

My name is Debra Oswald. I've been a fulltime writer for theatre, radio, fiction and television for forty years. My television credits include 'Police Rescue', 'Bananas in Pyjamas', 'Sweet and Sour' and 'The Secret Life of Us'. I was the creator and head writer for the first five seasons of 'Offspring', a drama series broadcast on the Network Ten and now streaming in many countries on Netflix.

The important reasons to nurture and sustain an Australian screen culture are clearly stated in the discussion paper. When I talk about Australian TV content with people outside the industry, I am often struck by how much people take for granted that we have any local shows at all. Most viewers don't understand the cost of drama production or the lopsided economics involved in being a small market at the tail-end of the world distribution process. We've had some regulatory protection for so long, most Australian viewers don't realise that they've been able to enjoy 'Blue Heelers', 'The Secret Life of Us', 'Packed to the Rafters', 'Puberty Blues' and so forth *because* of that system. I am certain that 'Offspring' – a series that achieved high ratings, won awards and was beloved by many viewers – would never have been made without the content obligations on Australian networks. I reckon very few people outside the industry would imagine how quickly their cherished shows could vanish if our industry isn't given a viable chance. Australians would be dismayed and feel let down by their government if it turns out that we and our kids don't have our own stories on screen.

As outlined in the discussion paper, the streaming platforms have shifted the landscape for a sector that was already undernourished. Clearly, it's unfair and untenable for free-to-air networks to continue with the current regulatory structure without the streaming platforms having strong local content obligations also. But the answer is not to dismantle all regulation. I respect that broadcasters and streaming platforms are businesses trying to maximise profits and in the Australian context, it would make business sense to fill our screens with cheap overseas content and maybe the odd low-budget local show. Without government regulation, Australian screen storytelling would pretty much disappear or be reduced to a shrivelled novelty.

The answer is to oblige all platforms – broadcast and streaming – to produce Australian drama, comedy and children's content at a high standard and properly budgeted level. For that reason, I would urge the government to opt for Model 3 as the only useful starting point. To support regulatory structures, there needs to be increased funding to develop and produce content at a high standard. We have the talent here to do it, but like any country in the world, we do need appropriate funding. Otherwise, we will continue to see a drift of actors, directors and writers to the UK and the US, leaving our own industry diminished.

Whichever regulatory system is adopted, it must ensure there are no potential loopholes that networks and streamers can use to limit their commitment to high quality drama/comedy/kids' material. We don't want to end up with a lot of cheap stuff spewed out to satisfy loose obligations and content that finds work-arounds for what constitutes 'Australian'. And we need boosted funding so we can make the high-quality dramas that will hold up at home and overseas. Every wealthy country in the world protects its screen culture by a combination of quotas and subsidy, so why should Australia value its culture less than Denmark or Spain or the UK?

I don't believe we have to see this new reality as a disaster. At the risk of sounding like a Pollyanna, it could prove to be a wonderful opportunity to strengthen our screen culture. In many European countries where the streaming giants are required, by regulation, to make local content, there has been a wonderful flourishing of new local material – shows that would probably never have been made without the streamers being obliged. For example, Netflix is currently screening a

Spanish romcom, 'Valeria'. 'Valeria' is the number one show on Netflix in Spain because audiences *want* to see their own shows if they are given the chance. The same is true for Australian audiences. As a bonus, our shows could then travel around the world which is surely a precious thing for our national standing, tourism industry and so forth.

I suspect that as the new screen structure plays out around the world, countries will fall into being cultural 'have' or 'have-nots' – that is, some countries will have a flourishing, protected screen culture and others will have allowed their culture to be asphyxiated under the weight of overseas content. Because we share a language with the US and the UK, there is an added risk for us. I fervently hope Australia will be a country that stays proud of its own storytelling and devises ways to support that.

This issue is important for all of us. By 'us', I don't just mean screen industry workers. I mean all of us - all Australians who deserve to see their own stories on screen and want Australian content for our kids to watch. Of course this country is facing bigger and more urgent problems with the COVID 19 crisis, so much suffering being met with moral and physical courage from health workers and many others. But during and after this time, if we want to have a surviving screen industry, if we want to see our own stories bobbing up amid the deluge of overseas content, we need a strong, clear-eyed system of regulation and decent funding.

Thanks you for the opportunity to offer my thoughts.

Debra Oswald.