

National Cultural Policy Submission

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Submitted: On behalf of an organisation with arts-components (e.g. community organisation, tourism, venue, health, education etc)

Who we are:

We are a team of academics based at public universities in Australia with joint research interests in the public value of Australian books. Together, our areas of expertise include Australian books and writing, emerging writers and author livelihoods, literary sociology, especially how people engage with books and literary culture, and cultural economics, including the value of arts and culture.

Introduction

We write in enthusiastic support of the broad vision for the arts outlined in Creative Australia: National Cultural Policy, including the five goals and the three key pathways for action outlined in the document.

Our submission has a particular focus on Australian books and writing and on the question of public value in relation to Australian books.

We are passionate about the aim, as outlined in the Creative Australia: National Cultural Policy, “to improve policy and decision making in cultural industries and in government by enhancing the quality, range and availability of relevant cultural statistics” (p.120). We believe there is a significant gap in the cultural statistics available on Australian books.

This gap impacts upon the capacity of the government, sector and community to monitor, support and celebrate the significant contribution that Australian writers, the Australian book industry and related literary arts and cultural events and organisations contribute to public value in Australia.

Background

A key element of national cohesion is the ability of audiences to see and share in their own stories, including history, biography, fiction, children’s books, true crime, travel narratives and beyond. Nobody else is going to tell our stories for us, and Australia is like nowhere else on Earth. While we must connect with the world and participate in global culture, our national identity is founded on Australian stories, and many of these first come to life through the written word.

Our book industry, worth \$1.3 billion in 2021 (Books and Publishing 2022), has faced significant challenges in recent years due to digital disruption and the aggressive cultural marketing of the Northern Hemisphere English language market. Further, the COVID-19 pandemic has made it more difficult for Australian authors to maintain a decent standard of living. In 2020, for example, the Australian Society of Authors (ASA) surveyed 1400 Australian writers and found 80% are earning less than \$15,000 a year. More than 30% reported a downturn in their incomes due to COVID-19. ASA CEO Olivia Lanchester said of these results, “There is a fundamental disconnect between the

enormous value and importance the Australian public ascribes to books and the difficulties authors face earning a living delivering that value.”

We see a need for a greater understanding of the public value of our local book industry. By supporting a rigorous means to demonstrate the public value of the local book, this government has the opportunity to put in place support mechanisms, including targeted policy levers and sustainable forms of funding, that will help Australian authors, local publishers, educational institutions and literary arts organisations to continue to produce, appreciate, share and learn from Australian books and writing in all its forms.

Key point 1: There is an urgent need to achieve a deeper understanding of how Australians engage with Australian books.

Justification: Much recent scholarship questions the rise of measurement culture as a key aspect of public life, public policy discourse and the making of meaning. Economics and innovation scholar Mariana Mazzucato, for example, notes that we have entered a period in which “price has become the indicator of value” (2018, 270). For conditions to be sustainable long term, this imbalance needs urgent correction. Accordingly, we see an urgent need to expand notions of value in relation to Australian books. We define public value as the benefit books can create in the public sphere, taking into account affective elements such as cultural experience, belonging and identity.

While economic approaches tend to preference the production side of the book industry, they neglect to account for other sources of public value including educational and social benefit. We want to see evidence-based data relevant to the affective elements of cultural experience, practice and identity, tuned to the particularities of books as a unique cultural artefact. For example, what if we considered book titles in terms of their lifecycle as cultural artefacts: how might we identify, collect and articulate qualitative and quantitative data in this context? At present, there is no such mechanism, and as a result, much of the contribution Australian books make to national life, including social cohesion, health and well-being is impossible to articulate in an evidence-based manner.

This gap in our understanding makes it particularly difficult to advocate for the Australian literary arts sector in key public policy debates: as evident in the debate in 2015 around the Productivity Commission’s proposed “fair use” recommendations. Similarly, it makes it hard for the industry to advocate equitable treatment in arts funding terms in comparison to more expensive artforms. For example, “In 2020-21, the Australia Council gave out just 4.7 million dollars in grant funding to literature – 2.4% of the total funding pool that year. In contrast, the major performing arts organisations received \$120 million.” (Eltham 2022)

Key point 2: It is time to bring together experts and key stakeholders in the Australian book industry/literary arts sector to build a stronger understanding of the public value of Australian books as a first step towards building capacity and sustainability in this important and unique sector of the arts and creative industries.

In 2013, the Australian Government’s Book Industry Collaborative Council (BICC) delivered a final report, that, in part, worked to “emphasise the importance of the book industry to Australian culture and to show that the cultural and creative benefits of Australian books go hand in hand with the industry’s economic contribution to output, incomes, exports and employment.” (BICC 2013, p.11.). Its recommendations, which included a “clear need for improved collection of industry data” (p.19)

were never acted upon. In the same year, the Gillard government wound up the Literature Board of the Australia Council and since that time the books and writing sector's share of national arts funding has been in decline. In 2014, the Abbott government promised a new Book Council of Australia, earmarking an initial budget of \$6 million: it never eventuated.

There has been no cohesive and genuinely representative national conversation about books and writing in Australia since that time.

If, as stated in the Creative Australia: National Cultural Policy, there is a need to “more confidently advocate the value of the arts to national identity, to shaping and communicating Australian culture at home, and to promoting ‘brand Australia’ by trade and cultural diplomacy overseas” (p.32) then the Australian books and writing sector needs a new, strategic forum for a national conversation about the public value of Australian books.

Key point 3: A workable and transferrable set of public value dimensions particular to Australian books would constitute a valuable investment in understanding and hence maintaining and building the capacity and creativity of Australia's books and writing sector.

Justification: We support the statement, in the Creative Australia: National Cultural Policy, that “the cultural, social and economic benefits derived from arts and creativity are still not fully recognised politically” and that this is “because of the lack of sufficiently strong, comprehensive and comparable data about the sector and the economic and public value it creates” (p.32).

This is particularly so in relation to Australian books. We strongly support a national cultural policy that assists key stakeholders in the Australian book industry – including but not limited to author advocacy groups, professional associations for local publishers and booksellers, print industry groups and licensing organisations – to come together in order to arrive at a robust and nuanced understanding of the public value of the local book and strengthening their capacity to articulate such value. In particular, we would like to see the Australian books and writing sector supported to efficiently mobilise the public value of the local book as a key feature of future policy and public debate.

Australia has a unique opportunity to draw on a range of disciplinary experts in higher education to lay the groundwork for ongoing collaborative and comparative work on the public value of Australian books. Indeed, an opportunity to identify and collect a range of data relevant to the affective elements of cultural experience, practice and identity, and to experiment with presenting this data using a bespoke model applied to the local book – would constitute an original research contribution and would have flow on benefits applicable internationally.

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