

## [Supporting Australian stories on our screens—options paper](#)

Submission from Gus Howard.

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Information can be published or made public

### SUBMISSION:

The information contained in the options paper embodies much of the general intelligence held on the position of the Australian screen industry across the fields of television and theatrical product.

Of the various options presented, whichever or whatever is implemented will create a new or revised regulatory environment for broadcasters of all types, those bodies concerned with government and private investment and support, as well as producers and content creators.

The issues are essentially twofold: film and television content viability and its forms; and Australian content and its relevance and value.

Viability for broadcasters and exhibitors depends upon the cost of product relative to the potential returns on exploitation, based on an estimate to reach a certain potential audience. For producers it depends on being in a position to develop and produce material that can be usefully exploited by broadcasters and exhibitors, and which can be made from financial resources available, which resonates with domestic audiences, and ideally those in other countries. This can create a paradox, regarding the corporate imagery of any FTA. This is their entitlement, but variations in style are not necessarily easily accommodated.

It is useful to note that many top rating Australian television programs or top grossing Australian feature films, do not travel well in international markets. The Australian audience figure for Molly, the highest rating mini-series in the survey period of the paper, is impressive, but Molly is not international product. Similar things could said about such domestically successful feature films like Red Dog: high budget, high return in the domestic realm, but no traction in the world market. There are not many under the radar Australian titles that travel either. The Miss Fisher series and The Babadook being interesting exceptions. Both high concept, same star. Both made away from corporate concerns.

This is the climate the Australian screen industry has lived in for a long time. Domestic-subject, populist product plays well. A lot of the rest is derivative,

under-developed, under-resourced, and generally pitched at a level beyond the quality of the merchandise.

As the producer of *Blue Heelers*, the most successful and longest running prime time television series of its era, I had to accept along with a show that ran very successfully for 10 years, the paradox that all the international programming for that show (90+ territories) presented it virtually as ethnic television, generally with a corresponding timeslot. The thing that made it a domestic success was a limiting factor in other ways. Had we been in a position to have a bigger budget, it would not have been spent on spectacle, but on increased script power. The thing that usually stands between a domestically acceptable show and something with greater potential is script power and universal relevance, perhaps more so than much else of what passes for production value.

There are at least four strong reasons for this:

- A short-sighted but commercially driven requirement for FTA material of all types being linked to parochial or regional subject-interest, often limiting the potential of global success. When domestic successes do result, concern for wider markets evaporates.
- The general lack of effective and well-resourced story and script development, which includes attaining a product which is likely to satisfy wider and wider audiences, which in turn generates primary interest from broadcasters and distributors anywhere, as well as domestic success. This is a problem for producers, but requires greater development resources
- Possibly the most difficult obstacle; the tendency for both Australian audiences, broadcasters and exhibitors to favour the type of domestic drama and comedy that reinforces parochialism over regionalism – not in all cases, but often enough. Against the weight of world film and television output, this is difficult in a small country that speaks English, and has yet to experience true social and existential crisis. We do stories about battlers, who either win or die gloriously. We rarely make successful film and television that truly explores the poles that mark the difference between way life is and the way life could be, whether that be as comedy, drama or fantasy. Some of our biggest domestic TV successes are misanthropically about losing, not success. This may be part of the 21<sup>st</sup> C zeitgeist, but it is not strictly what drama is for.
- Finally, and meeting these obstacles head on, the combination of quality and quantity of development talent in networks, screen agencies and production entities. Development is often expensive or slow, or both. To be rapid and effective requires better resources than we generally have.

Within the Options lie an opportunities to address these and other issues, even though they are not spelled out. Some corporate-culture concerns of FTA broadcasters in particular arise, but are not necessarily able to be addressed through the options presented.

Free-To-Air networks are large, expensive to maintain, cumbersome beasts. Brand identity is important, and often pursued with embarrassing desperation. Big personalities are required to own and run them, and even in their journalism, exclusivity and specialness of moment-by-moment offerings are over-branded. The same brand issues arise in the badging of programs. Image and brand loyalty is always at stake. Ultimately, the mammoth nature of a network makes it top heavy corporately. Add to this the requirement to conform to broadcast regulations in a competitive environment, and we become witness to the insincere game that is mostly played.

Aren't they just broadcasters – only as good as their material? Why is image more important than content?

There is no commitment to a wide audience. Rather a target audience. Big is good. There is no commitment to niche audiences (even though it is understood that niches becomes mainstream).

**In that vein, this is essence of my proposal, which is a radical content quota approach that requires the creation of a regulatory climate that retains regulations but nudges commercial FTA networks away from certain requirements.**

1. Because audiences for drama are drifting from FTA's to other sources, relieve commercial FTA broadcasters of the expense and trouble of carrying drama, comedy children's material and documentary.
2. Revise the rules to not simply discourage Australian commercial FTA drama content, but actually disallow it. Free them to do what they do best. If this streamlines the enterprise, so be it, considering all that would remain would be their most profitable, image-driven products.
3. Let FTAs keep game shows, reality shows, sport, variety, news and current affairs, with a useful minimum domestic quota. No drama.
4. Transfer all the commercial domestic drama, comedy, news, current affairs, documentary and children's requirement to cable and streaming services (where audiences are increasingly wanting to see it).
5. Establish strong minimum quota hours for cable and streaming services, and make them pay well for development and license fees.
6. Retain subject-related stranding channels on cable and streaming, as long as there is a corporate umbrella involved, as per the existing FOX model.
7. Place a similar domestic quota and commissioning requirement on internationally sourced services, which they can either absorb into programming, or create special strands for.

8. Regulate to allow and encourage partnering with international broadcasters to aim for strong global product, domestically produced.
9. As well as strengthening broadcaster and streaming contribution to development, consider a development funding levy to be paid by broadcasters and streamers to be paid to Screen Australia (but not to replace current source), or at the risk of creating another bureaucracy, some new service. Make one, pay for another one to get started.
10. Otherwise increase the financial capability of Screen Australia and the ABC to increase and improve project development.
11. Amortise the producer offset across all forms except those retained by FTAs, preferably 40% of QAPE.