

SUBMISSION TO THE INQUIRY INTO AUSTRALIA'S CREATIVE AND CULTURAL INDUSTRIES AND INSTITUTIONS.



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INTRODUCTION

The Australian Children's Television Foundation (ACTF) welcomes the opportunity to contribute to this Inquiry into Australia's Creative and Cultural Industries and Institutions. The focus of our submission is the production of quality screen content for Australian children, and how this content contributes culturally, socially and economically to our nation.

WHO WE ARE

The ACTF is unique in the world; a not-for-profit organisation with a singular purpose to deliver quality screen content for children all over Australia, and all over the world. The ACTF has been at the forefront in developing a world class Australian children's screen industry with an enviable reputation.

The ACTF makes Australian children's lives better through screen content that reflects Australian culture and values. We act as a catalyst for the production of quality Australian children's screen content which reaches and connects with children on all the platforms they engage with. We achieve this by providing:

- Script development funding;
- Capacity building/enabling/nurturing producers and emerging talent;
- Production investment (via distribution advance and/or equity);
- Promotion, worldwide distribution, advocacy for children's screen content; and
- Education resource development and scaffolding, and educational outreach.

The ACTF is a not-for-profit public company, independent of commercial or other interests. We receive funding of \$2.89 million from the Commonwealth Government (through the Department of Infrastructure, Transport, Regional Development and Communications) and much smaller contributions from the governments of all States and Territories. We generate additional income from our sales and distribution activities. Our governing body are a Board of Directors, all of whom serve in an honorary capacity. They come from every State and Territory and their expertise ranges across the screen sector and creative industries, educational practice and leadership, child psychology, public companies and private enterprise.

We occupy a singular position at the intersection of the screen business, education, Australian culture and social impact. We operate in a nimble and flexible way, depending on an individual production's needs and a producer's experience and expectations.

For 38 years we have embraced, championed and adapted to changing times and opportunities, whilst maintaining our focus on achieving quality outcomes for the child audience.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

THE BENEFITS OF AUSTRALIAN CHILDREN'S CONTENT

Children are inundated with screens during their formative years, right at the time when they are developing their sense of identity and self-esteem. It is vital that they are provided with screen content especially for them. High- quality Australian children's programs generate many economic and non-economic benefits for Australia.

Economic benefits include the employment of people in the screen sector all over Australia, the unique training opportunities children's screen content provides for practitioners, and the export benefits and soft diplomacy afforded by the widespread export of Australian children's programs.

Non-economic benefits include the educational and nation building aspects of Australian children's screen content, which contributes to building empathy, kindness, social cohesion and shared values in our communities. They can contribute to the important public health and social messages on issues such as bullying, children's mental health and school readiness. Aside from inspiring, entertaining and informing Australian children and their families, good quality children's programs are also great teaching tools and can be highly educational, both in formal and informal teaching situations.

Australia is a recognised world leader in the production of high quality children's content, which is popular with audiences in Australia and exported all over the world. This year, for example, an Australian children's drama, *Hardball*, (produced by Northern Pictures for the ABC) has captivated Australian primary school aged children, won every major international award possible, (including the Prix Jeunesse, Banff Rockie Award and an International Emmy Award), and been purchased by the BBC, ARD Germany, France Television, South African Broadcasting Commission among many others. It is a prime example of the success story that is Australian children's television.



SUSTAINING A VIABLE AUSTRALIAN CHILDREN'S SCREEN INDUSTRY

The Australian screen sector, including the production of children's screen content, is supported by inter-connected policy levers which are currently in a state of transition and reform, in response to a rapidly changing viewing environment.

The Commonwealth Government has recently announced its response to the Supporting Australian Stories on Screen Options Paper, which will see it:

- Simplify existing regulations and provide greater flexibility for commercial broadcasters;
- Reduce the expenditure requirement for subscription broadcasters;
- Ask streaming services operating in Australia to report on their level of investment in Australian content;
- Harmonise the Producer Offset for film and television production to 30%;
- Provide \$30 million over 2 years in additional funding to Screen Australia from 1 July 2021 to invest in Australian film, drama, documentary and children's content;
- Provide \$20 million over 2 years in additional funding to the ACTF from 1 July 2021 to boost development, production and distribution of high quality Australian children's content.

It is clear this response is intended to support content with high production values which reach audiences in Australia and internationally. It provides attractive levels of funding to high quality productions.

Over the next three years it will be imperative to monitor the impact of these reforms on production levels, the type of content that is commissioned, and the investment of all Australian broadcasters, including the public broadcasters, as well as the streaming platforms.

DIRECT AND INDIRECT ECONOMIC BENEFITS AND EMPLOYMENT OPPORTUNITIES OF CREATIVE AND CULTURAL INDUSTRIES

The production of children's media plays a vital role in the screen industry, employing people all over Australia, including regional Australia.

ECONOMIC BENEFIT 1:

Children's television creates employment and training opportunities.

Many of our most skilled practitioners on camera and behind the scenes have learned their craft on a children's television project.

Children's television productions act as important springboards into the film industry. During the recent Commonwealth inquiry *Supporting Australian Stories On Our Screens - Options Paper* many submissions highlighted this phenomenon. Talent agent Catherine Poulton highlighted in her [submission](#) that children's drama has been a "talent accelerator" for many of her clients, and Goalpost Pictures called children's television a "proven talent escalator" for both cast and crew in its [submission](#).

There is a long list of performers of the calibre of Nicole Kidman (*Room To Move*, *Winners series*), Margot Robbie (*Elephant Princess*), Sean Keenan (*Lockie Leonard*) and many others, who got their start working in Australian children's drama.

These sentiments are echoed by the Australian Production Design Guild in their [submission](#), pointing out the career pathway provided by children's drama to production designers now working on the world stage. Leading Australian directors, including Jeffrey Walker and Daina Reid, have gained valuable experience directing Australian children's drama.

The Australian Film Television and Radio School highlighted the children's television production sector as one of the key centres of excellence in the industry by providing invaluable training pathways for key talent:

"While some talented individuals are compelled to travel overseas to further their careers, and often then remain overseas (directors, for example), genres that work in collaborative teams, with ongoing output relationships with end-users, tend to stay at home. Consequently, the companies they are associated with grow and become local economic drivers in the sector...In Children's, there is Flying Bark in Sydney, Ludo, the creators of the hit series, Bluey, in Brisbane and Blue Rocket in Tasmania. Each is a mainstay of the local industry.... These centres must be recognised for their potential as highly productive training and internship pathways – vital for the ongoing growth of a diverse, healthy screen ecosystem. AFTRS argues ... the government prioritises creativity and considers identifying and supporting these 'centres of excellence': the domestic powerhouses of Australian screen storytelling and culture."

AFTRS, SUBMISSION FROM THE AUSTRALIAN FILM, TELEVISION AND RADIO SCHOOL (2020)

ECONOMIC BENEFIT 2:

Screen industry supports other industries and regional areas, contributes to soft diplomacy and export dollars.

The production of children's content also nurtures and supports businesses and industries in other fields. For every project which employs people in front of and behind the camera, other businesses draw economic benefits such as caterers, local shops, airlines, car rentals and hotels. Particularly in regional Australia, film productions cause a significant economic boost in regional towns, as film crews stay for several weeks and spend their wages on location, working during the week and being tourists on the weekends.

Australian locations have contributed to the export success of Australian children's dramas, which are shot all over Australia. Children's dramas like *H2O: Just Add Water*, *Mako Mermaids*, *Round the Twist*, *Dance Academy*, *The Unlisted*, *Itch*) showcase Australia's stunning natural beauty, unique wildlife, widely envied lifestyle and vibrant society. This in turn builds influence by encouraging visitors, both within Australia as well as overseas.

The Australian children's television industry has been making a major contribution to Australia's 'soft power diplomacy' for more than three decades. Australian children's programs like *Round the Twist*, *Spellbinder*, *Ocean Girl*, *The Genie From Down Under*, *Mortified*, *Lockie Leonard*, *Mako Mermaids*, *Little Lunch*, *Dance Academy* and *Hardball* have been screened by major broadcasters around the world. Ultimately these programs capture the hearts and minds of those abroad through the presentation of Australian culture and values.

In 2021, *Maverix*, an adrenalin-fuelled live action children's drama will be shot in Alice Springs. This means a film crew will live in Alice Springs for a few months, therefore support local businesses and hotels by spending their wages in the region. This film project will also support local businesses and create traineeships and other employment opportunities for regional Northern Territory. Central Australia will then be showcased as an exciting destination to the children and families who watch locally on ABC ME and the many more around the world who will see the series on Netflix, who have acquired the world rights outside Australia. As a children's series it can be expected to have a long life, being repeated and screened many times over as there is a new audience for whom the show is completely new every few years.

THALU CASE STUDY

Thalu, a live action series from Weerianna Street Media, was developed over 2018 and produced in 2019, with NITV, the ABC and the ACTF. It was also supported by Screen Australia and Screen West. The series follows a disparate group of kids who join forces on a mission to save their communities from the mysterious cloud heading their way and engulfing towns and camps in its path. The series was produced in Roebourne in the Pilbara region of Western Australia with a children's cast from the community, supported by elite adult Indigenous actors from all over Australia. As *Thalu*'s producer and director Tyson Mowarin puts it: "*Thalu* was a fantastic opportunity. By developing and shooting a drama series in Ngarluma Ngurra, we wanted to show that a small production company in the remote Pilbara of Western Australia could bring a whole lot of people together (both professional and first timers from the local community) to make something magical."

ECONOMIC BENEFITS

The entire budget of *Thalu* was spent in regional Western Australia, including the film production, for location hire, post-production and music creation for the series. *Thalu* also provided additional employment opportunities for locals: 30-50 people stayed in Roebourne for three months and spent their wages in the area, including Roebourne, Wickham and Point Samson. Local businesses benefitting from this included the local store, local catering, petrol station, art gallery, local markets and local airlines, as well as the local sporting clubs. Any ongoing profits made from *Thalu* will flow back into the community as the production company is based there.

INDIRECT AND NON-ECONOMIC BENEFITS:

Thalu came from the Roebourne community from the ground up, the series is owned by the community and not a fly in fly out production. Roebourne is a regional area with social challenges, in the midst of which *Thalu* provided training opportunities, life experience for all people involved in the film project, insights into careers and future opportunities for individuals both in front of and behind the camera. The child actors in particular gained many educational experiences and benefits by having to take on responsibility, being reliable, having a purpose and reading the scripts.

They came away from the experience having grown personally, with something that they and their extended families can be proud of.

The series was produced, directed and written by Indigenous Australians. ACTF's executive producer Bernadette O'Mahony and Mark O'Toole provided mentoring opportunities and built capacity by mentoring Robyn Marais and Tyson Mowarin as drama producers and directors and assisting the producers to get a drama series credit.

Thalu is quintessentially from Roebourne with the theme song, cast, development and production filming all in and from Roebourne:

"The making of Thalu brought people from all over Australia to Ngarluma Ngurra to work with the community as a team and make something we truly think is special. Thalu was created from the ground up in Roebourne: from the initial development workshop with the kids and community, to the casting, to all the locations and filming, the editing, and even the theme song was written, performed and recorded here."

TYSON MOWARIN, PRODUCER AND DIRECTOR, WEERIANNA STREET MEDIA

The finished series has put this tiny regional community on the world stage and enables Indigenous kids to see themselves on screen as the leads of a television drama series, and as heroes of their own story.

As delightfully surreal a live-action children's show as may be seen on our screens, Thalu follows the unlikely alliance of four girls and three boys as they flee through the spectacular Pilbara region trying to stay one step ahead of a mysterious dust cloud and the sinister Takers within... Community stories from the West Australian town of Roebourne where the series was shot are woven with elements of Ngarluma culture to create a unique narrative that mixes Little Rascals, Teletubbies and Mad Max (minus the violence and car chases) to distinctive effect in a show that is all Country. [...]
Thalu is a weird and wonderful winner.

EDDIE COCKRELL, THE AUSTRALIAN, 17 APRIL 2020



NON-ECONOMIC BENEFITS THAT ENHANCE COMMUNITY, SOCIAL WELLBEING AND PROMOTING AUSTRALIA'S NATIONAL IDENTITY

BENEFIT 1:

Children's television is validating for children.

What children see on screens influences the way they think about themselves and the world around them. The stories they see explored on screen inevitably contribute to their understanding of what is 'normal' and valuable. It is affirming for children to see stories that are genuinely representative of their own experience of the world and to know that stories like theirs are worth telling.

As soon as they see Australian people, Australian characters, that's something they latch onto. It's what they 'get': it's what they can write, it's what they can explore, it's what they can joke about. They can pull comedy out of [television programs] like Little Lunch and Mustangs FC.

DANE KRAMS, TEACHER OF FILM, TV AND NEW MEDIA, MANSFIELD STATE HIGH SCHOOL (QLD)

It is key for children to see characters who not only look like themselves, their family and their community, but who sound like them too. Australian children should have access to content which genuinely reflects their language, community and culture. In a [submission](#) to the recent Commonwealth Options Paper, a parent expressed this as follows: "If fewer Australian stories are made, my family and I will see less of ourselves and our culture reflected on our screens. ...Bring on more kids shows like Bluey!! Recognisable landmarks from our own city - the west end markets, mowing the lawn, camping, kookaburras. I want my girls to identify, relate, have pride, seeing Australian stories on screen."

LITTLE LUNCH CASE STUDY

Quality local children's series such as Little Lunch provide children with characters, settings, and events that they can readily identify with. *Little Lunch* captures the funny and touching adventures that occur during snack time in an Australian primary school context. Families love seeing these familiar experiences played out on screen, as it is universally relatable. During the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, the screening of everyday school life also assisted children with the isolation of home schooling:

Our kids are missing school after the long Covid-19 shutdown and Little Lunch is a great way to bring them back. [...] It follows a group of children on a playground during their school break. They talk about friendship, teachers, school work and everything in between. It is funny but insightful and can open up conversations between you and your child about different things happening in their school life - bullying, homework, making friends. As an adult, you too will get a laugh and a few life lessons along the way too!

LIMERICK LEADER 31 JULY 2020

BENEFIT 2:

Australian children's television can be educational.

The ACTF has extensive experience in producing resources that interconnect relatable children's television content with the Australian school curriculum. Children learn both from watching high quality programs on screen as well as in a more formal school setting where teachers use screen content to illustrate certain points:

- Children learn *through the media* about the content explored in television shows and movies, and by observing the social interactions depicted. Children who see their own lives reflected on screen are reassured that stories like theirs are worth telling. Looking beyond the affirmation experienced by individual viewers, screen content also influences how we think about others and what is 'normal'. Becoming engaged in a television drama is an opportunity to try on someone else's shoes and consider what it is like to be them. And in doing this, it encourages understanding and acceptance of others in 'real life'.
- Children learn *about the media* by analysing screen stories to learn about their construction and meaning, intended audience and purpose. ACTF Teaching Toolkits support students and teachers to examine a film's construction and themes. Learning tasks are mapped to the Australian curriculum, and draw on content such as English, Health and Physical Education, STEM and Media Arts.
- Children learn about *creating media* by analysing media texts, stories and film techniques, they learn to create their own media and learn about media careers. Great tools to assist with this are ACTF created Apps that are based on children's television programs. For example, the *Little Lunch App* is designed to promote literacy learning while also developing digital technologies skills in children and supports teachers and students in creating and sharing their own *Little Lunch*-inspired episode.

Our ACTF supported television programs and their related teaching resources allowed us during the COVID-19 pandemic to support schools and families during difficult lockdown and home schooling times. The ACTF also ran additional webinars and modified programs to provide teachers, parents and students with a range of freely available curated resources, including webinars, curriculum resources, apps, daily activity suggestions and teaching toolkits.

BENEFIT 3:

Representation on screen matters – especially for marginalised groups.

The Australian Council of State School Organisations (ACSSO) noted in their [submission](#) to the Commonwealth Options Paper that all young people should see the diversity and culture of Australia reflected in the media that they access: "For our children, the media should act as both a mirror with content that reflects their world, where they live and who they are. Moreover, media should act as a window into the world they live in, exemplifying to them the diversity of culture, religions, employment and opportunities that they may not experience in their world. Studies [...] have shown that it is important for children to see characters who not only look like themselves and their families, but also sound like them. Without access to Australian content on our screens, young people will not be exposed to their world in their contemporary or socio historical context. For marginalized groups, in particular, the mainstream media are believed to offer critical insight into

how the world at large views their group, its members, and their contributions. There's a relationship between low self-esteem and negative media portrayals of racial groups, in addition to an association between poor self-esteem."

This point is validated by feedback the ACTF has received from teachers using ACTF supported programs and materials. Judy Beal (STEM Leader at Braeview School R 7) stated: "As a STEM leader, I embed video regularly into learning experiences for my students and utilise the content of the ABC every week. This new program [*Hardball*] parallels the diversity in my class where there are many differently abled learners whose questions continually drive our learning in a myriad of directions."

When Australian children from all walks of life see their lives reflected on screen, they gain positive role models; the characters and stories help them to imagine all the possibilities for someone who looks and sounds like them.

LITTLE J & BIG CUZ CASE STUDY

Little J & Big Cuz is an outstanding and Logie award winning Australian animation series for pre-schoolers. It aims to support the transition to primary school for Indigenous children and their families. Set in the dusty Australian outback, the series follows five-year old Little J and his cousin as they explore the world around them. An impact study from 2019² has shown that children and educators have not only enjoyed watching *Little J & Big Cuz*, but that it also added value to the existing education programs and assists Indigenous children's transition to school, including the recognition of the strengths in learners; a celebration and incorporation of Indigenous cultures into the learning environment; bolstering of pride and identity in Indigenous children; and support for all learners' emotional wellbeing.

Little J & Big Cuz is an authentic representation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures and peoples without generalising. *Little J & Big Cuz* allows Indigenous children to see themselves on screen, which is a powerful thing, for their sense of self, their sense of community and for their sense of being as important as any other child in Australia. Indigenous children now have a cartoon series that they can support and be a fan of, including having a *Little J & Big Cuz* themed birthday parties even with a *Little J & Big Cuz* themed birthday cake.³

Little J & Big Cuz helps its young audience prepare for school by exploring the routines and expectations of primary school and is also instructive for a wider Australian audience, as it shares aspects of Indigenous histories, cultures and perspectives. Several episodes have been translated into various Indigenous languages. The series also contains a broad range of references to communities including Indigenous, multicultural and children living with disabilities: "When you're in that mindset of a little kid seeing something for the first time, the world is big. These kids [in *Little J and Big Cuz*] are discovering things about themselves, about the world – and about each other." (Deborah Mailman - *Little J and Big Cuz* Voice Actor).

² Katheryn Moyle, 'Little J & Big Cuz: A school readiness initiative: Final report and case studies' (2019), available [here](#).

³ Georgia Durmush, 'Torres Strait woman makes deadly cake design based on Little J & Big Cuz' (10 May 2018), available [here](#).

Little J & Big Cuz also functions as an incubator for Indigenous screen talents by employing many Indigenous writers, actors and animators.



It is not only pre-schoolers that can be assisted by screen content they are able to identify with. Quality local content is just as important for older children and teens, helping them to rehearse strategies for coping with life's challenges and disappointments. Age-appropriate portrayals on screen of diverse characters model social and emotional skills for children of all ages and backgrounds and give parents and teachers a springboard for discussion and learning. In the series *Lockie Leonard*, the 12-year old lead character struggles with his transition to a new town, a new school as well as his mother's mental illness. The series' sensitive depiction of these issues helps young viewers to process personal experiences with mental illness.

As children are not a homogenous group, we need an array of Australian stories, from different producers and from around our country, reflecting the full diversity of children and their lives, on all the platforms children turn to for entertainment.

BENEFIT 4:

Australian Children's Television contributes to a national identity.

Locally produced children's content can have a positive impact on our collective national identity. It builds a sense of community and citizenship among the audience and contributes to our perceptions of Australian life. Children's television creates shared childhood memories and often becomes firmly entrenched in a generation's collective memory.

As Bridget Blain pointed out in her recent [submission](#) to the Commonwealth's Option's Paper: "It is vital that young people are regularly offered characters, settings and stories from their home country. Diversity is a wonderful asset in Australia, but American content taking up all of our screens is not diversity. Please consider boosting Australian production so that my children (and one day their children) can continue to enjoy amazing programming like *Thalu*."

Furthermore, investment in children's television is a long-term cultural investment, as explained by a primary school teacher in his [submission](#) to the Commonwealth Options Paper: "The high quality Australian children's content that the Commonwealth Government invests in – shows like *My Place*, *Little Lunch*, *Lockie Leonard*, *Little J and Big Cuz* – are incredibly important to educators and the audience and stay in circulation in schools long after they go off air. The content should be considered as a long-term investment in Australian culture and the children's audience, and not a short-term fad".

BENEFIT 5:

Using children's television as leverage for public interest messaging.

By leveraging the inherent interest and appeal of Australian children's television, it becomes a great vehicle to distribute wider messages that have community value. For example, during the COVID-19 pandemic, the creators of *Little J & Big Cuz*, together with ABC and SBS, used the popular animation characters to amplify the importance of thorough handwashing to stop the spread of the virus amongst small children and Indigenous communities.⁴ This public health message is of great public interest and can be communicated easier with the help of an adored animation character such as Little J.

Australian children's television programs such as *Little J & Big Cuz* or *Thalu* have an additional public interest aspect to them. As pointed out by SBS in their [submission](#) to the Commonwealth Options Paper, these Indigenous programs also contribute to other policy objectives such as Closing the Gap.

⁴ ABC, 'Little J And Big Cuz: Everybody Wash'em Now' (2020) available here; SBS, 'Little J has an important message for you...' (2020) available [here](#).

SUSTAINING A VIABLE AUSTRALIAN CHILDREN'S SCREEN INDUSTRY

“This newest generation are part of an unintentional global experiment where screens are placed in front of them from the youngest age as pacifiers, entertainers and educational aids. This great screen age in which we are all living has bigger impacts on the generation exposed to such screen saturation during their formative years. From shorter attention spans to the gamification of education, from increased digital literacy to impaired social formation, these times impact us all but transform those in their formative years.”

MCCRINDLE RESEARCH (2020)

It is critical to support Australian content for children in the great screen age.

Australian children's television productions have been made possible through a combination of content regulation and government support, on the basis that there is public value in screen content that speaks directly to Australian children and which reflects Australian themes, culture, language and social values. Now, perhaps more than ever, Australian children need access to Australian stories.

The new funding measures to take effect from 1 July 2021 shift the focus to funding, over regulation, and by implication, emphasise quality over quantity. The ACTF believes that emphasis on quality is absolutely critical to success in an ever more competitive environment where audience expectations (including those of children) are very high.

It is clear, that more than ever, Australian children and their families are looking to the public broadcasters and subscription video on demand platforms for content. The enhanced funding, through an increased producer offset for television, and additional funding for Screen Australia and the ACTF, should make financing Australian children's content an attractive proposition.

Over the next two years it will be critical to monitor the impact of these measures and to monitor the commissioning levels for Australian children's content on all public and commercial platforms (including subscription video on demand platforms (SVODs)) to quantify the impact and effects of these policy changes.

The next steps would be:

- bringing the public broadcasters inside the policy and regulatory framework (this could be negotiated as part of triennium funding agreements to allow for sufficient funding), to invest a minimum level in new (first release) Australian scripted children's content. We note that in its [submission](#) to the Commonwealth Options Paper, SBS was open to tied funding for children's content and to complementing ABCs children's television with additional levels of Indigenous children's content through NITV;
- making it a legal requirement for all content service providers on all platforms, including SVODs, to invest a percentage of their revenue in new (first release) Australian scripted children's content.

CONCLUSION

Australia is a world leader in producing quality children's screen content.

The Australian screen industry is at a cross roads. The renewed Government funding measures demonstrate a desire at the Commonwealth level to secure the future of Australian screen content, especially children's content, with a focus on supporting quality content which is fit for purpose for the platforms that value children's content.

The social impact of children's content means that there is additional public value in every dollar spent on it.

There is huge potential to meet many social, cultural, educational and economic objectives by continuing to support high quality Australian children's content and we must ensure that wherever children are watching, they have many opportunities to engage with Australian content.

This means that ensuring public broadcasters and commercial platforms including SVODs continue to commission children's content is imperative.