

National Cultural Policy Submission

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I come to this discussion as the recent editor of Screenhub, a part of the Artshub website dedicated to news and analysis about the work behind the creation of our national stories in screen media.

I have a working knowledge of screen production, of small business online publication, of government arts funding, and the early development of internet creation by the national broadcasters.

First, some truisms.

We in Australia ultimately rely on a sense of national self confidence which springs from a particular experience as a migrant multicultural society, whose economy and survival depends on alliances. We are also a post-imperial nation, the inheritors of delusions about our own importance, created by invasion, seeking to transcend terrible wrongs.

We are a democracy, governed by rule of law, committed to peace, playing with the idea of relative equality of opportunity. We are learning to be a coherent society.

We need access to media which is clearly trustworthy, unbiassed and adequately funded. We dropped the ball on that right back in the 1970's when Whitlam funded the ABC properly, Fraser hacked it up and no subsequent government brought true vision to the ABC – although, ironically, Fraser did create SBS.

We are committed to a mixed model of government and private media. Unfortunately, our society has had to cope with a toxic Murdoch media at the same time as the government broadcasters needed to restructure to become more democratic in the digital era. And the whole sector, private and public, has to deal with the turmoil of broadband.

The fight between public and private began as soon as the ABC was set up as a radio network, sometimes for good reason as Auntie had trouble with that post-colonial bit. But if we had no government media now, we would be in the same mess as the United States.

So here are a few thoughts.

1. Of course, the ABC and SBS need to be funded much better. The restoration to a historical level is not the answer because the budget was already too low.
2. They need to create a commanding presence in children's TV, especially in high quality live action. This is about creating an international identity.
3. The ABC and SBS are not just broadcasters in that traditional radio and TV sense. They are national centres of the communication system, spreading their ideas properly into internet creation and traditional print publication. There have been many successes, but the main game has been TV with a sidebar in radio and less again on the net and in magazines. That really needs to change – they need to provide deep content origination in each of these forms with all the synergies we dream about.
4. They need to examine the unconscious culture of poverty which pervades organisations under so much financial stress for so long. Bashed and harassed, they can be timid, and compulsively risk averse. In time, the staff are hired and promoted because they are efficient rather than creative, because they fit in instead of sticking out. They are middle class, respectable organisations, often full of their own importance, driven by logistics and self-protection.

5. When they deal with the outside world, there is a tremendous imbalance of power. Our time never counts, their's is always well paid. We beg and they dispose. This is important because...
6. The broadcasters need to work in partnership. We do it, awkwardly, in the drama and documentary sectors and individual broadcast staff members and departments understand they are part of an ecology of production companies and freelancers which is vital to everyone. But we need, for instance, for the broadcasters to be in the book publishing sector with the existing companies, to support researchers and archives, to syndicate articles back and forth, to commission small magazines for series and branding opportunities... we need the ABC to be commissioning music and sticking up murals and running festivals – all stuff that happens but needs to be the norm and not some exception driven by an imported format.
7. There are good examples inside the broadcasters, where this does happen. It is a question of making sure that extra money can be used to create that open engagement with the culture, using the history of success, rather than creating yet more closed, secretive systems, driven by more technology, planned and prescribed and hungry for clicks.
8. The broadcasters need to spend a lot more money on marketing. On the back of every bus...
9. It is easy enough to get on the broadcasters; it is a very different proposition to work with them, to engage them in our projects. We, as the makers of creative culture, need to be able to make a freelance living, and we see this only in terms of the conventional arts. But we forget the sphere of public discourse, which engages with audiences and meaning.

How does this relate to my truisms?

One of the central points in any cultural policy is about creating an atmosphere of public ferment and excitement. The key is appetite, is an eager audience. Part of this is a restless, supported culture of ideas, of discussion, of essays, of debate and exploration. We need a close relationship with our academics, with our tertiary research institutions. We need to name our historians, to demand evidence for our policies on crime, to see our artistic achievers honoured so we can share their work as well.

By far the biggest public institutions engaged in this space are our national broadcasters. They are the instruments to build our culture, secure our future, sponsor our debates, and help us make decisions. We need them to make a fuss about ideas – a role they have dribbled away from over an entire generation.

Now we are so used to the public broadcasters with their backs against the wall, we forget what they are for. And a lot of great ideas are still-born, and excellent staff never get the chance to shine.