

SAVE OUR STORIES – SUBMISSION TO THE AUSTRALIAN GOVERNMENT’S GREEN PAPER ON MEDIA INDUSTRY REFORM.

BY ALEXA WYATT

I have spent my entire professional working life as a scriptwriter and playwright, but mainly employed in the television drama industry as a script writer, script editor, story consultant and script producer. After graduating from a communications degree from UTS in Sydney, I was fortunate to secure not long after, an in-house job on a long running drama series, where I gained invaluable on-the-job training in the story department. The transformation of the local TV drama industry over the years means that such jobs no longer exist, as such shows no longer exist. Apart from the existing serials *Home and Away* and *Neighbours*, all drama series are now short runs of anywhere between 4 – 10 episodes for hour dramas and 8 – 20 episodes for half hour children’s content, comedies, and dramedies. For these productions, the script department with an inhouse team became redundant, shrinking employment and training opportunities for writers significantly.

It is important to understand the background to the current proposed changes to the media industry to appreciate how the local TV drama industry was already being severely eroded. As a writer who has spent a considerable proportion of my career working in children’s drama, and as a mother myself, I am particularly alarmed at the outrageous demolition of this sector. Australian children deserve to see stories that reflect their own cultural experiences and values, not those that belong to another country and culture. Production in this sector must be supported, with networks and streamers obligated to provide quality live action drama for their youngest viewers instead of being allowed to get away with next to nothing, or cheap magazine format and animated series as a token gesture to the under 12s.

A fundamental lack of understanding of how the local screen industry works seems to have informed many recent decisions made by the federal government, particularly replying on the covid19 pandemic as an excuse to relieve local networks of local quota responsibilities, when the clear intention is never to restore them. The rush of US productions filming here will only last until the vaccination program in America is completed, and given Australia’s debacle in the vaccine roll out, we will cease being an attractive shooting destination very soon. These imported productions do nothing for the long term benefit of the industry here; they are simply a stop gap measure that employ crews and ancillary services but no creatives, and Australia receives none of the profits and revenue from these productions. Whilst they are shooting here, they damage local production because crews are not available and the expectation of parity with American pay rates is impossible to meet.

As a long standing member of the Australian Writer’s Guild I therefore fully endorse all their demands for media industry reform:

1. An investment obligation on SVOD and AVOD platforms of 20%. Eligible service providers must be required to reinvest 20% of their Australian-sourced revenue into commissioning new Australian content. A 20% rate of obligation would deliver approximately \$366 million in Australian content investment annually, driving an additional 10,000 industry jobs creating over 300 hours of Australian content to streaming audiences each year.
2. Service providers should be subject to this obligation provided they have at least 500,000 subscribers or registered users and AU\$50 million per annum in Australian revenue. The investment obligation should apply to all types of service providers with no exemption for services owned by a corporate structure that also owns a broadcasting licence. Stan and Binge may be owned by the Nine Network and Foxtel respectively, but they have different platforms, different revenue streams and different audiences.
3. Eligible service providers must comply with genre sub-quotas for drama, children’s television and documentary and these quotas must come with promotion and discoverability requirements.

4. There must be an increase in the direct funding of the public broadcasters who have been left with the sole responsibility of programming vulnerable genres such as children's television for local audiences. It is ludicrous that only one network is producing children's content. The lament of the FTA channels that no children watch their content is only a reflection of their failure to provide quality programming at appropriate times on appropriate platforms. Good content will always find an audience. FTAs are not to be rewarded for their own failures.

5. The regulation of the streaming platforms should be implemented by 1 January 2022 to reignite a contracted sector and cushion the blow from the loss of \$100 million in Australian content per annum.

6. The government must incentivise investment in script development and support local creatives. Investment in script development is critical if the government wants screen content with "higher production values and programs with a better prospect of being sold into the global content market." See my above comment about the government's woeful lack of understanding of the process that goes into creating screen drama.

The government must also commit to growing and retaining world-class Australian creative talent. Emerging writers need to be able to hone their skills in their local industry, experienced writers need to be paid fairly and have control over their projects from development and throughout production. Writers must be encouraged to work in Australia, rather than the US or UK.

As it stands, I am now seeking work opportunities outside of Australia – taking my expertise and experience for the benefit of other country's screen industries and their economies. Why any government would willingly support a brain drain from any sector, let alone one with the potential to earn billions for the Australian economy (arts revenue totals more than the mining and sports sectors combined in Australia) is unthinkable. The fact that this brain drain relates not just to any old commodity, but cultural content that reflects what it means to be Australian, that defines us as a multicultural nation, reflecting our history, lived experience and values, constitutes nothing less than cultural vandalism. Without a robust screen industry our screens will be flooded with content from other countries, and the Australian voice, and everything it has to say, will be silenced.

Yours sincerely

Alexa Wyatt