

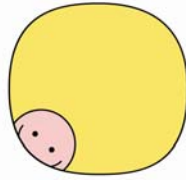
Submission

No 31

## INQUIRY INTO CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE 9-14 YEARS IN NSW

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AUSTRALIAN CHILDREN'S  
TELEVISION FOUNDATION

Submission to the  
Inquiry into Children and Young People 9-14 Years

by the  
New South Wales Committee on Children and Young People

**We spend significant resources creating content for children aged 9-14. The aim of this content is specifically to enhance a child's understanding and experience, and in this way help take children through adolescence and into adulthood.**

**However, the current system is broken. Most of this content is not reaching its intended audience.**

**The ACTF is supporting the establishment of a dedicated Australian children's television channel run by the ABC. The channel can be an effective way of providing children with content actually aimed at them.**

**It can be used as a means to open a dialogue with children up to their early teens. It can teach them and provide them with the information that they need to tackle adult life, tailored to their stage of development.**

### **Age appropriate media for children**

Providing children with audiovisual media created especially for them has a number of benefits:

- educational programming can prepare children for different stages of school. Film and television can be powerful learning tools as they teach while engaging viewers' minds, senses and emotions;
- children's film and television are effective ways of studying sensitive issues such as puberty, bullying and conflict with parents. Children are willing to openly discuss what is happening to a television character without feeling exposed to their peers;
- children's programming has proven to be an effective way of connecting with otherwise unengaged students; and
- children's programs with prosocial messages can increase social capacities such as cooperation and tolerance of others.

Media is most effective at delivering these outcomes when the messages are entertaining, potentially embedded in the narrative of the program they are watching.<sup>1</sup>

For example, the current children's drama program *Lockie Leonard*, based on Tim Winton's series of books, is aimed at children aged in upper primary school and lower secondary school; children directly in the age range of the current Inquiry.

It aims to help children, but primarily boys, tackle issues such as the transition to adolescence, masculinity, peer pressure and familial relationships. But it delivers these messages in an entertaining, often humorous way, using characters and situations that feel both real and relevant to the child audience.

As a teacher notes, "children can really relate to the characters, they can relate to the experiences and it really gives them an impetus to talk about their own life and their own experiences."<sup>2</sup>

Alternatively, there are also studies that show that viewing of content inappropriate for a child's age may have detrimental effects. For example, children who have a heavy media diet of violence are more likely to see aggression as acceptable in general life.<sup>3</sup> There have been cases where the content of news programs has created fear and anxiety in children. There is also growing concern that children are becoming prematurely sexualised through, amongst other factors, viewing content which features characters, situations and experiences intended for older viewers.<sup>4</sup>

## **The response**

The United Nations Convention of the Rights of the Child, which has been ratified by Australia, specially calls upon governments to encourage the mass media to disseminate information and material of social and cultural benefit to children.<sup>5</sup>

In Australia, consecutive governments have supported the delivery of content to children with a multi-pronged approach:

- the establishment and maintenance of the Australian Content Standard and Children's Television Standards (the "Standards"). The Standards require that the commercial free-to-air broadcasters screen 390 hours of children's content each year. At least two-thirds of this content must be Australian, and an average of 32 hours per year must be new, local, children's drama;
- production funding for children's programs, administered by the Film Finance Corporation Australia (soon to become Screen Australia). Over \$270m of public funds have been spent on local children's content over the past two decades;
- funding to the Australian Children's Television Foundation ("ACTF") to support the development and production of new content; and
- funding to the Australian Broadcasting Corporation ("ABC") which devotes a significant proportion of its daily schedule to children's programs.

Programs created by broadcasters under the Standards must not just be made specifically for children, they must also aim to enhance a child's understanding and experience. Programs are assessed by the Australian Communications and Media Authority ("ACMA") to ensure that these criteria are met. The goal is to create high quality, developmentally positive content for the Australian child audience.

These mechanisms are principally directed at television. While some may argue that support for television is outdated due to the rise of new technologies, this is not borne out by

research. Despite the increase in use of other mediums, in particular the internet and gaming consoles, ACMA recently reiterated that television is still by far the most persuasive and influential media in the lives of children.<sup>6</sup>

### The failure of the current system

Unfortunately, these mechanisms do not deliver on their intent. Most children’s programs screened on television are simply not reaching the child audience.

Commercial broadcasters have a business imperative to deliver advertisers the largest mass audience possible. This means that ‘niche content’, such as children’s programming, will always be marginalised in their television schedules.

Around half of the local children’s shows on commercial broadcasters are screened at 4:00pm on weekdays. This is a time when hardly any of the audience in the range of this Inquiry is watching television. After school sport, tutoring and travel times mean that only a small proportion of the audience is even at home to watch programs in this time slot. Those that are home are often complying with homework rules that dictate that they must study before they can watch television. Children of all ages now prefer to watch television in the evenings, between 6:00pm and 9:00pm.<sup>7</sup>

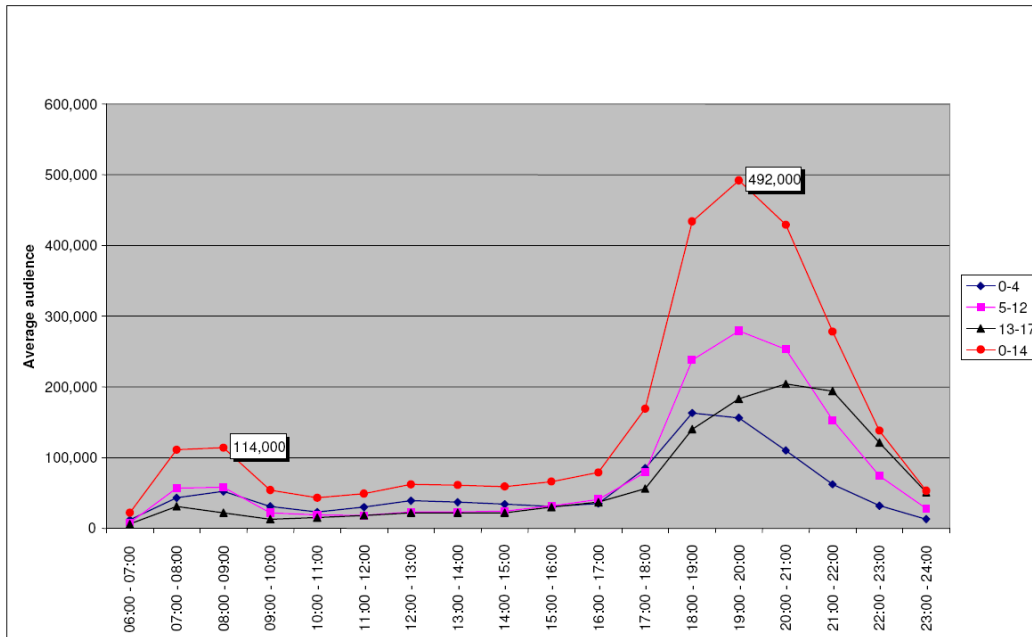


Diagram: Average child television audience by age and time (Source: Australian Communications and Media Authority)

With only the rarest exception, no commercial broadcaster shows children’s programs created under the Standards after 4.30pm. The ABC shows children’s programs up to 6.00pm on weekdays, but then switches to its adult programming.

We are critical that children in the 9-14 age range and younger are being exposed to the violence of *Prison Break*, or the inherent voyeurism of *Big Brother*, yet we respond by providing our children with absolutely no children’s programming on free-to-air television at the times they most want to watch it.



If children were at least aware of the children's programs being screened earlier in the day, then they could take advantage of new technology, such as digital hard drives, to record the programs to watch later in the evenings. But they usually have no idea the programs are even screening. There is no on-air promotion of children's programs on the free-to-air broadcasters during children's peak viewing times.

The situation is just going to get worse. As audiences continue to fragment to pay television and the internet, free-to-air television broadcasters will need to cut expenditure. Children's programming has been a perennial target.

Pay television does provide dedicated children's channels, and could therefore be argued by some as a solution to the problem of children being unable to access age appropriate content. But only a minority of families have pay television, creating an obvious equity issue. Indeed, already there are more households with free-to-air digital television than pay television. There is also the fact that children's pay television is predominantly American content. It rarely talks to our children with an Australian voice, or in a local context. Pay television does not provide an effective solution to the problem.

### **The solution, around the world, has been for public broadcaster backed digital children's channels**

These problems are not limited to Australia. All over the world, children's access to age appropriate programs is shrinking.

It has been the creation of public broadcaster backed, dedicated children's channels that has led the fightback for children's media: CBBC and CBeebies in the United Kingdom, Ki.Ka in Germany, Gulli in France and Barnkanalen in Sweden.

Following these world's best practice examples, the ACTF and ABC are jointly proposing the establishment of an Australian digital children's channel.

The proposed channel will screen programs from 6:00am to 9:00pm and feature a diverse slate of programming, including drama, comedy, news and educational programming. The channel will broadcast a minimum of 50% Australian content. This is far more than any other broadcaster.

The channel needs to be a true 'multi-platform' service for Australian children which incorporates both broadcast (be it on terrestrial, cable or mobile television) and broadband (on both computers and handheld devices). While television remains the primary medium to which children turn to engage with content, the child audience, especially those in the age range of the current Inquiry, is at the forefront of embracing new delivery methods. To effectively deliver age appropriate programming to children, content needs to be delivered to children wherever and whenever they wish to view it.



### **A much better service**

However, the children's channel must aim to be something far more than just a mechanism that better enables our children to watch age appropriate content. The channel should be everything that a public broadcaster is and does, but for the child audience.

Most of the content currently provided to children under the Standards is either drama, quiz shows or light entertainment programming. There is scope for more serious children's content, with the aim to better equip children to develop skills that they can carry into adulthood.

For example, the ACTF is a supporter of a daily, half hour children's news program. Children will be better prepared to participate in politics, business, civic life and society generally if they are informed citizens.



It is not enough that children watch the daily 'adult' news, as it is presented in a way that assumes certain knowledge. It contains little background or context for the child viewer. It also often contains images that might concern children at the younger age range of the current Inquiry.

A children's news service should be tailored to children's developmental needs. An excellent model is the *Newsround* program produced by the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC). The program uses footage from the BBC's nightly news program, and delivers the news of the day, but in a manner appropriate for the child audience. Additional background information is superimposed over footage so that children can better contextualise the information. For example, for a story on interest rates, onscreen text might give more details as to what the Reserve Bank is set up to do and the things it takes into account when making decisions.

Children's news programs can also reduce the potential for children to harbor unjustified assumptions or fears about events. A child of nine in Sydney, for example, may not appreciate that a natural disaster in Indonesia places them in little personal danger. A children's news service could provide additional information as to where the disaster is relative to Australia. Children will often worry less when they understand more.

An effective children's news service would also allow for interactivity with viewers over the internet. Central to children's anxiety is a sense of powerlessness. Enabling children to enter into a dialogue about important events or crisis reduces this sense.

Another effective tool for equipping children would be a child targeted current affairs style program. Governments spend significant resources trying to inform children on issues of health, managing money, jobs and careers and consumer rights – but have trouble reaching their target audience. A current affairs program on a dedicated children's channel could be an effective platform for delivering this material to its intended recipients.

Evidence suggests that these types of programs will be popular among child viewers. *Newsround* is typically one of the highest rating children's shows in the United Kingdom.

### **Interacting with children in schools**

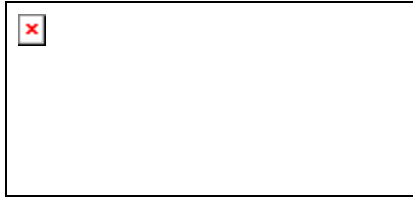
The intention is that the channel should also be a contemporary educational tool.

Digital resources will become more and more important for our children's education. This is especially true for children in the age range of the current Inquiry; children who are sophisticated decoders and users of digital content.

The Commonwealth Government has acknowledged that it will be necessary to create digital content and curriculum resources to take full advantage of the proposed 'Digital Education Revolution'.

It is intended that a significant block of programming on the channel be educational content, specifically linking into the national curriculum. These programs, or specially edited parts of them, can help form the digital resources required by teachers. The Commonwealth Government's initiative to provide classrooms with fibre-to-the-premises broadband means

that channel content, even shows of a significant duration, will be practically 'on demand' for teachers. The channel can deliver these digital resources to teachers ready for use, cleared of any rights issues.



Use of the programs can be backed up with online teacher resources (such as study guides and lesson plans) through the channel's online education portal. The ACTF is the leading provider of such assistance on Australian audiovisual content. More than 50,000 teacher resources are downloaded from the ACTF website each year and thousands of teachers attend ACTF professional

development sessions, training teachers on how to effectively use local content in the classroom.

All State and Territory Ministers at the Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs (MCEETYA) have endorsed the channel proposal for its potential use in education.<sup>8</sup>

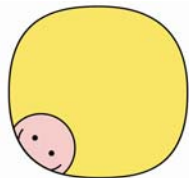
### **Interacting with children's creativity**

The channel should embrace the phenomenon of user-generated content, providing multiple platforms to share content actually made by the audience. Children in the Inquiry's age range are no longer content with just being consumers of media; they want to participate.

Digital technology and simple software applications are now enabling children, even at the younger range of the Inquiry's age range, to create sophisticated, high quality content. Children are proud of their creations and want to share them.

The children's channel could provide a broad platform for children to express themselves and their creativity to their peers.

### **For further information**



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Endnotes:

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<sup>1</sup> Marie Schmidt and Elizabeth Vandewater, *Media and Attention, Cognition and School Achievement* in *The Future of Children-Children and Electronic Media* (2008), 68.

<sup>2</sup> Sue Young, Assistant Principal, Serpell Primary School

<sup>3</sup> Barbara Wilson, *Media and Children's Agression, Fear and Altruism* in *The Future of Children – Children and Electronic Media* (2008), 100-101.

<sup>4</sup> See, for example, the current Parliament of Australia Senate Inquiry into the Sexualisation of Children in the Contemporary Media Environment.

<sup>5</sup> United Nations, *Convention on the Rights of the Child*, Article 17.

<sup>6</sup> Australian Communications Media Authority, *Media and Communications in Australian Families* (2007), 3.

<sup>7</sup> ACMA, *Media and Communications in Australian Families* (2007), 4.

<sup>8</sup> 20<sup>th</sup> MCEETYA meeting – Brisbane, July 2006