

RESPONSE TO Discussion Paper: ABC and SBS: Towards a digital future

Australian Directors Guild (ADG) December 12th 2008.

The Australian Directors Guild (ADG) is the industry association representing the interests of film and television directors, documentary filmmakers, animators and independent producers throughout Australia. ADG has 700 members nationally.

The ADG welcomes the opportunity to comment on the Discussion paper the Department of Broadband, Communications and the Digital Economy has published.

The ABC and SBS have comprehensively addressed the questions raised in the Discussion paper, and the ADG broadly supports the direction that both public broadcasters have proposed for the next three years, particularly in response to the constantly evolving technological landscape of the future. We believe this is a once in a lifetime opportunity to build a strong independent audio visual communication network in the digital era. This new era should be lead by the public broadcasters, and we applaud the ambitious and innovative plans they have laid down for the digital future.

For the purposes of this submission we have confined our response to the areas the ADG and our members work in, specifically the creation and production of locally made Australian screen content. This submission has been made with substantial input from the leading directors in the Australian Film and Television industry.

HARNESSING NEW TECHNOLOGIES TO DELIVER SERVICES

We see no better way for the cultural policy objectives of the public broadcasters to be realised, than through the opportunities offered by new technology, and feel confident that with the proposed strategies of the ABC and SBS in place, Australia will be able to maintain its cultural autonomy amidst the tide of foreign content arriving via digital and broadband platforms. We would however urge the government to consider how to implement acceptable levels of Australian content across the collective multi channels that all broadcasters will be operating.

We are encouraged that both broadcasters have exciting strategies in place for harnessing and maximising the potential of both digital broadcasting and broadband, which have positive flow on effects for the film and television industry in general, and social and cultural benefits for the broader community.

The ADG applauds the important role the ABC plays as an early adopter in relation to new technologies one which we hope it will maintain and extend as technologies, content and culture evolve.

The ABC's role as an innovator is crucial for the industry. It positions the public broadcasters together as cultural leaders from whom the independent sector can benefit in terms of knowledge and skills as these are inevitably shared as different platforms/media/content are explored, tested and become mainstream.

While there may be some risk involved with this for the broadcasters, we feel that to date, being on the vanguard has been by and large a success, and one from which the entire industry and community have benefited enormously. It supports our belief that it is the public broadcasters with their focus on their respective charters rather than commercial imperatives, which have an obligation, as well as the freedom and the knowledge required, to take broadcasting in Australia to new frontiers.

INFORMING AND ENTERTAINING AUSTRALIANS

The ADG applauds both public broadcasters for their statements on the number of hours of local content they would like to output in 2009 and beyond. Without stories to tell, no one will engage with the public broadcasters no matter how cutting edge their technology is.

Since the onset of television ABC TV has provided countless opportunities for filmmakers to tell unique stories, explore groundbreaking techniques and express themselves, all for the benefit of a growing and diverse audience.

For the past five years, locally produced drama production output from the ABC has plummeted. The whole industry is acutely aware of the connection between well funded public broadcasters and the health of the screen production industry. In terms of content, forcing filmmakers to reach back to the known and the formulas they know in an attempt to keep their audience figures up hasn't worked. Filmmakers need to take risks and there needs to be sufficient content production to enable them to take risks and balance that with the tried and true. Currently, there is little opportunity for filmmakers to be innovative. When the ABC reached its 100 hours of first run prime time drama, there were some unsuccessful shows among the excellent shows. Picking what will work and what won't with an audience is not a precise science.

The ADG believes that increased content and additional channels will allow for greater experimentation, nurturing of new talent and ultimately more diverse and higher quality programmes. The ABC and SBS have always been renowned for their pursuit of excellence in

content production, and we strongly believe that an environment where ideas and new talent can flourish, and where creativity and innovation is rewarded, will be actively encouraged through the embracement of new platforms.

The public broadcasters active engagement new technologies such as ABC's Q&A for example, also encourages the independent sector (producers, writers and directors) to experiment and be innovative in terms of new content and forms (eg the SBS series Marx and Venus).

In addition it encourages participation from a broader number and range of key creatives due to the feeling that there is a market for new content, there is interest in new forms and there is an audience for a diverse slate of programming.

The ADG is excited by the planned introduction of new suite of ABC channels and new SBS channels. With additional services being a key driver for the uptake of digital broadcasting, we view the new channels as an opportunity to not only accelerate viewer transition from terrestrial to digital reception, but also for both the drama and factual practitioners to provide content via new avenues for telling Australian stories, for developing skills within the industry and for catering to a

diversity of needs and specialty interests. We see the success of ABC2 with its specialised programming as an example of this. We believe that additional channels allow for experimentation with programming at low risk, and create new markets. Once the audience interest has been identified, new content for specific interest groups can be developed and produced, which in turn encourages a more diverse range of content producers

The proposed 100 extra hours of original Australian content on SBS will give a renewed sense of energy to the industry. The proposed additional ABC channels, in particular dedicated education and children's channels, offer the potential for factual and children's programme makers to increase their content production dramatically, thereby creating jobs, developing a deeper and wider skills base within the industry, while also ensuring that the variety of Australian voices are heard, stories are told and disseminated. We support SBS plans to introduce more children's programming, and in particular children's programming in languages other than English, with sub-titling to engage the widest range of Australian children. The role the public broadcasters play in commissioning new and innovative content in documentary and comedy from the independent screen sector is also crucial to maintaining independent voice and challenging educating audiences.

EDUCATION, SKILLS AND PRODUCTIVITY

Directors in documentary, drama, wildlife and animation have been able to build careers around their work for the public broadcasters, and many creative technicians that are leaders in their fields have been able to grow and develop ideas with the ABC and SBS.

The ADG strongly supports the proposal for the ABC to consider offering industry training externally on a cost-recovery basis, as we feel that this would offer the broader industry new skills as they evolve within the context of the realities of broadcasting environment. It would add greater value to the investment by the public broadcaster in new technologies by sharing the benefits with the industry and thereby developing a skills base from which it too could benefit as required, while confirming its role as an innovation leader. In addition, the ADG believes that a enormous amount of cultural and technical capital rests within the public broadcasters, and it would be wonderful opportunity for the industry if there were formal avenues for this to be shared.

SUMMARY

The ADG strongly supports the bids by ABC and SBS television in their triennial funding rounds. We urge the government to lead the way into the digital era by enhancing and substantially increasing support to the public broadcasters so they can build on the strong foundations of the public broadcasters and act as cultural leaders.

DIRECTORS TESTIMONIALS IN SUPPORT OF THE PUBLIC BROADCASTERS

The ABC gave us great freedom in casting, scripting and in the editing room with episodes we presented to them for network discussion. In particular the open approach to casting enabled us to source young actors, often un-trained, many of whom have gone on to have substantial careers in Australia's film and television industry and who I have enjoyed working with on later commercial broadcast productions. Actors like Alex Dimitriades ("Headon", "Young Lions", "Underbelly"), Callan Mulvey ("Underbelly", "Rush") and Ada Nicodemou ("The Matrix", "Home and Away").
JESSICA HOBBS (LOVE MY WAY, ANSWERED BY FIRE)

As an early Directing graduate of AFTRS my first job after Film School was as a staff director for the ABC Drama Department. As a beginner it's rather like when you get your drivers licence it's only then that you really learn how to drive the car. My first production was a drama series called Menotti and it was a brilliant training ground for directors/writers/producers and actors and I recall my first day on set was with a highly regarded theatre actor arriving to face the cameras for the first time, that actor was Geoffrey Rush.

Geoffrey, like all of us, enjoyed the fertile ground of ABC Drama to explore, learn, hone skills and be creatively challenged. We have all continued to contribute to the industry and the benefit of that wealth of experience is a direct result of those early encounters at the ABC.

Over many years I directed some of the ABC's landmark dramas including 1915, Spring and Fall, Seven Deadly Sins, GP etc. In every instance these shows allowed creative freedom across all the disciplines. Not only did we collaborate and expand our vision for each drama we learnt from each other and broke new ground. Just as Geoffrey had come from a theatre background so to did the ABC search out and nurture writers, producers and many more actors who had a varied background in other disciplines. This environment created a situation of "no boundaries" a place to work where questions were boldly asked and risks were taken. Issues of content were paramount, not style and marketability but issues of relevance to our Australian audience. Where we reflecting their current interests and concerns? Where we using our drama to inform and contribute to the community?

The development phase of these productions gave us the blueprint for many dramas that subsequently emerged on the commercial networks. Dramas that reflected Australians and their culture, concerns, sport, wars and so on...

DI DREW (ALL SAINTS, GP)

As one of the directors of WHO DO YOU THINK YOU ARE? I had the opportunity to explore a unusual triple treat for Australian audiences - genealogy and celebrity coupled together with history. SBS, as a public broadcaster, can commit to populist content from their own distinctive and intelligent approach. They play a unique role in the spectrum of Australian television content.
KAY PAVLOU (WHO DO YOU THINK YOU ARE, LOVE IS A FOUR LETTER WORD)

SBS' support of RAN, for example was quite something.

The support of SBS that allowed us to go to an actual island, (MASIG), with huge logistical challenges cost money. So from the get go there was this incredible understanding of process, and how location does impact creatively.

Then Penny Chapman was very open to respecting local culture/lore, and being on the island with the local mob made a huge difference to that side of things.

As a filmmaker it allowed me to bring a lot of cultural correctness to scenes and I always tried to do that as much as possible.

CATRIONA MCKENZIE (RAN, THE CIRCUIT)

It is difficult to imagine a series like SeaChange being made through the commercial networks. When we began, there was an enormous amount of work to set the show up, to build the characters and the whole locale and environment that would become so entrenched over the next three series. SeaChange was a breakthrough series, we were encouraged to work with the actors to build character and the writers were given an enormous amount of creative freedom. This was not a big budget production, but generated huge on-going audiences - through re-runs and into dvd. The formula was picked up by the commercial networks and built into further successful series (Grass is Greener, Packed to the Rafters) in an era when cop shows were the standard fare. One can't underestimate the on-going value for the writers, directors and actors who worked on the ABC shows like SeaChange, who then went on to build careers on the base of this work. Actors like David Wenham, Shane Bourne, Kerry Armstrong, Tom Long, Kevin Harrington became much loved and recognised with the Australian public through their work on these ABC series

RAY ARGALL (SEACHANGE, MDA)

I learned that there is no compromise in the quality of the work. There were financial restrictions to work within, but no restriction in creativity. There was a great sense of integrity in what you were trying to create – scripts, vision, and casting. Directors and writers worked much more closely than in commercial TV. Casting was much adventurous and always based, well it seemed to be, on matching the part to the actor. We could reach much deeper into that incredible pool of talent of Australian actors and actresses.

The ABC would push visually boundaries. It was always ahead of commercial programming. Once something proved successful on ABC it would be then spread to the commercials. There would be no 'Underbelly' without 'Wildside' This has also been taken up by SBS who is showcasing really interesting and often much edgier work. Cable programming is also forging ahead in this. 'Love My Way' is something that used to be the heart of ABC type shows. Another important factor of ABC and SBS programs is that they are not formatted around ads. Working to an act out every ten minutes or so can give at worst melodramatic air to commercial shows and or at least imposes a rhythm that may not best serve the story. It doesn't necessarily make bad TV, but it just reduces the options.

KATE WOODS (MDA, LAW AND ORDER)

I loved the improvisational aspects of Wildside and it has influenced my direction on every drama since that day,.

PETER ANDRIKIDIS (EAST WEST 101, UNDERBELLY)

I had the good fortune of working on all three series of the ABC's MDA.(2002/03/05). Probably the last series they presented, and that in conjunction with Screentime.

I can't really say that there was no ABC Management interference (casting and content), nor that we had a luxury of shooting time (an ABC hour in five and a half days), but there was sheer joy in working with the expertise and teamwork of their resident personnel (probably by now mostly dispersed) and the opportunity of sustained, adult story telling, without having to dumb things down, nor constantly allow for the hiatus of commercial breaks.

There is no question in that increased drama output from our public broadcasters will boost the opportunities for young and established practitioners to exercise and develop their various skills. And no question that this added quality will only enhance our industry and viewers alike.

AARNE NEEME (MDA)