

# **What really happened to Australian Children's Television?**

## **And Where to from here?**

### **A submission to the Australian and Children's Screen Content Review**

**July 2017**

by

**Dr. Patricia Edgar** AM, BA, B Ed (Melbourne University), MA (Stanford University), PhD (La Trobe University), Hon. D.Litt (University of WA)

**Patricia Edgar** was Chair of the Australian Broadcasting Control Board's Advisory Committee on Program Standards (1975-6) and a Member of the Australian Broadcasting Control Board (1975-6). In those roles she was the architect of the C classification. She was Chair of the Australian Broadcasting Tribunal's Children's Program Committee 1978-84 and oversaw the implementation of the Children's Television Standards. She was the founding director of the Australian Children's Television Foundation 1982-2002. In that role she produced over 174 hours of television drama which won more than 100 national and international awards and sold into more than 100 countries. She was Deputy Chair of the Film Finance Corporation 1988-1996, Founder of the World Summit Movement (1995) and is Chair of the World Summit on Media for Children Foundation (1999 - ).

The next World Summit will be held in Manchester, hosted by the BBC and the City of Manchester, on 5-7 December, 2017. Its focus will be on the future of media industries, their relationship with education and development, and a vision for children, media and education centred around digital technology.

## **Introduction**

On May 6, 2017, the Minister for Communications, Mitch Fifield announced 'a broad ranging and comprehensive review of Australian and children's content' within a broader media reform package aimed at assisting free-to-air networks to remain viable in the highly competitive digital era. At the same time, the House Standing Committee on Communications and the Arts is inquiring into the 'factors contributing to the growth and sustainability of the Australian film and television industry'.

**This paper addresses the area of Australian children's television content, its history, its successes and failures and proposes a new approach to fostering children's programming in the digital era. It focuses on the type of content we should be producing for children given their needs and interests. It supports a system that will encourage them to access and contribute to content when they wish and how they wish. It builds on children's acute interest in learning from screen content. It does not address adult content which requires a quite different policy approach.**

### **This submission concludes:**

- All governments have agreed television is important for the cultural and educational development of children.
- Since the 1970's Television Networks have been regulated and programs subsidized to that end.
- That system is no longer working so commercial quotas should be abolished and the networks should pay an annual levy to support a new independent service.
- The ABC2 is the appropriate host for programs for children in their early years – aged 2-9. ABCME should be closed down and available revenue consolidated to serve the younger age group with new programs.
- For older children - 9-15 year olds - who are engaged with new technology, a new service should be established and run independently.
- the government should establish a new framework for children's media and education as the two are inextricably linked.
- A committee should be appointed to shape and cost the system, decide the offerings and how it would be managed.

**It is time for a new beginning in the interests of children, their development and education, and for a digital production industry which should comprise innovative thinkers who would design the content for a new destination for children. The central issue governing children's media should not be to find ways to support an existing industry. There is a need for a complete re-think, just as there was when the C classification and quotas were first introduced. This is a different time with very different challenges. A solution will not be found by tinkering with quotas.**

## **Recommendations**

- 1. Commercial broadcasting children's television quotas should be abolished.**
- 2. ABCME should be closed down and resources consolidated to develop ABC2 as the destination for children aged 2-9 years. This new service would include scheduled programs with on-line games and on-demand viewing.**
- 3. The ABC should develop new program content for pre-school children and the early schooling years to help bridge the educational disadvantage for so many in this age group and make a powerful contribution to the formal and informal education of Australian children. The best creative brains in the world of media and technology should be recruited to design and produce quality products specifically aimed at reinforcing the learning and development goals of the Early Learning Development Framework (ELDF).**
- 4. The 9-16 age group should be catered for by a new multi-platform service appropriate to their needs and interests.**
- 5. A committee should be appointed to shape and cost the system, decide the offerings, how it would be managed.**
- 6. The Government should allocate funds to establish this new service.**
- 7. Commercial networks should each pay an annual levy of \$10 million in return for relief from all children's quotas. By relinquishing their regulated quotas in exchange for an annual payment to a fund attached to the new children's service for 9-16 year olds, their responsibilities to the child audience, as 'holders of licences in public trust' would be fulfilled.**
- 8. Funding for a new service could be supplemented through a mixed economy model blending public and private support.**
- 9. The new multi-platform service should establish a production fund to finance diverse children's digital media programs and special projects. These projects, including stories, should have an educational and innovative purpose as well as being entertaining. They would become part of an on-demand library.**

- 10. Commissioned producers should be able to access *Screen Australia* funding and seek partners.**
- 11. The service will require visionaries who will need to be selected with care and trained to understand the developmental needs of children along with media expertise. These people should workshop program ideas for the new service.**
- 12. Communication and technology policies should be seen as integral to the nation's education policy. The importance of media in the education of children has not been well recognised by the education system because there has not been a whole-of-government perspective linking education policy and communication policy.**
- 13. Media Education should be expanded beyond a narrow focus to include the content and learning potential of all forms of digital media and their social impact.**
- 14. An online multi-platform service for children should include an interactive cyber-literacy destination developed in partnership with educators.**
- 15. Australia needs a new agency dedicated to furthering innovation in education through new practices and new technologies. Government should fund ACMA and other appropriate organisations for a concerted research effort to document the links between children's media use and their learning and development outcomes, in order to improve the effectiveness of the early learning and development initiatives.**

## **Section 1.**

### **Background to the regulation of Australian children's television**

The dilemmas facing both reviews of the Australian children's television content industry can only be understood by reviewing the history of the Children's Television Standards (CTS) and the decisions made along the way which have inadvertently undermined the viability of the original system. The quota system has not been working as it was intended for more than seventeen years, which was evident when the Australian Broadcasting Authority (ABA) released an evaluation of the C classification in March 2000. There are lessons that can be drawn from this history for any attempt to impose new quotas.<sup>1</sup>

It should be understood the regulation of children's programming has never been a straightforward issue. Governments have been reluctant to impose requirements on the commercial broadcasters and the broadcasters have resisted the regulation of children's television with every tactic in their arsenal. They have thwarted the objectives for children and the partnership between the regulator and the regulated has been stormy.

For the first 12 years of Australian television broadcasting, programs were monitored but there was little in the way of formal regulation. Australians took to television in the fifties so rapidly that the grand promises made when licenses were granted (about serving the Australian community with quality programming) were off the agenda, forgotten, as program managers travelled to the US and UK and cherry-picked the best of overseas programming, including drama they could obtain more cheaply than producing their own. Popular Australian content comprised studio-based variety shows such as *In Melbourne Tonight* and live studio-based programming for children such as *Adventure Island* and the *Magic Circle Club*. These programs did a creditable job and they were used as bait to sell television sets to families. But when the television set market was saturated and videotape was invented they disappeared from the screen, to be replaced by American sit-com repeats like *Father Knows Best*, *Mr Ed*, *My Three Sons*, *Leave it to Beaver*, *the Brady Bunch*, *The Partridge Family* and *I Dream of Genie*. These series were shown in the late afternoon which was regarded as children's time. Australian kids knew more about what it was supposed to be like growing up in the USA than they did about growing up in their own country.

A report tabled in 1963 by the Senate Select Committee on the Encouragement of Australian Productions for Television, dubbed *The Vincent Committee*, although not addressing children's

---

<sup>1</sup> 20 Years of C Children's television programs and regulation, 1979-1999, Sydney, March 2000

programming specifically, was highly critical of the services provided by the commercial television industry. But it attached even greater blame to the Australian Broadcasting Control Board (ABCB) 'for failing to adequately discharge its statutory obligations under the Act'.

By 1968 public concerns about children's programming led the ABCB to establish a series of committees to advise on matters related to children and television. The Senate established a number of relevant Standing Committees on children and television, first in 1963, and conducted hearings from 1971-75. The ABCB argued it did not have the powers to intervene under the broadcasting legislation but refused to test its powers in the courts.<sup>2</sup>

The ABCB's expressed intention was to '**encourage** constructive, entertaining and not overtly instructive programs'. Encouragement failed as the industry made a disinterested, poor response which is documented in the 1973 Report of the Children's Television Advisory Committee.<sup>3</sup>

By 1975 children's television programs consisted of a school-age quota introduced in 1971 which had begun at 4 hours and increased to 10 hours every 28 day period. These programs were predominantly dull, talking-head, studio-based, cheap programs which few children watched and the commercial industry did not promote.

### **Advisory Committee on Program Standards**

In 1975 there was a Labor government in Canberra. Dr Moss Cass was the Minister for Media and was expressing concerns about the ABCB's inaction on Australian content regulation and children's programs. The ABCB responded and invited me to chair a seven member advisory committee to review all program standards including children's programming. Shortly after this committee got underway two vacancies came up on the five-member ABCB. Dr Cass filled these positions, appointing Geoff Evans as a full time member and myself as a part time member. In our final report to the ABCB, the Advisory Committee on Program Standards, (the *Edgar Report*), laid out a blueprint for programming for children under 13 years of age.<sup>4</sup>

---

<sup>2</sup> Senate Standing Committee on Education and the Arts, *Children and Television*, Australian Government Publishing Service, Canberra, 1978.

<sup>3</sup> Australian Broadcasting Control Board, *Final Report of the Children's Television Advisory Committee*, 28 February 1973 – Appendix L in Twenty Fifth Annual Report of the A.B.C.B. June 1973

<sup>4</sup> *A Report submitted to the Australian Broadcasting Control Board by the Advisory committee on Program Standards*, February, 1976

In reaching its conclusions the Committee saw television as a dominant learning experience for children. We saw potential in television to make a significant contribution to children's intellectual development. The aim was not to support programs that would simply entertain and divert them from other activities, but programs that would enrich their life experience. The blueprint called for a C classification, a quota for pre-school and school-aged children of programs specifically designed for them, dedicated timeslots and the appointment of an Advisory Committee to classify programs as qualifying for C before they went to air to meet quality controls.

Malcolm Fraser won government in November 1975 and announced on winning the election his government would abolish what the industry viewed as a now troublesome ABCB, as soon as legislation could be drawn up, replacing it with an Australian Broadcasting Tribunal (ABT) with a chairman chosen by the industry. In these changed circumstances, the Chairman of the ABCB, Myles Wright, did not want to release the Program Standards Report. However, the two new board members insisted, and so the blueprint for C classification became public.

The industry was hostile to the *Edgar Report*, claiming they couldn't afford such programs for children and they didn't understand what a children's program was, Australian children couldn't act and wouldn't watch such programs - family drama such as Disney produced was the answer and that was beyond their means. They also claimed the high costs of the technology involved in converting television to color in 1976 would consume their revenue.

Historically the ABCB had not treated children's programming as a priority and by accepting school-quota programs over years with such low production values and with such lack of imagination, the ABCB had allowed a situation to develop where the television operators believed they should decide unilaterally what they broadcast and have the same freedom of operation as the press.<sup>5</sup>

Networks argued there was an expected cost and production standard for children's programs set by precedent. But public advocates such as Australian Children's Television Action Committee (ACTAC) and Australian Council for Children's Films and Television (ACCFT) resisted this argument. They understood the old 1975 school-quota programs bore little relationship to the original intention of the quota and they became very active in lobbying for quality children's programs. The inquiries conducted by the Senate Committee gave them a forum as did the inquiry into self-regulation for broadcasters?

---

<sup>5</sup> Senate Standing Committee report, *Ibid*, p. 9

## **The Self-Regulation Inquiry**

The ABCB was abolished in December 1976 by the Fraser Government and the Australian Broadcasting Tribunal (ABT) replaced the ABCB from January 1, 1977. The Government, however, did not strengthen the regulatory power of the ABT in the legislation so there was still ambiguity over the ABT's authority. Bruce Gyngell (a former Network 9 Chief Executive) was appointed to head the new regulatory body. His first task was to chair an inquiry into *Self Regulation for Broadcasters?*<sup>6</sup>

This inquiry received 539 submissions, the majority of which argued for quality children's programming and endorsed the blueprint for C classification spelt out in the *Edgar Report*.

Gyngell was a man who listened and he was impressed by the passion of the public advocates who appeared at the Self Regulation Inquiry - the parents, educators, individuals and groups involved with the welfare of children, and he was persuaded, much to the chagrin of the television industry, to back the plan for a C Classification.

The advocacy for quality children's production was a community initiative, not a campaign by a children's production industry, which did not exist at the time. The cultural context of television was an important factor in the argument. There was a strong belief in the potential of television to make a transformative social contribution as well as a concern about its negative effects. In 1977 Australia suffered from a 'cultural cringe'; our television was still dominated by imports from the USA and the UK which were relatively cheap to acquire but there was a growing and strong public view that it was time we produced our own stories – our own drama and comedy - with Australian landscapes and actors with Australian accents. For children, the issue was perceived as a need for programs of quality.

## **The Children's Program Committee (CPC) and the Children's Television Program Standards (CTS)**

In July 1977, *The Self Regulation for Broadcasters?* report endorsed the blueprint for C classified programs which had been outlined in the *Edgar Report* and the ABT recommended the establishment of a seven-member advisory committee, a *Children's Program Committee* (CPC) to develop detailed regulations and classify programs to fit the quotas specifically designed for children. The Committee was to include 4 public members and 3 industry members. The Senate Standing Committee Report (1978) was skeptical the membership

---

<sup>6</sup> Australian Broadcasting Tribunal, *Self Regulation for Broadcasters? A report on the public inquiry into the concept of self-regulation for Australian broadcasters*, July 1977.

proposed would be able to work together constructively but supported the idea of a moratorium between 4.0 -5.0 pm where only children's programs should be screened.

The new requirements came into effect on 1 July 1979. Bruce Gyngell invited me to join the CPC and I was elected to the chair, a position I held for five years. During that time Australia embarked on an experiment in regulation unlike anything that had been tried anywhere else in the world. It is important to note we aimed to build an entirely new system to meet the needs the two public enquiries had revealed as important to the development of children – to parents, teachers and those working in a variety of fields with children.

The major Australian networks' response was predictable. They continued to claim they did not have the resources for such programming. There was fierce competition between the three networks and they claimed the advertising pie was not big enough to make the programs called for. The CPC argued programs did not need to be paid for by revenue generated from the hour they were shown; the networks were expected to offer a comprehensive service. But The Federation of Commercial Television Stations (FACTS) continued to assert they did not know what a children's program looked like, that kids could not act and (given the experience of the school-age quota) kids would not watch such programs.

Color television proved to be a commercial bonanza, but despite that, as the Senate Committee had predicted, the CPC became unworkable as an intense public fight between FACTS, the CPC and the ABT ensued. The networks attempted to subvert the operation of the CPC by boycotting meetings and withdrawing their representative, David Morgan. But importantly, and a major reason the CPC did succeed, was the support that came from the regional television operators.

When FACTS withdrew membership from the CPC, two regional operators - John Stapp from Ballarat and Rex Heading from Adelaide - insisted the major networks did not speak for them. They stayed on the CPC, supporting the process throughout. These men were heroes for they were persecuted for their support of the committee and the regulations. There was more collateral damage through this struggle which contributed to a fall-out between long time friends Bruce Gyngell and Kerry Packer. Gyngell lost his position as Chairman of the ABT and David Jones, a lawyer, was appointed to replace him. Jones took a much more cautious approach to the task.

In 1979 as I began my tenure as chair of the CPC, I undertook a study of children's responses (8-15) to children's television programs from the UK, USA and Canada that had not been seen in Australia before. The study, called *The Unknown Audience*, documented the fact that

drama programs were more popular with this age group than any other form of program. Comedies were also popular, and the least favoured programs were magazine formats.<sup>7</sup>

This research was influential in my approach to children's programs from the outset. Although the guidelines, defining the types of programs the CPC were calling for included drama programs in the broad quota mix, the new programs submitted for C were studio-based game shows and low cost repeats of programs more than a decade old. (591 episodes of *Lassie* was one example) No original Australian drama was forthcoming.

**Stories are essential for a child's development. They give children a shared purpose, a roadmap for their lives and teach them about their feelings, their tribe, their culture and their place in the world. A cohesive national culture and identity would not be possible without shared cultural experiences which film and television programs enable. When done well, television programs can stimulate a child's imagination and open up the infinite opportunities that life presents. Like good books, good television programs can extend children's understanding of their world. Stories are particularly effective in helping children develop emotionally. That is why Australian and local programming is important for children. In 1980 television was the medium best suited to delivering these experiences to children.**

I believed we therefore needed a specific drama quota, and the CPC supported this view. It took four years and a somewhat brutal public fight with the networks to achieve the drama quota. The ABT itself was not enthusiastic and during the Fraser years the CPC struggled to be heard. The Committee was given little administrative support but was determined to do the task it had been given. At one point John Stapp, Rex Heading and I met with David Jones on a weekend in Melbourne in an attempt to resolve tensions between the CPC and the ABT and progress the implementation of the Children's Television Standards (CTS) and drama quota.

Eventually on March 27, 1984, after a change of government (this time returning Labor and Bob Hawke to power, March 1983) the Jones ABT came round and made a determination specifying the new CTS which would include a drama quota of 8 hours of first-release programming to be screened on each network each year.

Fifteen commercial television licensees challenged the validity of the law, in particular the ABT's power to classify programs before broadcast. The Federal Court dismissed the FACTS' challenge but the industry pursued its argument in the High Court which held the ABT's

---

<sup>7</sup> Patricia Edgar and Ursula Callus, *The Unknown Audience, A study of Children's responses to television programs*, Centre for the Study of Educational Communication and Media, La Trobe University, May 1979.

Standards were invalid. The industry won, confirming the weakness in the Act regarding the ABT's authority. To counter this, Labor's Communication Minister, Michael Duffy, introduced an Amendment Bill strengthening the Broadcasting Television Act and affirming the ABT's powers. Finally the networks then had no choice but to comply or risk losing their license. But there is no question the CTS and the drama quota remained a running sore with the networks.

### **The Drama Quota**

My first stormy year as chair of the CPC convinced me that regulation by itself would never achieve the type of programming we were aiming to have produced through the CTS. Various proposals had been made since 1972 for the subsidy of children's drama through an independent production entity of some kind. The *Edgar Report* recommended subsidy through the Australian Film Commission (AFC) and state film authorities. In 1978 the Senate Standing Committee on Education and the Arts recommended that the government establish an independent children's television production unit funded by receipts from commercial broadcaster's licence fees which would produce all required children's programs. It was not a practical proposal or one likely to gain support. I began to argue publicly for the establishment of a production house that could make exemplary programs to serve as examples of shows the networks denied could be made. The Hon. Norman Lacy, Minister for the Arts and Education in Victoria read a lecture I had given and contacted me. He wanted to take up the idea.<sup>8</sup>

We worked together arguing the case to other State Ministers and the Federal Government, for an Australian Children's Television Foundation (ACTF) to be established. Lacy took the proposal to the Australian Educational Council (AEC) and the Arts ministers and in March 1982 the ACTF became a reality. Three weeks later Norman Lacy lost his seat in the Victorian Parliament and I became the founding Director of the ACTF. The AEC's interest waned but I found a new ally in Dame Beryl Beaurepaire who agreed to be a member of the Board of the ACTF. As a doyenne of the Liberal Party she helped persuade the Prime Minister Malcolm Fraser to support the new organization for a three year period with a \$500,000 grant each year. John Stapp and Rex Heading and I met with Malcolm Fraser to consolidate the case and it helped that John Stapp ran the regional television business in Fraser's electorate.

---

<sup>8</sup> The Second Annual John Grierson Lecture, *Children's Television, The Past, the Present and the Future*, State Film Centre, Melbourne, November 15, 1979.

Additional funds were to be sought from the States and Territories through the AEC, but the results were mixed. It is a mistaken assumption that the AEC formally established the ACTF. Norman Lacy was the driver. Once he lost his seat in Victoria, AEC interest flagged. NSW lost interest when it was decided to base the ACTF in Victoria and it was a demanding task to maintain annual funding from the States. The Commonwealth became the major financial support for the ACTF, due to the connection between Dame Beryl and Malcolm Fraser, and that remains the case today.

### **What is children's drama?**

Many advocates who supported the concept of children's programs were clearer about what they did not want than what they wanted. Their cause was to protect children from violence, sex and stereotypes. They wanted pro-social programs with characters who were positive role models. The Senate Standing Committee (1978) endorsed these arguments. During the seventies, when the debate about children's programming was at its peak, Australia's censorship rules were very stringent and indeed galling to filmmakers working in our emerging film industry. Many advocates and parents feared television's power to influence children adversely. Research including my PhD helped clarify the fact that their concerns were largely unjustified.<sup>9</sup>

Briefing writers, to emphasize pro-social lessons, was not going to lead to programs of interest to children.

There were few models to go by. In the post World War Two years, simple adventure stories became popular and Censorship Boards accepted such fare. *Lassie Come Home* was one example that spun off 7 feature films and 591 episodes of a series called *Lassie* made from 1954-73. It seemed you couldn't go wrong with animals so eighty-eight episodes of *Flipper* were produced from 1964-67 and ninety one episodes of *Skippy* from 1966-77 (by the Australian and well-known international actor John McCallum). Roger Mirams, a pioneering New Zealand film-maker produced a series of children's adventure series including, *The Terrific Adventures of the Terrible Ten* (1959), *The Magic Boomerang* (1965) and *Funny Things Happen Down Under* (1965). Then re-runs of sit-coms took over the schedules.<sup>10</sup>

---

<sup>9</sup> Patricia Edgar, PhD Thesis, *Self esteem and attitudes to film and television programmes in a sample of junior high school students*, La Trobe University, 1974

<sup>10</sup> A decade later Mirams returned to the children's genre to produce *Secret Valley* (1980) and *Professor Poopsnagle's Steam Zeppelin* for the C quota for the Network 9.

I believed we needed to go beyond simple family and animal adventures, to tell stories to children about their lives that reflected their social, cultural and emotional reality. My first task as Director of the ACTF was to develop an anthology series, *Winners*, which would showcase diversity in children's drama and address contemporary issues children were experiencing. The series included contemporary, historical, fantasy, comedy, science-fiction and social-realism genres. They had male and female protagonists and children of different ages as actors, and in accord with the educational objectives for C programs, accompanying books and learning materials. All ACTF programs were designed to entertain but also with an educational purpose at their core. The accompanying books were adapted from original scripts not the other way around. Other producers entered the industry to develop their program ideas to fulfill the 24 hours of drama quota programs across three networks each year plus any production the ABC might undertake.

The ACTF called on the top creative people in the film industry. Australian writers, directors, producers to work on this series. And the programs proved to be a success. This was a huge step forward because *Winners* proved children would watch programs made for them, Australian children could act and there was an international market as well as a domestic market for Australian children's programs. Unexpectedly, ACTF programs won a raft of awards overseas and international broadcasters began to look at Australia with new interest. *Captain Johnno*, a program in the second ACTF anthology series *Touch the Sun* (1988) won an International Emmy, only the second Emmy ever to be won by an Australian production.

Crawford Productions, The South Australia Film Corporation, Film Australia, Entertainment Media, L.J. Productions, White Vaughton Prods Pty Ltd., R. Bence Productions, Samson Productions, Roger Mirams, Paul Barron and other established Australian drama producers, as well as new film makers, began to produce children's programs and a new industry emerged which proved children did want to see their own stories and Australian producers could match the best drama programs created overseas.

### **The Film Finance Corporation and Co-productions**

Production finance for Australian drama, documentary and children's drama productions came via Division 10BA of the Income Tax Assessment Act as tax concessions, which Paul Keating as Treasurer ultimately decided led to abuse of the system by film makers more concerned with tax evasion than the quality of Australian cultural products. As well, the cost to government under this system was unpredictable. Thus in May 1988 the government set up the Film Finance Corporation (FFC) and I was appointed Deputy Chair. At the time, Keating urged the government to take account of the impact on children's television of changes to the Tax Act so when there was a suggestion by the Chairman, Kim Williams, that

children's productions should receive only 10% of FFC funds, there was FFC Board agreement no such limit should be set.

By 1988 the production industry was producing exemplary award-winning children's programs that were selling around the world and FACTS had gone quiet about the CTS and drama quota. The ACTF had been producing anthology series such as *Winners*, *Touch the Sun*, and *Kaboodle*. As Director I saw our purpose in the regulatory and subsidy mix as that of innovator. It was not our role just to make more programs but to create new formats, break new ground in program style and bring in new investment partners.

I aimed to produce a program that spoke to the unique larrikin Australian spirit, our humour, our vernacular, our sense of fun, the culture our children were growing up in. I searched for people and ideas and the team I put together, of Esben Storm and Paul Jennings, came up with *Round the Twist*. That program, although idiosyncratically Australian, became, and remains, a hit with children from all over the world – from Zimbabwe to Brazil, Japan to France. *Round the Twist* became the most commercially successful children's program the FFC financed, the most acclaimed and is still cited as a seminal program favored by almost all young Aussies.

The format was a thirteen half-hour mini-series. Each episode told a story but had strands of an overall story which came together in the final episode. This format was another breakthrough in the development of the Australian children's drama industry and required negotiation with the Department of the Arts in Canberra. In drawing up the program definitions that would qualify for FFC funding, no one had given thought to children's programs. It was important that long running serials like *Home and Away* or *Neighbours* would not qualify for financing as they would eat up resources, so a series, to qualify, had to have a beginning, middle and an end. The thirteen half hour mini-series was a new format which suited children's production and became the hallmark of future Australian series which led to Australia becoming an international leader in the field of children's drama production.

The ingredients that would make for a successful production industry were now in place and were the envy of children's producers around the world. We had a regulatory structure through the CTS and a drama quota, subsidy through the FFC and state film bodies, an ACTF that demonstrated quality in children's programs and had drawn the attention of world broadcasters by winning awards. An industry concerned with quality had been created despite network opposition and Australian children were the beneficiaries.

When the C classification and the CTS were introduced, the quality, diversity and quantity of children's television on commercial television increased. This period - the Hawke/Keating years - was the peak for the production of quality Australian children's drama.<sup>11</sup>

Once Paul Keating became Prime Minister in December 1991 he aimed to further boost Australian culture through his *Distinctly Australian* initiative, which involved further funding for the film and television production industry, with the ACTF being given an additional \$750,000 to support co-productions with the independent industry. Keating's concerns were cultural but he wanted the industry to operate more efficiently. He referred to the Arts as creative industries.

Financing television production is a complex business. If a program is purchased from a broadcaster's acquisition budget after a production is complete, the payment you receive can be quite small. If a program is purchased as a pre-production, more money is paid as it is assumed with a pre-production that the broadcaster has much more control over the content of the program. The difference to a budget is significant. The BBC paid fifteen thousand pounds per episode for the first series of *Round the Twist* as an acquisition, but put \$2,000,000 into *The Genie from Down Under* (a satire about the republic debate), as a thirteen episode co-production—half the budget. The challenge a co-production arrangement posed for Australian producers was to satisfy the joint-venture partner's legal requirements for genuine creative input, without compromising the central objectives of Australian content policy. The Department of the Arts in Canberra was required to issue a qualifying certificate to authenticate the Australian components of a production and satisfy the FFC's rules required for overseas investment in a project to qualify for funding. But to qualify, an idea had to originate in Australia and the story had to involve Australians in an Australian landscape. It was challenging to come up with concepts that would qualify and retain the integrity of Australian financing, but it could be done.

In the case of *The Genie from Down Under*, which was released in 1998, the entire series was shot in Australia although half the story was set in the United Kingdom and half in Australia; one of the lead cast members and one of the three directors involved were British. The FFC had not seen such a level of finance - half the budget - from an overseas co-production partner before. The program successfully met the BBC requirements for a UK production and qualified as an Australian production.

On release of *The Genie From Down Under*, the television critic, Debi Enker, analysed the elements of the series, concluding: 'the ACTF has made an art form out of producing high-spirited and imaginative family entertainments. And it has also forged a model for the

---

<sup>11</sup> 20 Years of C Children's television programs and regulation, 1979-1999, Sydney, March 2000

independent Australian production company operating successfully, and with integrity, in the international marketplace, creating work that has universal appeal without fatally compromising its local identity.’<sup>12</sup>

The ACTF 26-part animation series *L’il Elvis Jones and the Truckstoppers* demonstrated animation did not need to lose its national identity either. The series was a co-production with France Animation and a German company Ravensburger, which together made a substantial investment in an \$11.5 million budget - almost half the budget. The French partner sent out an experienced designer and script consultant to work in Australia and the production became a training course for ninety Australian animators and artists. But the program’s flavor was clearly Australian, featuring our iconic outback landscape colours and characters. When released, critic Dennis Prior wrote: ‘The most remarkable quality in the series is the way international rock and personal nostalgia have now Australianised. The voices are Australian, and belong to some of our most enterprising actors. Wonderful Australian details unobtrusively creep in. It is morning and you can hear the burble of the magpies. The Paragon Café is run by a couple of Greeks. An old hippie wears a peace symbol on his belt buckle. A man wearing a footy jumper is always seen carrying a keg. Bowling ladies arrive to hear Li’l Elvis sing. This is a landmark in Australian television, another triumph for the Children’s Television Foundation. It is funny, thoughtful and ingenious.’<sup>13</sup>

These programs demonstrated Australian rules and values did not need to be compromised through international co-productions. Nevertheless, some producers became very adept at manipulating the system, putting their names to foreign productions so that overseas companies could access the generous Australian subsidy from the FFC. The Australian producers who went along with this practice were effectively production managers for overseas interests who controlled the scripting and production process, threatening to withhold funding if they didn’t get their way. This was not an uncommon practice. The resulting projects undermined the objectives of the system and the quality of quota programs. The aims of cultural integrity and financial efficiency came into conflict, with a negative effect on the quality of children’s quota programs.

With the best of intentions, the ABA increased the drama quota from 8 hours to 12 hours a year in 1990 and to 16 hours a year in 1991. The system could cope with this level of production retaining diversity in drama formats. There were tele-movies as well as short run

---

<sup>12</sup> Debi Enker, *Sunday Age*, View Magazine, 22 June, 1996

<sup>13</sup> Dennis Prior, *Age*, 28 February, 1998

series to fill the quota and 'global' animation had not taken over, but in 1996 when the drama quota was increased to 32 hours per network things began to unravel.

### **Increase in the Drama Quota**

In a blow to the Australian commercial networks, the acting chairman of the ABA, Peter Webb, made the unexpected announcement at the first World Summit on Media for Children in Melbourne in 1995 that over the next three years the amount of children's television drama that networks must broadcast would be doubled from sixteen to thirty-two hours per annum, with eight hours of repeat drama required. The quota would increase in the following years: to twenty-four hours of first release children's drama in 1996, twenty-eight hours in 1997 and thirty-two in 1998. This was the final stage of the ABA's long-running review of Australian content.<sup>14</sup>

Webb was being far-sighted, saying the proposed changes would allow the local production industry more scope to achieve the critical mass of talent necessary to be a player in new media development and to play its part in challenging Australian children. The ABA's review had confirmed that 'Australian parents want their children to have access to quality programming. They understand the need for their children to be given a window into Australia and its Aboriginal origins, its cultural diversity and mores, its natural features and its place in the world'.<sup>15</sup>

But the substantial increase in quota, in time, actually undermined the achievements that had been made. Several significant unanticipated consequences followed. Longer-running series increased, program diversity declined, the number of producers working in the industry declined, animations soared and merchandising flourished. The values on which the children's drama quota had been based – giving a window into children's lives from their perspective – were undermined. For the first time producers realized there was money to be made out of the children's market. The tail began to wag the dog.

The claim that producers were 'creating quality programs' in the best interests of children remained the industry mantra, but the evidence shows children came to be seen, not as individuals in an audience who were there to be informed and entertained, but as a market.

The main problems that emerged were as follows:

---

<sup>14</sup> Patricia Edgar, *Bloodbath: A Memoir of Australian Television*, MUP, 2006, p. 295

<sup>15</sup> *Media Australia Magazine*, 17 March 1995

1. Animation was only six per cent of quota in 1984-89 but filled 37 per cent in 1996-1999. By 2006-7 animation had overtaken live action in hours of children's quota. This was prior to the introduction of the producer offset, which exacerbated the trend further, and by 2016 animated series dominated the commercial quota.<sup>16</sup>

Animations are cheaper to produce and distribute worldwide. They cost less to acquire, as they are easier to dub, are rarely culturally specific and lend themselves to long-running formats, so they have steadily driven out live action drama. Yet they qualify as drama quota. When broadcasters were looking to fill 32 hours of quota, long-running animations provided an easy solution. Producers had also discovered in the '90s that characters based on animations could turn children into a consumption market of global proportions, sometimes exploiting them at the expense of their health, education and development. Children's programming, that had been seen as a cost burden began to emerge as a significant revenue producer.

This was initially apparent at the pre-school level. The ABC saw the potential to earn revenue and spun off *Bananas in Pyjamas* from *Play School* with a suite of merchandise for this purpose. The show, although puppets not animation, was studio-based, cheap to produce, long-running, fully owned by the ABC, so they could produce additional episodes each year and sell to the burgeoning overseas cable markets. The response to this approach, which is contrary to the ABC Charter, is discussed below.

2. The 26 part live-action series format replaced the 13 part series and one-off tele-movies that had been run on the commercial networks. The more episodes there were in a series, invariably the weaker the scripts. Ninety per cent of the drama broadcast in 1996-98 was of the longer-running series format. So quota was achieved more easily but quality suffered. The experienced writers simply shuffled script plots. A story might be about jealousy, bullying, peer-pressure, loneliness, boyfriends, step parents, etc and the same themes would be set in the director's chosen setting. The protagonists could be surfers, horse-riders, ball players, lost on a distant planet, it did not matter, the plots were derivative and stereotyped. Producers came up with a simple concept and writers churned out formulaic episodes.

In November, 2008, television critic Melinda Houston wrote, 'It's the curse of the C classification. You know what they say about good intentions and the road to hell?... these days what we seem to be getting is a rash of programming that is often well

---

<sup>16</sup> Australian Children's Television Foundation, 2017, *Inquiry into the Australian film and television industry*, House Standing Committee on Communications and the Arts, pp. 8-9

intentioned but doesn't really work. Two long running series - *H2O: Just Add Water* and *Blue Water High* – are clearly trying to do the right thing... But they are often dull, and way too preachy... Too much C programming feels flat and worthy, created by a committee to tick all the boxes... failing as entertainment.' <sup>17</sup>

3. Most importantly, the doubling of the quota provoked a significant financial problem for the FFC. As a member of the Board I knew the FFC was stretched to its limit and, without additional funds, would not be able to finance these new children's quota requirements. Funding was becoming more and more competitive, with new producers attempting to enter what they saw as a guaranteed opportunity. Inevitably some of these people would be denied funds for their programs and with some of them willing and desperate to do a deal at any price, they became 'the meat in the sandwich' between network buyers and the FFC.

Between 1988-94 the FFC funded thirty-six children's drama productions, representing 312 hours of television. In 1994 they had invested twenty million dollars, twenty three per cent of the FFC's funding, within a total children's production budget of nearly thirty million dollars. But, over a five-year period, the FFC's investment allocation had been diminished by 'efficiency cuts' imposed from Canberra and the organisation began to reduce its allocation to children's programs.

In 1994, the FFC agreed to allow pre-sales of a series to **both** a commercial network and the ABC. A network would acquire one run only to meet its quota requirements, and the ABC could buy subsequent runs more cheaply since the program had already been screened. The FFC accepted these joint presales for \$55,000 per episode. By 1998 investment in children's programs had dropped to \$9.3 million - 12.9 per cent of FFC funds.

The ABA, in an attempt to secure a minimum license fee, on 1 March 1999, named \$45 000 per episode as being the necessary expenditure on a program to obtain a C drama classification. This meant the commercial industry could wedge the producer by defining the minimum as the maximum. Networks would not pay the FFC's minimum fee of \$55,000 - even with two presales across the commercial and public broadcasters - when the ABA would accept \$10,000 less for a qualifying C program. These different pre-sale positions, taken by the funding and the regulatory bodies, made it a confusing and anguishing environment for producers to do business. In 1999–2000 only three producers secured funding for children's programs from the FFC: the ACTF, Jonathan M Shiff Productions and Ewan Burnett's, Burberry Productions. Burnett's project was with the ABC for twenty-six episodes. The ABC's investment in children's drama had declined over the same five-year

---

<sup>17</sup> Melinda Houston, 'Tween TV', *Age Green Guide*, November 9, 2008

period from 32.5 hours to 13 hours and all of those hours in 1999 were provided by one producer, Burnett. A study by the ABA revealed the extent of the decline in children's television production and in the number of producers successfully operating. Many of the producers who had entered the field when the quota was introduced had dropped out.<sup>18</sup>

The networks used this conflict to force down the quality of children's programming by buying any program on offer at the lowest possible price to fulfill their quota requirements. There was pressure on the FFC to approve cheap programming and pressure on the ABA to classify such programs C but they were unlikely to be saleable on the international market and inevitably fell short on quality expectations.

No matter which way the financial pie was cut, the real problem was that the hours of quota required did not match the available funding. The ABA required the three networks to broadcast quota of ninety-six hours' first-release children's drama each year. The ABC did claim it would match a network's output (although there was no requirement to do so). In total there were 128 hours of potential production each year for which Australian children's producers could compete. To produce that volume of television, at that time, at a quality that would sell on the international market, would cost around \$80 million. Between them the networks paid \$14 million for their drama quota programs. **The FFC had around \$12 to \$15 million to invest in children's programs each year, which was being eroded by the demands of feature films and adult television, so there was a \$50 million shortfall that had to be found from the marketplace if quality was to be maintained. This was not going to happen.**

**The data showed in terms of quality: C drama programs had won thirty-eight International awards and ninety-seven Australian awards for excellence; however, there had been a decline in the number of international awards since 1996. In terms of scheduling: from 1984 to 1989, 46 per cent of C-classified Australian drama programs were scheduled during the early evening time slots. The number declined after 1990. From 1996 to 1998 there were no evening broadcasts of C classified Australian drama in the market studied. With independent production, the recent trend to longer drama series had reduced the number of independent producers making C Australian drama, decreasing diversity and lowering quality. As well the cultural relevance of some of the programs, financed principally by foreign interests, had become more of a concern.**

### **Summary : Section 1**

---

<sup>18</sup> 20 Years of C. Op. cit.

The ABA overview of twenty years of C classification demonstrated that, after a courageous beginning and a record demonstrating significant improvement in children's programming as the result of regulation and subsidy, the hard-won system was failing, and children were once again missing out on the programs that had made a significant difference to their Australian cultural experience.

- As soon as the drama quota was introduced FACTS played hard ball. The city network stations never gave up their attack on the quota requirement, although several regional stations complied constructively. Color proved to be a bonanza for the television industry as audience numbers soared, but that did not prevent the industry from challenging in the courts the new children's standards and quotas set by the ABT and the ABA. Although the networks lost that battle, when the Hawke government introduced changes to the Broadcasting Act to close loopholes, they continued to take the path of least resistance, doing the minimum required.
- Australia could sustain a children's production industry only with subsidy, and without quotas the networks would not produce such programming. They complied only to meet their condition of license. It was for the government of the day to decide through its funding policies and through the ABA how important children's television was to the Australian community and the level of funds they were prepared to allocate.
- Expanding the drama quota inadvertently undermined the regulatory objectives. Accepting animation to qualify as quota was a mistake; the quota should have been for live action drama and at a more modest level. Volume was less important than quality. Such programs for children are infinitely repeatable and the objective should be to stockpile a library which can be played each year for upcoming generations. There is no value in programming for children that is made to simply fill their time.
- The FFC accepting two pre-sales between a commercial network and the ABC was a mistake which inevitably had the effect of lowering the total budget that could be raised. The discrepancy between the FFC and the ABA's minimum qualifying acceptable price led to confusion and further lowered achievable budgets.
- The attitudes of the producers themselves, who did compromising deals with overseas buyers, lowered the integrity and quality of programs.

Ironically Screen Australia's *Convergence Report* in 2011 pointed out Australian children didn't want to watch the Australian programs being made for them then, they preferred to watch 35 year old American sit-coms such as *I Love Lucy*, *Bewitched*, *I Dream of Jeannie*, *Happy days* and *Mork and Mindy*. We had come full circle.

The free-to-air networks have failed to adapt to technological change and they have no interest in developing relevant programs for the young, who are the greatest consumers of new media and the discriminating audience of the future.

## **Section 2: The Development of New Technology**

### **Creative Nation: 1994**

By 1994 Prime Minister Keating had become convinced of the need to transform information technology in Australia and bring the arts, including the ABC and SBS, into the mainstream of industry and commercial life. He wanted an industry and cultural policy that was nation-building, and in October 1994, he announced *Creative Nation*, a \$260-million program. Under the program \$60 million was pledged for a Television Production Fund to be based in Melbourne; a further \$10 million for the SBS to make Australian programs, and \$84 million to seed an Australian multimedia content industry.

The ACTF received \$250 000 to initiate multimedia content—a small amount but sufficient to prompt a rethink in direction for a small organization. We responded by developing an experimental program called *Kahootz*, a multi-media construction ‘tool-set’ which enabled children to create complex environments that included animation and sound. Children could link scenes to create narratives, construct inventions, build animation sequences and develop games and puzzles. It was a digital sandpit for kids to make their own content, designed for use across a range of key learning areas throughout the curriculum. The ACTF partnered with Telstra and Hewlett Packard to make a product that was groundbreaking, globally, in its concept at that time. (*YouTube* and *FaceBook* had yet to be born) The same year the ABA announced a review of the Children’s Television Standards.

### **First World Summit on Television for Children, 1995**

It was clear a rethink was needed for children’s media production and the regulatory structures supporting the industry. To that end the ACTF hosted the first World Summit on Media for Children in Melbourne to discuss the rapidly changing media environment. Six hundred and thirty seven delegates from 71 countries attended in March 1995. At the Summit the Acting Chairman of the ABT, Peter Webb, announced the ABT’s proposed increases to the children’s drama quota which he believed would support the development of new media industries. The ABA’s CTS review following *Creative Nation* had confirmed - as has every such survey - ‘Australian parents want their children to have access to quality programming’.<sup>19</sup>

It was believed new technologies would produce fundamental transformations in patterns of thought, in social interactions and in the relationships between social groups and

---

<sup>19</sup> Patricia Edgar, *Bloodbath, A memoir of Australian Television*, op cit, p. 296

between nations. Chris Vonwiller, director of interactive multimedia services at Telstra (which sponsored the Summit) predicted accurately: 'Kids will take the technologies of the communications revolution for granted. They will use them with unselfconscious ease, and with a level of skill that derives from early and prolonged exposure to what is to us at best a second and laboriously acquired language. They will also take for granted a richer communications world'.<sup>20</sup>

**It was evident then, in 1995, the children's television industry needed to lift its game if it was to survive and strengthen. Innovation and redefinition of purpose were imperatives for children's production to continue to succeed as it had been doing domestically and internationally. The argument for government support of the industry remained cultural, not economic. Although Paul Keating had changed the ground rules to make the industry competitive, its objectives were cultural. However the producers, the networks and the ABC did not heed the warnings to seize the opportunities new technology presented. They continued with business as usual, and therein lie the seeds of the 'crisis' today and the need for a review of the structure of the broadcast industry and content quotas in 2017.**

### **Prime Minister Howard, 1996**

The ACTF's best programs had been a product of the political times, of an era before globalism and aggressive competition policy, when the Commonwealth and state governments were ideologically and economically more comfortable with positive intervention to invest in, develop and protect Australian culture.

After Australia elected a Liberal Government and John Howard became Prime Minister (March 11, 1996) State and public sector reform became driven by a new conservative agenda of economic rationalisation. Picking up on this change, television producers co-opted the rhetoric of free-market ideology and competition policy to argue that the television industry's support mechanisms were there to support independent production. Individuals who came through the industry - actors, directors and technical crew - were making their mark internationally, although children's productions remained outside this mainstream.

**The arguments for supporting children's programs had not been about the industry. Under previous governments since the introduction of the CTS, children were to be the beneficiaries; any industry benefit was a by-product.** But once the focus of the argument shifted, its integrity was undermined, for the logical conclusion of economic rationalism should mean the removal of all protection policy for cultural production. Independent producers wanted to keep subsidies, keep regulation and quotas, yet stop what they saw as competition from a government-subsidized body, the ACTF. They claimed the ACTF had

---

<sup>20</sup> Ibid, p. 297

completed its job in 'kick-starting' the industry and should no longer compete with independent producers for production funding.<sup>21</sup>

**Across the next decade business was profitable for a few producers who knew how to tap into the existing structures and effectively mass produce children's drama programs. But, as discussed above, the quality of the programs produced and their diversity declined.**

## The ABC

The ABC's Charter requires the ABC to treat 'its audience as citizens, not consumers', and 'provide innovative and comprehensive services which contribute to a sense of national identity, **inform, educate, entertain** and reflect Australian cultural diversity; to promote the arts; and to broadcast to other countries programs that will encourage awareness and understanding of Australia'.

The ABC was slow in coming to terms with the digital world until ABC Managing Director Mark Scott saw an opportunity and argued to the government (which was experiencing challenges converting Australia to digital television), 'You've got challenges converting this country to digital television?... by 2013 (the date when the analogue signal would be switched off). Let us help you do that? A great way is creating a digital free-to-air children's television channel which will also be **of educational benefit to this country, help the independent production sector, and be a renaissance of children's television.**'<sup>22</sup>

These were big promises, impossible to realize in fact. Research was already available from the British media regulator, Ofcom, which published in October, 2007, the most detailed analysis of British children's television ever undertaken. The UK Broadcasting Act of 2003 abolished regulated requirements on commercial ITV and Channel 5 and their investment in kids' TV fell but, Ofcom found, there was more children's programming screened in the UK than ever before, due to the explosion in digital channels. Critically, a **decreasing proportion of programs were made in the UK**. From fewer than 1000 hours per year in the 1960s, the total volume of children's programming grew to 113,000 hours in 2006. But **only 17 per cent of these programs originated in the UK, and first-release British programming counted for**

---

<sup>21</sup> This argument eventually won the day and when I stepped down as Director in 2002 to produce *Noah and Saskia*, for the ABC and the BBC, the ACTF became primarily an investment and marketing company for the independent producers while maintaining their work producing educational materials to support programs.

<sup>22</sup> Mark Scott speaking at the Screen Producer's Association of Australia Conference, Sydney November 17, 2010

**only one per cent of total hours. More than 60 per cent of content was cartoons, and American material constituted 46 per cent.**

The BBC has long been the model for the ABC, but even with its generous budget, which Australia could not hope to match, it was having problems screening a majority of home grown content on its digital platforms. The BBC has experienced a continuing trend since 2005 of a decrease in spend and output on first-run UK-originated programming. In 2015 that spend was 77 million pounds a year, a decrease of 13% in real terms - and down by 45% from a decade earlier.<sup>23</sup>

In 2007, the Australian Communications and Media Authority (ACMA) also released a comprehensive research report on *Media and Communications in Australian Families* which sounded a warning. The report demonstrated Australian households were media rich. Children were spending 49% of their discretionary time on electronic and communication activities, multi-tasking. They were watching 40 minutes per day **less** free-to-air television than in 1995. 99% of homes had 2.8 televisions, a third had access to subscription services, 97% a DVD, 91% the internet, 77% a games console, 9 in 10 a VCR, 97% of households with children had a mobile phone compared with 22% in 1995, 76% a portable MP3 or 4 player. Teenagers were spending two and a half hours a day online.

In the USA, the Kaiser Family Foundation released three reports on *Generation M2: Media in the lives of 8-18 year olds* (in 1999, in 2004 and in 2009) which showed the same remarkable explosion of new media use by young people and concluded this group were averaging 7 hours and 38 minutes consuming media a day, packing 10 hours and 45 minutes into that time by multi-tasking.

The trend away from scheduled programming was vividly clear in three western countries. Nevertheless the ABC pressed on. Its pitch to government promised a new channel would achieve 50 per cent Australian content. The channel would be on air from 6am to 9pm each day which meant 105 hours of programming to be transmitted each week or 5460 hours a year. The pitch claimed 'there was a rich legacy of work available for the new channel in the form of highly subsidised programs that had already been shown on commercial networks once or twice'. The new channel would provide 'a broad and comprehensive service delivering entertainment, education and information across a broad range of genres...The Australianness of the service was fundamental. It was about citizenship, about nationhood, about ensuring Australian children grew up hearing Australian voices and Australian stories'. The ACTF backed this pitch, but the claims made were not matched by the results.

---

<sup>23</sup> BBC, *Annual Report and Accounts*, 2015- 2016

Prime Minister Kevin Rudd, who had hosted a Big Ideas Summit to map out the future of Australia in April 2008, was looking for outcomes that would resonate with the public and was persuaded by his Secretary of the Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet, Terry Moran, that this would be a winner with the public and the industry. This was a fateful decision in the history of children's television and a significant opportunity lost, for with the allocated funds a new service for the future could have been developed, one more appropriate to the technological era.

The proposal for ABC3 was welcomed by the public and the production industry, but was unsustainable. **The evidence overseas, from Ofcom and the BBC, ACMA's research in Australia and from the US Kaiser Family Foundation was showing by 2007 that children were moving their attention away from scheduled programming to mobile devices and on-demand services.** This shift continues year by year, as ACMA's 2015-16 Communications Report shows. In 2016 63% of Australians were viewing their content online, with 2.2 million households viewing subscription services.

**A new media service relevant to the time would have been achievable and could have revived the leadership in children's media Australia had held internationally with its tripartite policy of regulation, subsidy and support for the not-for-profit ACTF. When the ABC had the opportunity to break new ground for an audience heavily engaged with new media, it looked backwards by establishing a children's channel on a model more than two decades old. To attempt to sustain this model today in the face of children's viewing behavior would be foolhardy.**

### Children's Channels

The first Children's Channel in the UK was set up in 1984. It became digital in 1999. The BBC's two digital children's channels were launched in 2002. Since then the child audience in the UK has followed the same trends as other western countries with school age children preferring to spend their screen time with mobile new media and the investment in local children's programming has declined. As mentioned according to OFCOM, 77 million pounds was spent on first-run UK originated programming in 2015, down from 140 million pounds in 2005. Between 1998 and 2015 ITV's original children's programming fell from 424 hours a year to just 42; Channel 5's fell from 353 hours to 30. Channel 4's production of children's television has fallen from 49 hours to zero. **The BBC is now responsible for 97% of original UK-produced children's programming.**

Despite the evidence that children were moving away from scheduled free-to-air television and the costs involved in acquiring/producing/broadcasting 5,460 hours of content into the future, the Australian government was persuaded in 2009 to provide an extra \$66.4 million over three years to build ABC3. In its triennial funding budget of 2009, the ABC received an additional and specific allocation in order to expand its children's offering. This allocation

rose over three years to \$27 million a year and remained at that level as part of base and indexed funding.

Recently Kim Dalton the former head of ABC television (2006-2012), described the channel as follows: 'Within three years the ABC was delivering its 50 per cent Australian content promise on the new ABC3... The ABC also set out to increase the breadth and depth of the children's production sector... ABC3 went to air on 4 December 2009 and was an almost overnight success... Competition for commissions improved overnight, experienced creatives became involved and programs started appearing on air with levels of creative ambition and standards of writing, direction, acting and storytelling that had not until then been achieved.'<sup>24</sup>

Bryce Corbett describes Dalton's claims as 'revisionism'.<sup>25</sup> I think that a fair assessment.

It was to be expected that the ABC3 could claim immediate success in ratings, as by this time the channel was the only show in town for round the clock children's programs for the 6-13 age group on free-to-air. But where is the evidence to support the wide-ranging claims of success that are being made now, in 2017, about the service? Where is the evidence that the output of the channels created what amounted in Mark Scott's words to 'a renaissance in children's television'? Is such an assertion based on anything other than measurements of audience reach and share which are the blunt tools broadcasters use to claim success? Such tools do not measure quality or audience attention. And where is the evidence that ABC2 (which became the 6.00am – 7.00pm destination for pre-schoolers adding a further 4,732 hours of programming to fill) and ABC3 contributed in a meaningful way to young people's education, information or empowerment? Only qualitative research by experienced social scientists could begin to tap such questions.

More importantly, how did ABC2 and ABC3 demonstrate a new vision for public service television which was to make a unique and indispensable contribution to the lives of children and young people at a time when media were in transition? And where is the evidence experienced 'creatives' appeared, raising the standards of writing, directing, acting and storytelling? Where are the real, notable achievements on ABC3? What was being shown of literature, art, ideas, natural history, the environment or science, relevant to children's learning and engagement? For these are indeed the qualities a children's service should aim to fulfill.

---

<sup>24</sup> Kim Dalton, *Missing in Action : The ABC and Australia's Screen Culture*, Platform Paper 51

<sup>25</sup> Bryce Corbett, 'Former ABC boss Kim Dalton chucks stones from the outside', *Australian Financial Review*, 10 June, 2017

Dalton's description has been widely circulated and treated as though it is a factual report, with the ABC being castigated severely – for forsaking a 'successful' children's service. The fact is, it was not possible in 2009 to mount a visionary children's service by going back to old scheduled models that were evidently failing. And in the current media environment it would be profligate to try to maintain such a service.

A digital children's channel is a demanding distribution system: two channels, ABC2 and ABC3, had to be scheduled from dawn to dark so; inevitably, they had to carry predominantly high-volume, inexpensive, repeat programs. The evidence that this is exactly the type of programming sought is in their press releases. At the SPAA Conference in 12 August 2009, ABC Children's Television announced a new initiative with up to \$30,000 in development funding for a 'project' which 'must be an original Australian concept and feature Australian kids 8-12. The ABC is looking for a project that can be produced at high volume, at low cost, suitable for playing on line as well as watching on air'. Submissions were to close October 5, so there was less than two months to develop the proposal.<sup>26</sup>

Needless to say that is not the kind of timeline that nurtures innovation and 'the top creatives in the industry' were not in line to submit. But this was the only type of programming the ABC could realistically afford for such a demanding schedule.

Another call for new programming came from a partnership between Film Victoria and ACTF. *Kids360* sought a derivative live-action non drama program 'That will excite, entertain and inspire children across Australia.' They were looking for concepts similar to programs created for adults in prime time that the ratings told them kids were currently watching. 'Think *Specks and Specks*, *Thank God You're Here* and *Rove* for 10-14 year olds' was the brief. They called for form over function. There was nothing to guide applicants about what the program should do for children other than 'engage' and 'interact with content'. It is a telling sign that the ABC did not really understand children's programming needs when asking for submissions emulating adult formats. This is not an appropriate starting point for producers of children's programs.

These programs were not capable of leading a renaissance. They typified the limited thinking, opportunism and unpreparedness to innovate that has dogged children's broadcasting in recent years in Australia. Developers need to start with the content and quality objectives to ensure children's best interests are served in education and social objectives as well as entertainment.

---

<sup>26</sup> SPAA Conference News Sydney, 17-20 November, 2009

The 'rich resource', of back catalogue C classified programs promised, that would have repeat screenings on the ABC channels, was a finite library and was not being replenished with live action drama, as the networks were filling their quotas with animations. The ABC did the same. Animations (mostly international in origin) were filling the screens and characters with merchandising potential were called for, but development time given for new ideas was limited.

**Children did not get what they deserved from ABC2 and ABC3 or what is now ABCME. Children live in a complex world today, a very different world from the one where we designed quotas and subsidies to service their needs in the 70's and 80's and when we could rely on the knowledge they had few other options. When standards and quotas were first formulated we lived in a linear, analogue world. It was a top-down system where adults held the controls. That is no longer so.**

**A new children's media service should be established, which could make a powerful contribution to the formal and informal education of Australian children. The best creative brains in the world of media and technology should be recruited to design and produce quality products specifically aimed at reinforcing the learning and development goals and allow children to actively engage. Today children require a diverse and robust multi-platform system that allows them to do what they want, when they want and develops their learning and creativity.**

With new media we now have an opportunity to target not only 3-11 year olds but that elusive demographic – the pre-and early-pubescent adolescent entering and living their teenage years. The highest levels of media consumption are in the tween and early teen years, 11-14 year olds. This group has been notoriously difficult to reach through children's television programs. It is the age when peer influences lead to challenging parental wisdom, with kids wanting to spend more time with their friends than with their parents. Mobile devices and online communities offer unprecedented opportunities to this age group to fraternize with groups outside the home who fit with their interests and developmental needs. They also offer a resource to educators.

### **Pre-School programming**

Pre-schoolers are the one group likely to continue to view scheduled programs as they are dependent on their parents, teachers and carers and under their control. They are a most important group and one deserving of priority by the ABC. Research suggests most children acquire many of their media literacy functional skills early and without much formal instruction. Children under age 6 already have good media skills. **A decade ago** ACMA's survey of media use found that of children aged 0-4:

- 74% can turn on the TV

- 58% can use the remote
- 46% can put on a video or DVD.

They were spending:

- 154 minutes per day viewing free-to-air television (127 minutes on commercial channels)
- 194 minutes per day watching subscription TV.

making a total viewing time average of 5 hours 48 minutes per day.

Pre-schoolers are among the heaviest viewers of television anywhere because they sit in homes with the television turned on, often all day, paying attention and not paying attention. They are regularly viewing adult programs for much of the time and the programs made for them are inadequate. Their production values are basic and the content remarkably similar with the scripts lacking humor, originality and imagination. These shows do little to enrich, stimulate and excite the imagination of children as television and new media are capable of doing.

The influence of television on toddlers has been a hot topic, with the American Academy of Pediatrics recommending children under the age of two shouldn't watch at all. This recommendation has been disputed by researchers in the USA, but we do know it matters **what** young people watch. Research on early brain development shows that babies and toddlers have a critical need for direct interactions with parents and other significant caregivers for healthy brain growth and the development of appropriate social, emotional and cognitive skills.

Education does not begin when children go to pre-school or school for the first time. **Eighty-five per cent of brain development takes place in the first few years of life.** Toddlers' brains are voraciously active from birth and disadvantage in society is born when young children's early education is neglected. The Early Years Learning Framework – an initiative of the Council of Australian Governments (COAG), is built around this understanding, but Australian children are lucky to get 15 hours of pre-school a week in the year before they go to school. Currently only 66 per cent of three-year-olds are enrolled in some form of early education and care. This is the age when children can be introduced to the building blocks of literacy and numeracy and social concepts like cooperating and building relationships. It has been found that 15-year olds with two years of quality pre-schooling consistently outperform their peers with one or no years of early education. Australia is lagging significantly behind other OECD countries.<sup>27</sup>

---

<sup>27</sup> Judith Ireland, 'The big little thing missing from the schools debate', *The Age*, June 1, 2017; Pallavi Singhai, 'Australia lags behind on preschool programs', *The Age*, June 26, 2017

Playing electronic games, which are found in 90% of Australian households, assist children's development and learning. A study of 3,000 children participating in the *Growing Up in Australia Longitudinal Study of Australian Children* has found children who were playing two to four hours per week at age eight or nine had better literacy and mathematical skills at 10-11 as reported by teachers. Moderate game playing was associated with the most benefits both academically and emotionally. The tablet is particularly popular with children under 8 because touch screen technology is relatively intuitive and easy to use. In 2016 Ofcom reported 21% of under 8's in the UK used mobile devices - a smart phone or tablets - to go online.<sup>28</sup>

**There is a great opportunity here, as part of the media review, to accommodate early childhood programs into the policy mix. The ABC should direct their funding for children's programs to this age group and to the early school years.**

#### **A new television program for early learners**

A new children's media service for pre-schoolers should be established, which could make a powerful contribution to the formal and informal education of Australian children. The best creative brains in the world of media and technology should be recruited to design and produce quality products specifically aimed at reinforcing the learning and development goals of the Early Learning Development Framework (ELDF).

This has been done successfully before. In 1989, more than 100 experts from differing fields with an interest in children developed a major initiative for early childhood learning. There were mathematicians, philosophers, scientists, musicians, writers, illustrators, poets, psychologists, sociologists, environmentalists, puppeteers and actors. During three week-long workshops, the ACTF devised a curriculum and characters for a new early childhood series called *Lift-Off*, which was comprehensive and supported by parents, the community and the schools. The project blossomed as individuals with different perspectives, knowledge and experience mixed ideas. A program was devised that became an exceptional success with its audience, parents, educators and collaborators – and with the television

---

<sup>28</sup> Sue Walker and Sue Danby, 'Electronic games: how much is too much for kids?', *The Conversation*, July 7, 2017; Rita Brito and Reijo Kupiainen, *The On-line and Off-line Digital Practices of Young children A Review of the Literature*, Academia.edu, July 2017

critics. *Lift-Off* was endorsed by all State Directors of Curriculum, and the Curriculum Corporation invested in a comprehensive package of materials to support it in schools.

An Outreach program developed and stimulated activities with parents, children's service-providers and teachers in all states. A total of \$17 million was invested in the television series alone. It took four years to develop. The plan was to maintain a weekly slot on the ABC to evolve the project into a comprehensive, national early childhood education program. With television at its core, it would involve parents, schools and the community – it was an experiment for children's education unlike any in the world (different from but on the scale of *Sesame Street*) and had the support of Harvard University's Professor Howard Gardner, the expert on the formation of multiple intelligences.<sup>29</sup>

He evaluated *Lift Off*, writing in July 1991: 'There is talk now in Australia about producing a society with clever children. If I were asked how one might fashion a society where the mind of the child is treated with the seriousness it merits, and where the most powerful medium of our time were yoked with other principal educational forces in the country, I could think of no better example than the efforts over the past three years to develop the *Lift Off* series.'

But with a change of administration at the ABC, *Lift-Off* was cancelled. Without a broadcaster, the project could not be maintained, so 78 episodes of a well-developed, comprehensive resource still sits on the shelf unseen. An important opportunity to improve the educational opportunities for early childhood was lost.

**The ABC should develop and transmit a new project incorporating the potential offered by new media, designed around the goals of the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework, that would be the core of a community based early childhood project. This would be a major contribution to their education as it could be accessible to all children in their pre-school years.**

Allan Fels, then Chairman of the Australian Competition and Consumer Commission (ACCC), made the case for both cultural protection of children's television and its importance in education policy in the context of competition policy at the ACTF 20th Anniversary Symposium in 2002 saying:

'It would seem that the arguments that relate to market failure with regard to Australian programming in general apply even more for children's programming (**there is also a further**

---

<sup>29</sup> Howard Gardner is an American developmental psychologist and the John H. and Elisabeth A. Hobbs Professor of Cognition and Education at the Graduate School of Education at Harvard University. He is co-director of Project Zero, a research program investigating the development of knowledge, artistic ability and symbol making processes in children.

**commitment that to a degree children's television can be seen in a broad sense as part of the nation's education policy).** It seems reasonable to assume that specific programs targeted to children, especially expensive-to-produce children's drama, will not be produced in the absence of regulatory requirements... The combination of minority audiences, advertising restrictions and relatively high cost make children's programming commercially doubtful for the free-to-air broadcasters. Consequently it is no surprise that these broadcasters will try to minimise programming costs and this is likely to be reflected in the quality of the programs.'

**It is understood the best children's media programs will not necessarily pay their way. Just as we need to subsidise schools, we need to subsidise the programs that will support the development and enlightenment of young children. A program that is well designed and takes into consideration children's developmental stages will enhance their progress more effectively than those geared towards commercial ends. As well, the children who will benefit most are those whose parents find ways to interact during viewing and take advantage of learning opportunities embedded in the program.**

### **The impact of merchandising on programming**

Twenty years ago, good story ideas drove children's programming decisions. Kids were not considered a market, much less a profitable one. They were a special audience and programs such as the early *Play School*, *Round the Twist* and *Lift Off* were provided to serve their needs as they entertained. This changed with the advent of children's channels in the United States and Europe in the '90s and fierce competition between them for market share.

While Disney began marketing Mickey Mouse as far back as the 1920s, it was the success in the '80s of program-length commercials such as *He-Man and the Masters of the Universe*, *GI Joe: A Real American Hero*, *Care Bears* and *Strawberry Shortcake* that set light bulbs off in the minds of toy manufacturers and producers around the globe. They conceived the idea of tie-ins to link products promoting *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles*, *Transformers*, *Mighty Morphin Power Rangers* and *Action Man*. The industries involved boomed and children were seen as consumers from then on. It wasn't long before the public broadcasters wanted their slice of the cake as well and, in the '90s, along came *Barney* the purple dinosaur on the Public Broadcasting Service (PBS) in the US and *Teletubbies* on the BBC in the UK.

Since the major public broadcasters overseas were on this path, why not follow? So the ABC, which cannot advertise, took the banana characters from *Play School* and turned them into *Bananas in Pyjamas* along with a suite of merchandise which has become a lucrative property for them.

But such a path inevitably led to conflict with child advocates who believed exploiting children by treating its audience as consumers was an abdication of the ABC's national responsibility to enrich their culture. In May 2009, Friends of the ABC released a statement saying they were 'appalled to learn Director Mark Scott had told the Senate Estimates Communication Committee that *Play School* concerts were being performed in NSW Clubs licensed to serve alcohol and operate poker machines'.

But the commercialization of ABC children's characters continued with a commercial partnership at Dreamworld called ABC Kids World which opened in June 2015.

Promotion for the theme park read:

'Spark their imaginations at our newest attraction, ABC KIDS WORLD, where children can have fun with their favourite Australian TV characters in real life. Meeting up with Hoot and Hootabelle, the kids are taken on their own mini adventure on board the pirate ship, and get to ride on the new Hop and Hoot ride where they can see Hootabelle, Twinklify the stars. At the *Bananas in Pyjamas* Fun Maze, kids get to have active fun darting in and out and meet the best-loved residents of B1 and B2. And at *Play School*, kids are captivated by games, stories and get lost in a world of creativity. If happiness is a place, this is it.'

ABC Friends called on the ABC board to intervene, claiming the 'tacky' venture showed its commercial activities are 'out of control'.

'We recognise the ABC is struggling for funds, but it is inappropriate in the extreme for the public broadcaster to be selling its creations and trusted name to a commercial operation to make money out of children,' spokeswoman Glenys Stradijot told *The Australian*. (June 2015)

'The ABC's responsibility is to provide quality information and entertainment. Its relationship with children should be ... to treat them as citizens, not exploit them as consumers. These sorts of activities are a betrayal of the public's trust in the ABC's integrity. They will ultimately undermine the esteem in which the community holds the public broadcaster.'

**Pre-school programs require an ethical agenda at their core. Pre-schoolers are not a market they are an audience with special needs. Programs made for them require creative development teams who understand child development and see media education as a part of a service for them. Pre-school programs:**

- **must have educational goals, not goals to sell soft toys or designer clothes**
- **must be trustworthy and put the interests of children as citizens above profit**
- **must treat their audience as active participants in the production and consumption of their media content**

- **must take risks, push boundaries, explore new possibilities, raise new questions, challenge their audience to think**
- **need media producers to work in partnership with educators.**

**Government should fund ACMA and other organisations for a concerted research effort to document the links between children’s media use and their learning and development outcomes, in order to improve the effectiveness of the early learning and development initiatives.**

**A revenue solution for the ABC children’s service that apes commercial media leaves the public broadcaster with diminished raison d’etre. The ABC needs to shift its focus in children’s programming from volume to quality and purpose. No-one at the ABC is speaking about the value the public broadcaster could bring to Australian children through a new model; through innovation, promoting and sharing creativity, generating benefits to society through collaboration with education. The current review presents an opportunity and their focus should be on the early childhood audience where programs of national and educative purpose are most needed.**

### **The elephant in the room**

Richard Finlayson, the ABC's director of television, appointed in April 2013, spoke openly of the challenges he was facing just two months after his appointment stating, ‘Audiences are rapidly moving away from linear schedules, to on-demand.’ By 2017 he predicted ‘80 per cent would prefer on-demand. Children were leading the charge, and older demographics were close behind.’ He had to try to solve the problem.

Today children spend more time with machines than with their parents. Free-to-air television is clearly struggling to maintain its dominance in the media marketplace. Still Australians want their Australian content. So how can these conflicting aims be reconciled in a highly competitive environment? Minister Fifield’s media package attests to the challenges facing the broadcasting industry and the fact that the economic model that has underpinned the industry since it began is disintegrating.

On July 4, 2017, the BBC announced a 34 million pound budget increase over the next three years in British made children’s shows in their attempt to stay relevant. The broadcaster’s annual children’s budget will rise from 110 million pounds to 124 million pounds by 2019-20 with a commitment to spend a quarter of that (£31.4m) on-line. Multimedia content would include video, live online program extensions as well as clips, pictures, blogs, podcasts, quizzes, guides, games and apps. The new digital content will sit alongside the existing children’s channels CBBC and CBeebies but their brands will be reduced in number. Tony Hall the Director General, said ‘the BBC must embrace new and developing technologies such as virtual reality, voice activation and artificial intelligence. The way children and young

people are watching and consuming programs and other content is changing fast, and the BBC needs to respond.' An iPlayer will become children's customized and recommending destination for content they like and can draw from content across the BBC.

The BBC has recognised for some time that a different model is necessary for children but it has been difficult to know what that should be. Some of the D G's description sounds like repurposing programs from the two children's channels into other formats and that is the fall back position of many traditional producers who cannot come to grips with the new reality. Nevertheless the BBC's commitment is the biggest injection of cash into the children's sector for a generation despite the fact there is pressure on the BBC budget.<sup>30</sup>

In Australia, governments have been malleable towards commercial broadcasters, fearing their power and critique, and their impact on the electorate, and this time the government is eager to help find a solution to ease their burden, while at the same time finding a solution to financing and supporting Australian content and children's programs, for it cannot afford to alienate the public who enjoy their Australian content and want quality programs for their children. But clinging to, and tinkering with, a dying system will inevitably fail.

It must be remembered, historically the commercial broadcasting industry have consistently resisted change before it would adapt to change. The television industry has watched the technical tsunami advancing but has clung to a model that assumes the audience wants a scheduler to construct an evening's program viewing for them. They have cried 'wolf' whenever demands have been made. They have undermined and modified Australian quotas, delayed the introduction of digital television, won concessions on advertising regulations and pleaded for cuts to their licence fees to ease the financial difficulties all three commercial networks are experiencing. **If free-to-air fails it will be due to a failure of imagination and creativity, for it is content that attracts the viewers who keep the industry afloat.**

Today the issue is still being described in terms of input - quotas, percentages, subsidies - all of which favour a self-serving production industry. They are not the harbingers of change. As well broadcast television, with its declining audience share, ageing management, and 'push' technology, will not become the engine for renewal of a creative children's sector. We can see no examples of genuinely new approaches to children's television produced in Australia

---

<sup>30</sup> Mark Sweeney, 'BBC vows multi-million cash injection for British-made children's shows', *The Guardian*, July 4, 2007; Report Simon Barr – Opening Keynote, Alice Webb and James Purnell, The Children's Media Conference, 5 July, 2017, <http://www.childrensmediainference.com/blog/2017/07/05/report-opening-keynote/>

or shown on the ABC and it is most unlikely we will see them again without well-considered regulatory intervention.

**There is no justification for the Government to fund children's television and media, if it is not for the clear developmental benefit of children. There are ample other opportunities for children to amuse themselves and support for children's programming should not be about providing jobs for would-be producers. What remains important today is the same fundamental issue as when we started – the contribution to and impact of the media system on the young.**

Technology moves on inexorably reshaping the media landscape. *Google* and DVDs appeared at the end of the 90s, *Facebook* in 2003, *YouTube* in 2005 and *Twitter* in 2006. The game industry has outstripped revenue from cinema with many players coming from television's prime audience. In the face of these dramatic changes, television's managers are claiming they can no longer afford to provide the quota programs their record shows they have never accepted. So **the most realistic and possibly effective response is to relieve them of this responsibility in return for payment of a levy.**

**Commercial broadcasters could relinquish their programming role for children in exchange for an annual payment to a fund attached to the new children's service for 9-15 year olds. This could fulfill their responsibilities to the child audience for they are holders of licences in public trust.**

They have a responsibility to the public, not simply to their shareholders. Their attitudes over the years have assumed they have independence, incompatible with their role, for broadcasting is not just another business, it is an integral component in our education and democratic political system. However the development of a new visionary idea, such as what is needed today for children through media, does not play out in a world where marketers narrow their audiences into demographics and special interest groups, and profit is their objective.

**As well, the ABC should close down ABCME.** Such a service cannot rest its claims for on-going support on the transmission of a very few programs of quality, amid high volume repeats, watched by a shrinking audience. **The ABC's children's channel should consolidate its resources for children's programs and focus on the early childhood years - the pre-school audience and children up to the age of 9 years,** with a brief to bring its program service for them into the 21<sup>st</sup> Century and service their genuine needs. While children in this age group are using mobile devices, by nine years this trend is increasing and children are turning to mobile devices, social networking and interactivity.

Much has been learnt about child development and children's needs since *Play School* was devised more than 50 years ago. Parents are nostalgic about *Play School*, but is there any other program that has stayed basically the same for 50 years without adapting to audience needs? This neglect could only be achieved with very young children. As one mother commented:

"Sesame Street @ 9:00 and Playschool @ 9:30 then Bananas straight after....it's been that way since I was a toddler in the early 1980s!" wrote another. "The change will spin me out more than my kids."

These comments are hardly an educational rationale.<sup>31</sup>

This 2-9 year age group enjoys character-based animation and stories and the best programs from around the world should be on their service as well as local programming. Scheduled programming still leads the trend for this age group but on-demand programs, on-line games and apps should be an adjunct to this service for it to remain relevant into the future. The ABC should not just extend and repurpose broadcast programs but explore interactive learning opportunities.

Children up to age eight are learning many complex cognitive skills through well designed games including:

- attend and concentrate
- associate words and symbols with objects
- perceive and discriminate
- identify similarity and difference
- classify objects
- see order or relationships
- develop concepts – space, size, shape
- explore and be curious
- manipulate
- use creative imagination.<sup>32</sup>

### **A new media service for children aged 9-16**

#### **The role of media education and cyber-literacy.**

---

<sup>31</sup> *The Irrigator*, Fairfax Regional Media, 5 July, 2017

<sup>32</sup> Mark Prensky, *Don't bother me Mum, I'm learning*, Prensky Books 2003

If the task of early childhood and early schooling is defined as 'learning to find your way around in the world', then mass media and the tools of modern technology have the potential to help in this task by taking every child well beyond the intimate confines of the family home to a wealth of 'life experiences', to discover who they are in relation to the wider human family and their social and physical environment. Media provide visual, verbal, emotional, social and even physical modes of dealing with the world.

An important tool to help children navigate new media and the internet which have thrown up new challenges impinging on their social development is media literacy. Discussions of media literacy in the past have focused on the basic technological know-how - a mechanistic, analytical approach, and a fairly negative form of critical understanding of the processes of media production. A broader approach is now called for in four main areas, covering children's ability to:

1. *Access* the media – the skills needed to gain access to media content
2. *Understand* the media they access – as they develop, children must learn the difference between reality and representation, how to cope with upsetting emotional responses to media content, and to make critical judgments about fake news, privacy, bullying, sharing online, TV violence, advertisements and branding.
3. *Create* – a neglected aspect of children's use of the media, even though children's own production of media content is rapidly expanding with smart mobile phones and website interactivity. Kids are very good at sending things up, spoofing programs and characters. They should be encouraged to turn the spotlight on the media and dissect it. This process aids understanding.
4. *Learn through* the media - this involves having parents, carers and teachers build on the content of what children view to enhance child development and learning in the areas of physical growth and health, language and communicative competence, self-understanding and interpersonal skills, cognitive skills and general knowledge.

### **Summary**

**1. As a tool for the voice of children, as a tool for the education of children, as a tool for cultural identity, the media is unequalled. Children come to media willingly yet we do not use technologies to develop and teach children; we use them to market to them. In order to attract children to relevant, appropriate material that is designed with their best interests at heart, producers need to take risks and to engage with the education revolution. Children should be a part of that process.**

**2. The importance of media in the education of children has not been well recognised by the education system because there has not been a whole-of-government perspective**

linking education policy and communication policy. Communication and technology policies should be seen as integral to the nation's education policy.

**3. Media Education should be expanded beyond a narrow focus on cyber-literacy skills to include the content and learning potential of all forms of digital media and their social impact. An online multi-platform service for children should include an interactive cyber-literacy destination developed in partnership with educators.** <sup>33</sup>

## **Section 3. The Future**

**A new innovative paradigm is called for.**

**Children are leading the technological revolution in ways no one predicted, yet most of the content we provide them is banal and exploitative. Parents have said repeatedly in surveys across the decades they want and have a right to expect media to contribute to their children's social and educational development in beneficial ways. A service for children today must achieve this aim for media are a dominant force in the lives of all young people.**

**Today's children have a vastly expanded range of interests and skills along with access to media that has so much potential for their benefit. We need to devise a system that is fit for purpose now. It cannot be all things to all people so choices must be made. It is clear transformative technologies will continue to be developed and a new service must be adaptable and flexible and able to respond to new developments as young people have demonstrated they will be the first to take up new ideas.**

We have known for a decade many kids prefer to engage with interactive technology, gaming, chat rooms, instant messaging, and the joys of online content they create themselves rather than simply watching scheduled television. Professionally produced quality, drama and comedy are important to children and they also help drive traffic. They should be in the mix, but they shouldn't define the service. A few landmark titles would

---

<sup>33</sup> Patricia Edgar and Don Edgar (2008), *Television, Digital Media and Children's Learning*, Victorian Curriculum Assessment Authority, This paper was commissioned by the VCAA to promote discussion about the important issue of children's learning and development through electronic media and new technologies.

suffice. They don't need to follow broadcast formats - short five minute dramas can be just as effective for this audience as 30' or 60'.<sup>34</sup>

This submission argues for two new services; one run by the ABC and the other developed independently. In that way a new culture can be established and the service need not just be funded by Government and a levy from commercial broadcasters, but be able to tap corporate sponsorship as it would be project based.

1. ABC 2, run by the ABC would cater for 2-9 year olds, funded by government directly , it should emphasis the importance of early childhood education and liaise with educators to develop entertaining programs related to child development. It should have associated on-line interactive games and projects along with on-demand programs.
2. A new service for Australian children beyond the early years (aged 9-16) should be redesigned from the ground up - with new participants, new stakeholders - who can demonstrate an ability to adapt quickly or radically to meet the new demands and challenges of today's technology. It is changing and evolving so rapidly it's very likely that while mobile is in vogue today in five years it will be something quite different. So the model built should not be an edifice trying to be all things to all people and it must be adaptable, doing what it aims to do well.

The challenge for kids' programming is one of content design and architecture rather than technical functionality. The technologies for a new fully integrated multimedia service are already widely available around the world. The service should not be simply a portal to a range of on-line activities. Complex websites that offer high levels of interactivity are commonplace and many have video playing and audio listening capability. Most broadcasters have an on-demand listening and viewing facility now. Pod casts, social networking and games are widely available on-line and a wide range of media creation and editing tools is available free.

At the moment most services are single purpose and assume a user will watch a program and then when they've finished that, perhaps play a game which may relate to the program theme, then chat with a friend and so on. In today's world kids are very comfortable doing several things at the same time, keeping a number of windows open on their desktops so they can flip between them or conducting multiple chats on mobile devices. They can play

---

<sup>34</sup> The Per Capita Report states: 'the average Australian home now has 4.5 connected screens in addition to their TV sets, up from 3.9 four years ago'. *ThinkTV* found this shift away from free-to-air commercial television which applies to all scheduled television is pronounced among child viewers. Per Capita Report, *Stories to Tell, Protecting Australian Children's Screen Content*, Emma Dawson, cites *ThinkTV* Children's Television Viewing, Research Overview, June 2017, p. 19

an on-line soccer game and trawl through *You Tube* while they chat with friends on multiple devices.

A new service should be accessible across multiple platforms accommodating distribution to a desk-top, online or to mobile devices. **It should be a robust, flexible, platform that lets kids do what they want in the ways they want, when they want. The draw card would be that it is project based not program based. This service could be used throughout the school systems as well as domestically.**

From a production point of view, the challenge is to engage the right teams of people to conceptualise, design and run such a multi-platform service. When groups from different cultures come together they tend to battle for power. If television people dominate such a new service the evidence so far suggests they will build an on-line TV delivery mechanism with a bit of interactivity on the side. The objective of a new service should not be to re-purpose traditional content. That approach is failing now. If on-line people dominate they'll probably go for technical functionality over content. One answer is to look to the young and give them a role in the development of this system. These are quite significant challenges but they must be met for a new service is the answer to our children's needs in 2017.

**Imagination, innovation and enterprise, and the brains of some very smart people are required. Kids today have access to and view a range of adult programs unavailable two decades ago. No purpose is served by mimicking such programs on a service for children. And if the people who commission, design and run the new service are in it just for the money and simply want to exploit kids as a market then we needn't bother.**

A new multi-purpose platform service for children **could** accommodate games, chat rooms, down-loadable libraries, and opportunities to access, manipulate, create and share multi-media content.

Some of the ingredients **could** include:

- A virtual world - developed with sound educational principles
- Voice activated software and A I
- An interactive games platform
- A YouTube equivalent where kids post and exchange their own productions
- A video library to watch programs at their convenience
- A chat room
- A digital sand pit with tools to create, draw and post inventions and narratives
- Content posted from school projects sharing the best of their work including art, films, music and drama performances, athletics and sporting matches and special projects of general interest.

It could do all these things but it cannot do all these things well. It should aim to be the best project-based global service possible as there is a huge vacuum in this space for children with public and commercial broadcasters either struggling with the concept or abdicating responsibility entirely. The BBC's most recent announcement reveals their attempt to respond to the current dilemmas new technology presents to broadcasters.

This submission recommends a project-driven experience which leads to rewarding outcomes for the participants and also engages the wider community. It has to be a destination that distinguishes from existing services. The kids would develop projects on a managed basis.

Drama would be a small subset. Kids do enjoy excellent drama and comedy and are attracted to controversial content. Such programs attract attention but you don't need many of them.<sup>35</sup>

There are other formats to consider when the goal is to invoke truly challenging interactive exchange. Examining the motives of a production is a good way to dissect the media and could be part of a project on the media.

It is not the purpose of this submission to name the projects that could be part of this destination but the potential is limitless. It would take workshops of creative people to come up with smart and viable ideas. These adult instigators would best come from lives outside the media. The model is the *Lift Off* workshops which brought together people from multiple fields of endeavor to spark the ideas that became the basis of the early childhood curriculum for the program. (See p. 32)

**Some principles to consider in developing projects:** Children are disrupters; they like to pull things apart. They like to laugh. They like competitions and a challenge. They need organizing and older kids might do that better than adults. They won't stay long if a task is dull. They like novelty and trying new things.<sup>36</sup>

---

<sup>35</sup> *Round the Twist* remains the seminal Australian television series that has attracted children world-wide for three generations. As the producer originating the series I was told repeatedly the content was okay on the page but impossible to translate to the screen because it would be disgusting. How wrong they were. But such success is rare. The Netflix series *13 Reasons Why*, is an example of clever marketing to young people through a choice of controversial drama content. The program has attracted controversy, over the graphic depiction of suicide and rape. It achieved Netflix's goal of attracting widespread discussion on social media and has been renewed for a second season.

<sup>36</sup> Teens still use *Facebook* a great deal, but they no longer see it as the most prestigious or important social network: The rise in teens listing *Instagram* as their "most important" social network, and the decline of *Facebook* in this category, has been one of the most pronounced demographic trends in social media. In late 2012, 42% of teens listed *Facebook* as the "most important". By early 2015 only 14% did so. That's a 28-point drop. *Instagram* has become the most important and most-used social network for US teens. 32% of US

Two examples of games that have caught this age group's attention and persistence are:

1. *Minecraft*. This is an example of a challenge that lasts. It is grand in vision enabling building almost anything you want. It is a sandbox video game which enables players to build constructions with others out of textured cubes. Multiple game-play modes are available. The PC version of the game is noted for its 'modding' scene, where a dedicated community creates new game-play mechanics, items, and assets for the game. As of February 2017, over 121 million copies have been sold across all platforms, making it the second best-selling video game of all time, only behind the various releases of *Tetris*. It seems to be holding its attraction.
2. *Pokemon Go* is one year old in July 2017. It is a free-to-play, location-based augmented reality game. Despite controversy, it quickly became a global phenomenon and was one of the most used and profitable mobile apps in 2016, having been downloaded more than 500 million times worldwide. It was credited with popularizing location-based and augmented reality technology; promoting physical activity and helping local businesses grow due to increased foot traffic. However it failed to sustain interest; it didn't update quickly or fix issues and after 3-4 months interest waned.
3. Instagram has added a new app for locating friends who have joined wherever they are in the world. It has novelty appeal.

### Theoretical Projects

1. Making humans a multi-planetary species, (Elon Musk) SpaceX's Colony Plan: How Elon Musk plans to build a million- person Martian city  
Build the accurate simulation of that plan in close collaboration with SpaceX. Kids sign up with their respective roles and responsibilities as outlined in the plan.  
**Sponsor** SpaceX
2. Music in the making, Australian Chamber Orchestra (ACO Virtual)  
<https://www.aco.com.au/acovirtual> Shift the concept online  
**Sponsor** ACO and associated companies
3. Spotlighting and tearing apart the media. Spoofing is a popular activity.
4. Navigating cyberspace – a project looking at issues related to security, anonymity, accountability and trackability. It is essential that kids have cyber literacy skills and there would be ways to do this in entertaining form.

Children must be attracted to a service that offers them 'things' they cannot get elsewhere.

---

teenagers cited it as their "most important" social network compared to only 14% saying that of *Facebook*.

<https://www.businessinsider.com.au/facebook-is-losing-its-grip-on-the-teen-demographic-as-visual-social-networks-gain-popularity-2015-6#V5A6PJb64poh9eo2.99>

**Sponsorship model.** If the new service becomes a destination for the young the exclusive market is where the value lies. We need to be as innovative in how we market/target these things as we are in what we actually produce The service could be part a broader nation-wide youth engagement strategy which would open up more partnerships beyond media/technology and education.

The Samsung netball campaign [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1nsylwOk\\_lw](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1nsylwOk_lw). This is an interesting example of a Korean Corporate sponsoring Australian values while selling their brand unobtrusively.

### **The role of children in the design of a new service.**

There is nothing more powerful for an individual, in giving them a sense of self-esteem, a cultural identity, an insight into their own problems and possible solutions, than a story about themselves. Our own stories give us a sense of value and purpose, and telling our stories to others gives us a sense of respect and a place in the world. An appropriate media service for today's children must include programming generated by the kids themselves.

Young people have taken ownership of the media and see this technology very much as their own, as Chris Vonwiller predicted at the first World Summit on Media for Children in 1995. Young people want to see themselves, their real lives, reflected in the media. They want to participate and make their own media programs, in their own ways, albeit for their own entertainment. But their interest in digital stories is also about finding meaning in their lives, seeking relationships and sharing with peers, and through this means they can play their part in influencing political and social decision-making. Their films should have a global reach, for interaction with other cultures. We are in a world where all children can become active producers of online content as they are already doing on *You Tube*.

The phenomenon of *YouTube*, reputedly created (2005) by two friends who were having difficulty sharing a homemade video, demonstrates in startling terms how much material is 'out there' and how much young people are interested in engaging in small scale production. A year after start-up, 65,000 videos were being uploaded every day and the site was receiving 100 million video views per day. *Google* saw the potential and that year bought *YouTube* for US\$1.65 billion. Kids love *YouTube*. Schoolyard word-of-mouth and texting mean they can promote their own little films and share very funny experiences widely with their friends. Trawling *YouTube* is a lot more fun than watching the umpteenth repeat of children's channel programs.

One example of the growth in kids' own productions is the success of *Little Big Shots*. In 2004 Nick Place developed *Little Big Shots*, an international festival of children's films to enhance the media literacy of young people, foster children's creativity and showcase the very best in filmmaking for, by and about kids. It is Australia's only major stand-alone kids'

film festival that tours all major cities in the country from June each year. Its focus is on diverse short films collected from all over the world as well as to showing the best child-made films from Australia. (<https://www.littlebigshots.com.au/>)

Another indication is the announcement of *Fest of Fests* in Europe. In June 2018 the Michael Cacoyannis Foundation in Athens is sponsoring 'the first of an annual summit called '*Fest of Fests*' which proposes the formation of a network and online community with a social network structure, which will emphasize the development of critical and informed viewers, through film and digital literacy. *Fest of Fests* aspires to involve the European and children and youth film networks, national and transnational organizations which actively support filmmaking by youngsters, the academic community and youth film festivals worldwide'. ([info@mcf.gr](mailto:info@mcf.gr) )

### **The Role of Education**

One of the most productive partnerships in this challenging context must be between education and television. We need to rethink literacy and learning, and to create new television programs and on-line projects that demonstrably support children's learning and well-being in cyber-space, as part of their social, emotional, intellectual, and physical wellbeing.

Free-to-air television management feared the education label would turn an audience off. The ABC abandoned its educational children's television department, schools programs were heavily reduced and children's producers generally eschewed 'education' to isolate their entertainment programs so no child would think they were an extension of school. The ACTF has demonstrated it is possible to educate and entertain through carefully designed programs.

Now with convergence, search and interactivity, education and entertainment have come together and kids have no issues moving easily between the two domains on the same technology. As a result teaching and learning are being transformed, with kids enjoying taking the initiative in their learning. The internet is a rich learning environment and the computer a window into an environment where there are resources to engage with independently from the classroom and teachers. An interesting indicator of the way forward with content for children was revealed a decade earlier when the Kaiser Foundation research revealed that despite the high levels of media consumption US children were engaged with, **most kids' grades were not suffering.**

In 2006, the Federation of American Scientists issued a statement supporting the use of computer and video games in classrooms: '...educational games are fundamentally different than prevailing instruction because they're based on challenge, reward, learning through doing and guided discovery in contrast to the 'tell and test' methods of traditional instruction ...

Games offer attributes important for learning – clear goals, lessons that can be practiced repeatedly until mastered, monitoring learner progress and adjusting instruction to learner level of mastery, closing the gap between what is learned and its use, motivation that encourages time on task, personalisation of learning, and infinite patience.’<sup>37</sup>

The Kaiser study concluded **‘kids are learning more than we know from the new media’** and kids’ immersion in media was looking like it could be a massive gift to the learning process. That is a decade ago and we have failed to consider this opportunity. In the UK Lord Carter’s 2009 *Report on Digital Britain* called for compelling content, ‘we needed to move from the pipes to the poetry’.

There are clear opportunities here. For most children, using new media does not isolate them but helps to connect them with others. Such activity motivates and produces a longer attention span; it aids self-concept and positive attitudes to learning because it insists on mastery from level to level.

A child born today in Australia will likely live to be one hundred years old and the best objective for their education is to equip them for change. Imagination, creativity and emotional intelligence are key skills that must be developed and nurtured from their pre-school years and throughout their childhood and youth. Lifelong learning must become a social objective. Children are now self-learners. They can go on-line and teach themselves. This is becoming a problem at the tertiary level where students find lectures boring and find other ways to acquire knowledge. There is massive potential for on-line media to serve that need. Imaginative educational media productions could help achieve what the education system has failed to achieve alone.

## **Recommendations**

- 1. Commercial broadcasting children’s quotas should be abolished.** While children enjoy good quality professionally produced drama and comedy the drama quota and it should have a place in a new service, there are now more important priorities. When local content quotas were introduced we didn’t know who we were as Australians. While that cultural quest is still relevant it can be explored by children themselves with their own productions that may be any length, and by diverse programs across the networks and channels. It is equally important for children to understand their place in the world today and the contribution they can make as citizens of the world.

---

<sup>37</sup> Kaiser Report, op. cit.

2. **ABCME should be closed down and resources consolidated to develop ABC2 as the destination for children aged 2-9 years. This new service would include scheduled programs with on-line games and on-demand viewing.**
3. **The ABC should be given a brief to develop new program content for a new media service for pre-school children and the early schooling years to help bridge the educational disadvantage for so many in this age group and make a powerful contribution to the formal and informal education of Australian children. The best creative brains in the world of media and technology should be recruited to design and produce quality products specifically aimed at reinforcing the learning and development goals of the Early Learning Development Framework (ELDF).**

The ABC needs to shift its focus in children's programming from volume to quality and purpose. No-one at the ABC is speaking about the value the public broadcaster could bring to Australian children through a new model; through innovation, promoting and sharing creativity, generating benefits to society through collaboration with education. The current review presents an opportunity for the ABC and their focus should be on the early childhood audience where programs of national and educative purpose are most needed. Where rights are available classic and durable Australian series should be acquired for the on-demand library for ABC2 as well as the best programs available from overseas.

4. **The 9-16 age group should be catered for by a new multi-platform service appropriate to their needs and interests.** This would be a project driven experience which leads to rewarding outcomes for the participants and also engages the wider community. It has to be a destination that distinguishes from existing services. The kids would develop projects on a managed basis.
5. **A committee should be appointed to shape and cost the system, decide the offerings, how it would be managed.**
6. **The Government should allocate funds to establish this new service.**
7. **Commercial networks should each pay an annual levy of \$10million in return for relief from quotas. By relinquishing their regulated quotas in exchange for an annual payment to a fund attached to the new children's service for 9-16 year olds, their responsibilities to the child audience, as holders of licences in public trust' would be fulfilled.** As it is proposed that broadcasters are also to receive substantial relief from the abolition of their license fees in Minister Fifield's media reform

package – reduced from \$130 million to annual spectrum fees of \$40 million – that concession, along with abolition of the CTS should be compensated by the networks.

- 8. Funding for a new service could be supplemented through a mixed economy model blending public and private support.** The service should protect children from purely commercial interests and the values that come with them. Rather than relying on old advertising models pushing product to children, ethical and corporate advertisers could be invited to be partners. We need to be as innovative in how we market/target the service as we are in what we actually produce. One interesting model of corporate advertising is the Samsung netball campaign [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1nsylwOk\\_lw](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1nsylwOk_lw). Here a Korean Corporate is sponsoring Australian values while selling their brand unobtrusively.
- 9. The new multi-platform service should establish a production fund to finance diverse children’s digital media programs and projects. Projects, including stories, should have an educational and innovative purpose as well as being entertaining. Projects would become part of an on-demand library.** <sup>38</sup>
- 10. Commissioned producers should be able to access *Screen Australia* funding and seek partners.**
- 11. The service will require visionaries who will need to be selected with care and trained to understand the developmental needs of children along with media expertise. These people should workshop program ideas for the new service.**
- 12. Communication and technology policies should be seen as integral to the nation’s education policy. The importance of media in the education of children has not been well recognised by the education system because there has not been a whole-of-government perspective linking education policy and communication policy.**

---

<sup>38</sup> It takes time to develop quality projects. It took 12 months to develop the first 13 episodes of *Round the Twist* with no deadline pressure on the writers. The golden age of television that has emerged over the last decade with brilliant shows from *The Sopranos* and *Six feet Under* to *Breaking Bad* and *The Young Pope*. They were developed over time with pilots and then an initial series that might run 12 or fewer episodes. The creative team behind the production normally takes a pause to fully develop and refine new scripts for another series. *Fawlty Towers* was just two series of 6 episodes each. Successful drama programs require passion; they are not churned out just to fill a slot.

**13. Media Education should be expanded beyond a narrow focus to include the content and learning potential of all forms of digital media and their social impact.**

**14. An online multi-platform service for children should include an interactive cyber-literacy destination developed in partnership with educators.**

**15. Australia needs a new agency dedicated to furthering innovation in education through new practices and new technologies. Government should fund ACMA and other organisations for a concerted research effort to document the links between children’s media use and their learning and development outcomes, in order to improve the effectiveness of the early learning and development initiatives.**

(The *Joan Ganz Cooney Centre* in New York was established to focus on the question, ‘How do new media help children learn?’) Since it was founded in 1982 the ACTF has worked to link television programs with learning resources. Such a role would assume new importance alongside the proposed new service as media literacy has become essential to children’s activities in cyberspace.

## **Conclusion**

New technology has opened up opportunities for children that could not have been imagined when the regulatory and subsidy system was developed. It is not just a failure of the system, but a lack of vision by key players that has set Australian production back, thereby denying the potential benefits of the digital world to the nation’s children.

ABC3 was a mistake and the level of its success has been highly exaggerated. It was an ill-informed venture at the time and for the ABC to continue to fund the existing service would be profligate. There is no justification for the Government to fund children’s television and media, if it is not for the clear developmental benefit of children. There are ample other opportunities for children to amuse themselves. What remains important today is the same fundamental issue as when we started – the contribution to and impact of the media system on the young.

**Australia could once again lead the international production industry by example, with an innovative multi-platform service to deliver children’s projects; a values-driven service whose mission to inspire learning is as great as its mission to entertain. This service could empower children with opportunities to access, manipulate, create, and share multimedia projects that meet their needs and reflect their interests. Children should become producers and partners of this service, not just its consumers and could help run the service.**

July 2017