catch a break... My whole intention with this show was for kids – for young adults by young adults.

–**Olivia Deeble, teenage writer/creator, *More Than This***

The changing nature of television production culture and the rise of streaming services means there is a preference for shorter-run commissions, and therefore fewer opportunities for new creative talent to get their start in the industry.^{xiii} In this context, Australian children's television is uniquely well-positioned to provide opportunities for talent development and industry renewal:

We said we want to take a whole year (writing *The InBESTigators*), we want to get a bunch of young writers in, and we want to mentor them in the space. There's very few opportunities for upcoming writers because you rarely get a [writer's] room in Australia. Normally you're making short-order, six, eight episodes, and so you can't really create a room or train anyone because you've just got to get it done... These people from *The InBESTigators*, now several of them have gone on and are writing in all sorts of spaces.

– **Wayne Hope, Gristmill production company (*Little Lunch, The InBESTigators*)**

Children's television also provides opportunities to develop talent and create opportunities outside of major metropolitan production hubs. *Maverix*, for instance, was produced by Brindle Films, an Alice Springs production company that shot on-location:

For me it was important that country kids can see themselves on screen... I don't mean lovely green grassy countryside, I mean dirt, I mean dust, I mean drought. And we don't see that very much.

–**Rachel Clements, Brindle Films production company, writer/producer, *Maverix***

Incentivising high-quality children's productions that break new and diverse talent will expand the avenues available to all Australians to contribute to arts and culture through our screen industry. At a time when Screen Producers Australia is reporting crew shortages as a key concern for their members,^{xiv} Australia needs children's television production to ensure emerging screen professionals have pathways to make a career and to support industry talent renewal.

Recommendation: Ongoing, predictable, and adequate investment in Australian children's television is required to continue to facilitate diversity in and ensure future sustainability of Australia's screen industry.

ⁱ Balanzategui, J 2022 'TV horror-fantasy for children as transnational genre: *Round the Twist*, generic subversions, and quality Australian children's television.' Olson, D and Schober, A (eds). *Children, Youth and International Television*. Routledge. ISBN: 9781032150734

ⁱⁱ Balanzategui, J, McIntyre, J and Burke L 2020, '[Cheese 'n' crackers! Concerns deepen for the future of Australian children's television](#)', *The Conversation*, 1 October.

ⁱⁱⁱ Burke, L, McIntyre, J, Balanzategui, J and Baker, D 2022, '[Parents' Perspectives on Australian Children's Television in the Streaming Era](#)'.

^{iv} Williams, C 2019 '[Dog days for Australian kids' television](#).' *Crikey*, 19 February.

^v Quinn, K 2022 '[Sixty countries, 110 licenses, 1000 products: How Bluey conquered the world](#)', *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 14 June.

^{vi} Flynn, S 2022, '[Dunny' and 'Brekky': How Bluey is changing the way American children speak](#)', *Independent*, 28 January.

^{vii} Burke, L, McIntyre, J, Balanzategui, J and Baker, D 2022, '[Parents' Perspectives on Australian Children's Television in the Streaming Era](#)'.

^{viii} Keslassy, E 2022 '[Netflix Meets 30% European Content Quota in Almost All Markets on Continent](#)', *Variety*, 7 June.

^{ix} Cabrera Blázquez FJ, Cappello M, Talavera Milla J, Valais S 2022 '[Investing in European works: the obligations on VOD providers](#)', IRIS Plus, European Audiovisual Observatory, Strasbourg, May 2022

^x [About, Little J and Big Cuz](#).

^{xi} ACER 2021, '[Little J & Big Cuz season three premieres Friday](#)', 14 December.

^{xii} O'Meara, D, Balanzategui, J and McIntyre, J 2022, '[The loss of Neighbours is a loss of career pathways for Australia's emerging screen professionals](#)', *The Conversation*, 26 July.

^{xiii} Maloney, N and Burne, P 2021, '[So Much Drama, So Little Time: Writers' Rooms in Australian Television Drama Production](#)', In: Batty, C., Taylor, S. (eds) *Script Development*

^{xiv} Keast, J 2021, '[SPA survey suggest production boom is leading to skills shortages](#)', *IF*, 26 April.