

PUBLIC BROADCASTING IN AUSTRALIA - THE CULTURAL BENEFITS AND VALUE

Australian Film Commission Submission to the Cultural Ministers Council (CMC)

June 2001

INTRODUCTION

The Australian Film Commission (AFC) is the peak federal agency responsible for supporting the development of film, television and interactive media projects. We provide screen cultural and industry support through a range of measures which include: project development through script and other pre-production assistance; post-production grants and low-budget production funding; grants in support of a vigorous and diverse screen culture; international promotion of Australian productions and marketing advice; creative interactive media development, production and exhibition; the development of Indigenous film and television program makers; monitoring film, television and multimedia industry performance; and information services.

The AFC has enjoyed a successful working relationship with both ABC and SBS. We have included a list of collaborations between the AFC and the public broadcasters as an appendix.

The scope of the proposed CMC Discussion Paper is ambitious in terms of the range of issues proposed. In discussing the institution of public broadcasting, it is difficult to distinguish the cultural from the non-cultural. The very existence of public broadcasting is fundamental to the artistic, political and linguistic cultural life of the nation. The AFC regards 'culture' in a broad sense and considers virtually all output by the public broadcasters to have a cultural dimension.

Of principal concern to the AFC is the creation of Australian content, which encompasses the telling of Australian stories as well as the portrayal and promotion of Australian cultural identity. In our view these elements are key to the cultural benefits and value of public broadcasting. They are prominent as the first four issues in the Discussion Paper's Terms of Reference.

In formulating this submission, we drew on a large array of documents produced by and about the public broadcasters, including annual reports, corporate plans, published research and submissions to the Mansfield Review of the Role and Functions of the ABC in 1996. A bibliography of these sources is listed at the end of the submission.

The AFC's Submission to the Mansfield Review in 1996 was one of many that addressed the theme of Australian voices telling Australian stories.

"Narratives exist within all cultures as means of sharing information, ways of knowing who we are, of defining similarity and difference, and recognising and understanding shared experience. As television has a critical role in developing new narrative practices, styles and forms it is essential that the ABC be a site for ensuring a high level of Australian drama on our television screens."

The public broadcasters are the most important institutions in our society for the representation and dissemination of Australian cultural identity. Both ABC and SBS have impressive histories of significant cultural achievement. However declining Australian content levels, especially in original drama concerns the AFC.

LEVELS OF AUSTRALIAN CONTENT

ABC Drama

The ABC has a history of commitment to broadcasting Australian programs. Between the years 1996/1997 and 1999/2000, the ABC has increased its local content hours from 5,111 to 5,147 – an increase from 57 per cent of total airtime to 59 per cent. However in the key area of Australian drama, the ABC has steadily decreased the number of screened hours. From a high of 260 hours in 1996/97 to 147 hours in 1999/00, there has been 43 per cent decrease in the number of hours of Australian drama screened on the ABC.

The decline in commitment to local drama is demonstrated by a comparison between number of Australian and foreign drama hours screened. In 1996/97, 45 per cent of all drama screened on the ABC was Australian (imported drama accounting for 55 per cent). In 1999/2000 this had been reduced to 24 per cent with imported programming accounting for 76 per cent of all drama screened. The ABC's first release Australian TV drama output declined through the second half of the 1990's.

While the ABC's Australian drama is a relatively small part of the Australian drama slate, it remains the largest single area of ABC Television production expenditure after news and current affairs. Entertainment program genres, like drama, which tend to be very expensive and heavily traded internationally, are critical to the popularity of ABCTV [Communications Law Centre, December 1999].

ABC Local Content Hours Broadcast								
	96/97		97/98		98/99		99/00	
	No of hours		No of hours		No of hours		No of hours	
Categories	Imported	Local	Imported	Local	Imported	Local	Imported	Local
Arts	197	476	160	80	192	79	198	177
Childrens	1053	457	1200	430	1219	511	1327	459
Comedy	209	58	168	101	206	58	106	128
Current Affairs	21	785	3	778	0	795	3	804
Docos	206	116	348	157	355	197	305	184
Drama	312	260	474	193	472	157	478	147
Education	757	819	691	792	607	807	499	865
Entertain.	93	697	52	947	50	986	56	941
Features	1	163	18	171	23	153	20	191
Movies	691	3	441	3	472	1	541	2
News	0	492	11	559	1	485	0	366
Religious	52	41	81	30	66	29	78	36
Science & Talks	0		0		0	7	0	13
Sport	61	378	64	473	7	510	0	531
Transmiss.	2	13	5	19	4	7	3	6
Promotions	0	353	0	312	0	306	0	297

(estimates)								
Total hours less promotions	3655	4758	3716	4732	3672	4783	3614	4850
Total	3655	5111	3716	5044	3672	5088	3614	5147

Source: ABC Annual Reports 1996/97, 1997/98, 1998/99, 1999/2000.

The ABC has attributed its decline in screening Australian drama to a lack of resources. The ABC's annual budget was cut by \$66 million, or 12 per cent (two per cent in 1996/97 and a further ten per cent from 1997/98). According to the ABC, this has had a direct impact on both staffing numbers and programming.

The ABC's Triennial Funding Submission acknowledged a downgrading of drama:

"Drama expenditure itself has declined over the past three years, as a direct result of the overall budget decrease. In order to maintain viable levels of Australian content, the ABC's production mix has changed with long series drama (at comparatively low cost) prevailing over top-end production. Quality has been maintained throughout ... but the mix of genres is less broad, and provides fewer creative opportunities for independent producers."

SBS

While not required to produce Australian content via its Charter, SBS has increased its Australian content levels from 1491 hours in 1996/97 to 1658 hours in 1999/2000. Screening of local drama has increased from zero hours in 1997/1998 to 27.78 hours in 1999/2000.

SBS Local Content Broadcast Hours								
	96/97		97/98		98/99		99/00	
	No of Hours		No of Hours		No of Hours		No of Hours	
	Imported	Local	Imported	Local	Imported	Local	Imported	Local
Adult animation			2.44	.08	31.05	0.00	5.72	1.72
Childrens	12.09	.66			3	1.75		
Cooking	38.55	0	41.5	0	35.42	5.58	31.93	5.63
Comedy					27.12	2.83	45.35	9.70
Current Affairs	0	142.28	0	178.56	0	162.90	0	159.37
Dance	3.85	0	.42	0	4.05	0.00	2.28	0
Doco	466.61	55.06	4.25.76	61.49	408.03	77.73	336.93	91.15
Doco Series	288.54	33.16	230.35	32.46	312.05	37.93	353.02	68.73
Drama series	302.38	4.10	209.21	0	88.60	10.88	131.58	27.78
Eat Carpet	44.66	0	37.7	0	44.98	0.90	43.12	0.43
Education	0	570.43	0	187.24	0	120.15	0	136.62
Features	1439.63	0	1563.26	1.82	1529.63	3.20	1430.37	2.93
Fillers	29.50	.45	20	.05	15.07	1.42	21.53	4.17
Funny shorts			8.1	0	3.55	0.12	3.73	0
Magazine	0	94.16	0	91.8	0	114.57	0	137.23
Music	5.92	1.75	10.4	1.01	11.93	32.00	4.45	6.03
News	1759.33	161.64	19.49.23	223.49	2289.23	275.62	2345.58	275.37
Opera	9.25	0	6.15	0	20.40	0.00	77.77	0
Performance			.97	0	.97	0.00	0.77	0
Single Drama	5.12	.85	9.02	1.96	11.67	1.78	8.45	3.73
Specials	64.79	8.70	75.58	7.57	61.95	10.78	28.43	16.25
Sport	0	417.97	0	733.01	0	724.58	0	711.25
Total	4470.22	1491.21	4590.09	1520.54	4898.70	1584.73	4871.02	1658.10

Source: SBS Annual Reports 1996/97, 1997/98, 1998/99, 1999/2000

Where above categories are blank, the particular category was not analysed that year. Where there is a 0, the category existed but no programs fell into it. Sport is often called local to reflect the presentation component. Many programs received from feeds and bought are edited and compiled by SBS. This makes it difficult to apportion accurate import versus local figures on Sport.

Since 1994, SBSI has committed \$37.8 million to the production of over 404 hours of programs. Of this 281 hours of documentary and 123 hours of drama have been produced.

DOCUMENTARY

ABC TV is the major broadcaster of Australian documentary programming. It broadcast 184 hours of Australian documentary in 1999/2000 and 197 hours in 1998/1997. It was expected to spend \$9.9 million in cash below-the-line costs on documentaries, including the Natural History Unit, in 1999/2000 (up nearly \$2 million on the previous year) and \$12.8 million on science and talks (features). [CLC report]

Since its inception, SBS has substantially increased its screening of Australian documentary and documentary series. Documentary hours have risen from 55 hours in 1996/97 to 91 in 1999/00. Series have more than doubled in the same period, from 33 hours to 68 hours.

By comparison the commercial networks as a whole only spent \$3.4 million on Australian documentaries in 1999/2000, which was down from \$5 million in 1998/1999. In the period from 1996 to 2000, expenditure on Australian documentary by the commercial broadcasters declined by 86 per cent [ABA's Broadcasting Financial Results].

COMMERCIAL BROADCASTERS

ABA figures show commercial broadcasters spent \$91 million on Australian drama in 1999/2000, or an average of \$30.3 million each. This is an 18.6 per cent increase between 1996-2000.

In the latest figures released for 1999, the ABA has indicated that commercial stations screened on average 196 hours of Australian first release drama a year per channel, with Network Seven at 218 hours; Network 10 at 216 hours; and Nine Network averaging 126 hours. The commercial networks have an annual legislated requirement of 55 per cent Australian content (6am-midnight). In 1999 the commercials averaged 58.6 per cent Australian content.

Unfortunately, precisely comparative figures are not available from the public broadcasters because the reporting methods of the ABA and ABC are inconsistent. This represents an obstacle to industry analysis and highlights the desirability of data being made readily available in the public domain in a format that would facilitate comparative performance measurement on the important indicator of local drama. However, a simple comparison of program schedules would suggest that the ABC is screening substantially fewer hours of first run Australian drama than the Seven or Ten Networks.

Digital Television and ABC Online

The ABC Online site is consistently one of the most popular sites in Australia. The site contains over 400,000 pages of “high quality and innovative content covering a broad range of subjects across 20 genre gateways.” Recently the site received over 10 million accesses in a single week.

Demonstrated by its collaborative project Documentary Online with the ABC, the AFC has recognised that the Internet is a mainstream media for a large proportion of Australians and that ABC online is a valuable public resource for Australian content in a converged environment. The ABC has shown considerable initiative and innovation in this area and plans to increase investment through Australian new media content and an increased range of interactive content, including children’s and educational services. [ABC Triennial Funding Submission]

It is expected that with the additional funding from the government for the ABC’s transition to digital television, that the ABC will also be showing initiative and innovation in this area as well. In its National Interest Initiative Funding Submission, the ABC requested funding be directed towards digital television services. In particular, the ABC is developing a digital only multichannel known as ABC Plus which will involve distinct streams including ‘ABC Knowledge’, ‘ABC for Kids’ (which will provide an extra 50 hours of local content and will be available between 7am and 6pm) and ‘ABC Information’. The AFC hopes that the ABC will seek out and make space for Australian content creators in its new enhanced services.

AUDIENCE PERSPECTIVE

Independent market research supports the view that Australians place a high value on the role of the public broadcasters.

Perception of Cultural Benefits of Australian Television Programs			
Proposition	Agree	Disagree	Neither/ Don't know
International success of Australian films and TV programs gives people a sense of pride in Australian achievement	86.6	6.0	7.4
Australian films and TV programs are more meaningful to viewers than imported ones	71.4	19.5	9.1
Australian films and TV programs improve understanding of our country and way of life	77.0	14.6	8.4
Australian films and TV programs are preferable to imported ones of same type and quality	52.7	33.7	13.6
Australian TV would appeal less if fewer Australian programs were shown	35.1	48.6	16.3

Source: Papandrea 1997 Cultural Regulation of Australian Television Programs, p126.

PERCEPTIONS OF THE ABC

A Newspoll survey in December 1998 found that 88 per cent of those surveyed rated the ABC and its services as valuable to the Australian community. Newspoll in December 1999 revealed that Australians considered the quality of ABC television programs to be twice as good as their commercial rivals (87 per cent to 43 per cent). Other results showed that the public rated ABC TV as better for Australian programming. On this question the ABC rated 46 per cent and its nearest commercial rival rated 23 per cent. [Public Rates ABC Highly - Independent Survey] However, the decline in ABC TV ratings by some 20 per cent since the beginning of this year is of concern.

PERCEPTIONS OF SBS

In answer to the statement, "It is important that SBS be available to provide an alternative to the commercial stations", 86 per cent of respondents agreed in 1999, rising to 87 per cent in 2000. Similarly 73 per cent in 1999 and 75 per cent in 2000 agreed with the proposition, "It is important that SBS be available to provide an alternative to ABC television".

The number who found value in SBS (answering in the affirmative statements including "I wouldn't be without SBS", and "I find a lot of value in SBS") amounted to 69 per cent of all respondents in 1999 and 70 per cent in 2000. Finally, the number who agreed with the statement "SBS has types of programs you would never see on other TV stations" was 82 per cent in 1999 and 87 per cent in 2000. [Television Audiences 2000 Brochure SBS Corporation]

Appendix A: The AFC and Public Broadcasting

The AFC has had a long and successful history of working with the public broadcasters. The following is the list of current joint initiatives the Australian Film Commission is involved in with SBS and the ABC:

Documentary Online

The AFC is financing the AFC of four documentaries that have been developed especially as online projects. The ABC has agreed to host, maintain and promote these projects for a minimum of one year and up to a total of five years on the ABC Online website.

Women Working in Television Project

Since 1997, the AFC in conjunction with the public broadcasters and commercial networks have worked on the Women Working in Television Project which aims to advance the careers of women within the Australian television industry.

Home Movies

Following on from the successful *Swimming Outside the Flags*, the AFC in collaboration with SBS is developing the animation series *Home Movies*.

Indigenous Drama Initiative 3 and Fifty/Fifty

In collaboration with SBS Independent, the AFC's Indigenous Unit has launched two new drama initiatives titled *Indigenous Drama Initiative 3 (IDI3)* and *Fifty/Fifty* to follow on from the success of *From Sand to Celluloid*, *Shifting Sands*, *Crossing Tracks* and *On Wheels*. SBSi is co-investor in the project with SBS screening the films.

Some of the more significant initiatives previously completed include:

Stuff Art

An award-winning interactive media initiative hosted on the ABC website and publicised by Triple J between 1998 and 2000.

Million Dollar Movie Fund

Collaborative initiative with SBS Independent from 1997-2001 resulting in five feature film productions including *Mallboy*, which was invited to the 2000 Cannes Film Festival and *La Spagnola*, which is closing the 2001 Sydney Film Festival.

Community Broadcasting Association of Australia

AFC policy funded the CBAA for a community television policy position up to 1999.

2SER FM Media Magazine

Between 1996 and 1998 the AFC provided funding to the Sydney Educational Broadcasting Limited for the Media Magazine.

Curators in Industry Programme

The AFC funded the salary for the curator of TV d'Auteur at SBS Television during 1996-1997.

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