

2 July 2020

Submission to the Supporting Australian stories on our screens options paper

In this submission, I wish to make three points.

- 1 Deregulation will not level the playing field for Australian audiences who stand to lose choice when locally produced scripted content disappears from our screens.
- 2 Local content requirements should be applied to all forms of program delivery. The details of these requirements can be negotiated with the industry and service providers once a policy principle has been adopted.
- 3 Service providers would be required to make contributions into an Australian Content Fund whenever they fail to meet the targets set for Australian scripted content. This should be seen as a penalty and not as an alternative. Service providers should not be able to opt out of their local scripted content obligations simply by paying into a fund.

Overview

The reason local content rules were introduced in the first place was that there there was a powerful public interest argument supporting them. There still is.

Before regulation, there was virtually no local drama or comedy for adults or children on commercial television. Australians were not able to listen to their own accents when they tuned in for entertainment. It was easy for a child growing up in Australia to form the view that nothing interesting happened here and that Australia had no interesting stories to tell about ourselves or about the world and our place in it. The accents in drama and entertainment programs on commercial television were almost exclusively American and almost exclusively British on the ABC. It is easy to see how this could lead to a sense of inferiority. No wonder there was a cultural cringe.

Deregulation

Deregulation will not create a level playing field for Australian audiences. If there are no Australian dramas or comedies or children's programs, or only a few, or only old ones on repeat, the playing field is not level, it is tilted to one side, weighed down by a deluge of imported programs, especially from America.

The options paper acknowledges, if not directly then through its links and references, that when children's television was deregulated in the UK, there was an instant and dramatic drop in the number of UK children's television programs. And as OfCom, the UK office responsible for the regulation of broadcasting, noted in its Children's Content Review, there was a lack of "a range of children's programs that help children to understand the world around them." And a lack of "original, high quality children's programmes available that allow children to see their lives, reflective of the UK today, played out on screen."

For these reasons, Model 4 Deregulation is not the answer.

Local Content Fund

The options paper outlines the difference in cost between locally produced programs and imported programs and points out that cost is a factor in making imported programs attractive. But it overlooks the element of risk and in my view, risk is a more important factor than cost.

When a broadcaster or service provider buys an imported program, it is buying something which has already been audience tested in its home market. The flops and failures stay in their country of origin. We don't see them, except when they are acquired at minimal cost and used to fatten the catalogue of a streaming service. Commissioning a new Australian drama or comedy or documentary means taking a risk. No one knows what is going to work and some programs will fail to reach a big enough audience to become sustainable and those failures add to the tendency towards risk aversion among broadcasters and service providers.

This makes the option of being able to contribute to a local content fund very attractive to service providers. Not only can service providers avoid taking the risk, they can do away with any department or staff whose job it would have been to manage the commissioning and acquisition process.

The establishment of an Australian Children's Content Fund (ACCF) or an Australian Program Fund (APF) would mean a centralisation of commissioning decisions for Australian content.

One of the values of having individual service providers separately commissioning local content is that this maintains a multiplicity of opportunities for content creators. There are more doors to knock on and this adds to the opportunities for a greater diversity of content. There are plenty of examples of programs which were rejected by one or more television networks only to be picked up by another and which have then gone on to become very successful. A single ACCF or APF becomes a single door, a sole opportunity for a creative writer or producer to go to. Whoever runs the ACCF or APF would become a kind of Commissar of Culture whose likes and dislikes would shape almost all of our scripted content.

All organisations develop a culture over time and a single body such as an Australian Production Fund would become a single gatekeeper for all Australian scripted content.

Whatever it is called, an Australian Content Fund should be used only as a body to receive payments from service providers who have failed to meet their local content obligations. It should not be seen as alternative to commissioning, acquiring and broadcasting regulated minimum levels of local content.

In a multicultural country like Australian, audiences need and deserve a diversity of stories, a diversity of voices and a diversity of faces on our screens. This will not be achieved if we end up with a single door, a single funding organisation which becomes a single gatekeeper for the funding of development and production of local scripted content.

Conclusion

In general, I support Model 3, Significant, but not with the option of service providers paying into an Australian Content Fund as an alternative to meeting minimum levels of local scripted content.

All service providers who provide services into the Australian market should be required to commission and deliver original, first run, scripted Australian content.

Whether this is achieved through a requirement for a minimum percentage of the total spend on scripted content acquisition or a minimum percentage of total hours of scripted content transmitted or some other formula could be part of a second stage of consultation once the model for the support of local content is agreed.

This is the way to create a level playing field.

Geoffrey Atherden AM

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Atherden
submission

Geoffrey is best known for his multi award winning television comedy series *Mother and Son* which has been dubbed into French, German, Spanish and Mandarin and shown in more than fifty countries as well as being remade in Chile, Quebec, the UK, Denmark, Sweden, Greece, Turkey, Lithuania and Serbia. Other television work includes, *Grass Roots* which received 7 AFI awards including two for Best Screenplay; *Eggshells* and *One Day Miller*, both award winning situation comedy series and *BabaKiueria*, which was given a United Nations Media Peace Award.

4

A number of his plays have had successful seasons at the Ensemble Theatre in Sydney: *WARNING: EXPLICIT MATERIAL* (2011), *Liberty Equality Fraternity* (2013) and *Dear Mum and Dad* was part of the *Gallipoli Project* in 2015. A theatrical version of *Mother and Son* has been staged in Melbourne in 2014 and in Canberra and Brisbane in 2015 and will tour in regional Eastern Australia in 2022. His latest play, *Black Cockatoo*, was part of the 2020 Sydney Festival and after a sell out season at the Ensemble Theatre, moved to the Merrigong Theatre in Wollongong and then Riverside at Parramatta.

In 2009, Geoffrey was made a Member of the Order of Australia.