Supplementary submission to the Australian Content Review

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<u>Part 1 : The social construction of childhood</u>

'Tell me a story!' What child has not expressed those words? Children find the fantasy world a story transports them into, comforting, entertaining and enlightening. As a prelude to sleep stories allow them to dream the impossible. They explain the strong emotions children experience as they grow up, teach them about their tribe, their culture and their place in the world and give them a shared sense of purpose. Throughout human history, stories have been the glue that has civilized and bound people together in a community as humane beings. Stories stimulate our imagination, opening up the infinite opportunities that life presents. Developing imagination, Albert Einstein believed, was more important than imparting knowledge, as wondering is the basis of invention, of all development and understanding. It would be a dystopian world without stories.

But stories have had different functions over the centuries and 'children' have been variously defined and regarded. Western notions of childhood have changed dramatically, especially in the past 300 years, as has the way stories have been presented and enjoyed. The idea of childhood as a special stage of life is a relatively new middle-class phenomenon. Before the 18th century children were seen as little adults, dressed as adults and expected to work like adults. They got no special consideration at law; until 1780 over two hundred offences were punishable by hanging for children as well as adults. The youngest convict on the First Fleet was John Hudson, a nine-year-old chimney sweep who had been convicted of stealing clothes and a pistol. The reality of life for young children has been an economic, social and cultural construction over centuries.

So, given the current Australian and Children's Screen Content Review, which is to determine the future of regulation for children's media content, it is important to ask some fundamental questions. Is childhood today a chronological stage or a system of constructed values? Has childhood changed since the Children's Television Standards (CTS) were introduced in the early 1980's? Do we still mean the same thing when we talk about a children's program in 2017 as we did when quotas were implemented in 1984? And what special functions do such defined programs fill that warrant ongoing regulatory protection in a dramatically changing digital world?

The rise of childhood can be traced back to the Reformation. The Puritans of the 17th Century were the first to stress the child's moral autonomy. They believed children had to be taught to think for themselves; to internalize moral values and to make choices for which they were personally responsible so they supported the need for education.

During The Age of Enlightenment, in 1762, Rousseau published his treatise on education, *Emile,* arguing his theory of the innocence of childhood. Liberal and permissive attitudes to children began to take root, but the ideals of the time didn't match social practice. Rousseau left his five illegitimate children in foundling homes. 'Woman is especially made for man's delight', he wrote, and 'for that reason there is no need even to teach girls to write'.

By 1830, despite calls for education, half Britain's workforce in the cotton mills was child labor. The English Factory Act of 1833 limited child labor to 8 hours a day, but because adults argued for the same terms, the limit remained at 10 hours. Child exploitation only came to an end with the passing of *The Education Act* of 1870, which required children up to the age of 10 to attend school. It was a start toward the protection of the youngest in society, but it was also because factory owners needed more literate workers who could read instructions for using machinery safely and efficiently. Many needy parents protested and absenteeism from school was common.

The poor continued to be exploited while the children of the affluent middle-class were shipped off to boarding schools, separated from adults and sheltered from the real world. But by the late 19th century, following the industrial revolution, in Australia as well as Britain, growing economic demand for an educated and relatively healthy workforce had produced education for all, and altered the nature of childhood.

In the pre-industrial age stories were told by bards orally and the experience was shared by all ages. The stories, although often cautionary tales, were told uncensored. Fairy tales were not about beautiful princesses in gauzy dresses but 'about child murder, cannibalism, starvation, deformity, desperate human creatures cast in the form of beasts, or chained by spells, or immured alive in thorns'. [1.]

Such stories enabled people to indulge their lust for sadism; evil was omnipresent but good triumphed. Characters were simplified and polarized to promote understanding among the uneducated; the good were beautiful, the evil were ugly. The overriding message of such stories was that life is a struggle against severe difficulties; they are unavoidable but if you are steadfast in meeting unexpected and unjust hardships, obstacles can be overcome and mastered. They were valuable life lessons for adults and children. [2.]

This oral form of group entertainment disappeared when the printing press was invented and children were sent to school and separated from their parents. As they were taught to read, their stories became simpler and more didactic. The long-accepted and traditional elements in stories were squeezed out of the official child culture to protect children from knowing about the murder and mayhem and horrors of life that might 'disturb' them. Stories acquired taste; they began to taste childish. Humanists taught courtly behavior. Religious reformers did not see the need for anything but religious reading. If children wanted adventure it could be found in the bible. Both groups agreed the 'chapbooks' (akin to comics) were harmful for children. This developing storybook culture no longer reflected the needs of children in a shared community; it reflected the needs and values of middle-class parents and teachers who expected to train well-behaved children to be seen but not heard. Emotionally, children were cast adrift to deal with their inner impulses and feelings.

Human enterprise seizes opportunity and in the early eighteenth century it was discovered money could be made from a children's publishing industry. *The Arabian Nights* (1706) and *Mother Goose* (1760's) a compilation of nursery rhymes appeared. *Grimm's Fairy Tales* (1812) were considered too grim for children. *Swiss Family Robinson* (1812) was basically a religious work. *Alice in Wonderland* (1865) a fanciful tale and *Tom Thumb's Pretty Song Book* (1744) a book of nursery rhymes, emerged along with others by liberal minded authors who brought new themes and attitudes to children's books. The toy industry also took off and experts were beginning to complain that toys had become so elaborate they left nothing to the child's imagination. The seeds of the debates that have raged about children's entertainment since were sown.

The dominant philosophical notion put forward by child advocates was that of childhood vulnerability and their need for protection from the secrets of adult life for as long as possible. One of the contradictions of this history is that the glorification of childhood coincided with the greatest exploitation of children. In literature and art the romantics were exalting the purity and innocence of childhood while at the same time the family and the church, which should have been responsible for nurturing children, were agents of repression.

The industrial revolution in the 19th century led to children serving as unskilled labor on the production line in the mills, as chimney sweeps, as pick-pockets, as well as lace makers. Eight year old girls dragged coal trucks through wet tunnels on their hands and knees. Charles Dickens wrote a stream of novels exposing the plight of working-class poor and abandoned children. But it would be another century before changes in industrial policy, education, social and welfare reform, a greater knowledge of child development and appreciation of individual differences, would lead to childhood being seen, as it is today, as a stage with special needs. When these changes came they were driven as much by economic need as concern for the well-being of children.

But it would become apparent, despite the repression of the Victorian Age, that children could not be coerced into becoming models of conformity. They simply did not fit a narrow stereotype. The nineteenth century's effort to standardize childhood through schooling failed. It would be some time before it was understood that the purpose of education should be to awaken a child's mind. Such a debate about the purpose of education and schooling is ongoing.

Charles Darwin was the first to keep systematic notes on one of his children to study child development and by 1900 child experts began to emerge and their theories split along several lines. Studies looking at the differences between children found a range of abilities. Behaviorism was one branch that aimed at conditioning children and molding them to a teacher's or parent's will. The French Psychologist Jean Piaget insisted children developed in stages, each step building on previous capacities toward mastery over their world. Research that followed called this 'stage theory' too rigid and arbitrary.

A spate of books on child rearing emerged with Dr Benjamin Spock dominating the field. He challenged behaviourism, relying on work on children's emotional development. Parents by this time were beginning to worry about whether their children would like them as friends rather than authority figures.

Harvard University's Professor Howard Gardner argued that we have multiple intelligences. His work challenged the inadequacy of IQ tests built around words, numbers and logical reasoning which overlooked the intelligences of those with visual, aural and kinesthetic abilities. He saw no division between thinking and feeling and drew attention to the full range of human intelligences. He believed in the plasticity of young minds, which has been borne out by recent brain research.

But despite what has been learned about child development and subsequent changes aimed at improving the well-being of children, many of the tensions in social attitudes toward them remain with us. There is a crisis of confidence among many child-rearing experts, parents and teachers, about how best to rear children. Neither parents nor the wider society are offering children the clear guidance they need and want. There are those who argue that children must be protected and socialized, taught moral values and know their place. With others limited guidance or permissiveness replaces firm rules. A desire for their

child's constant happiness and success drives many parents to indulge children, praise mediocrity in the cause of equality, or give them everything but their time.

Adolescents especially are searching for purpose, belief and causes today for without goals that incorporate them within a social group they become self-centred. It is not surprising they are confused given the dramatic 21st century changes in family structure, the impact of globalisation and economic rationalism along with rampant consumerism which has commodified them. Once again an economic revolution has changed the nature of childhood and in turn influenced storytelling.

Many of these changes have occurred since the Children's Television Standards were introduced by the Australian Broadcasting Tribunal in 1984. But over the same period we have made significant progress in our understanding of child development and the functioning of the brain.

Thirty years were added to our life expectancy across the 20th century and for the first time children are a minority, less than twenty per-cent of the population. The social structure in 2017 is radically different from the post war years when most people married and had children and the roles of men, women and children were more clearly delineated. These changes have led to a different experience of childhood. Education, equality for women, the cost of living, work demands and sexual liberation have altered family life. Women are less prepared to accept the role of dependent housewife and the dual income family has to organize its time differently.

Divorce, single parenthood, step families, same-sex couples and multi-generational families make for a varied experience of family life. Parenthood has become a private choice rather than a biological inevitability. Close to a third of our population now comprise free-living young adults aged between 25-40 enjoying long but insecure work hours and very adult-oriented entertainment, often with little interest in marriage or other people's children. And though many of these young adults hold on to the family ties they have, and claim an interest in eventually marrying and having children, the longer they delay the less likely it is to happen. And they question why, as singles, they should accept responsibility for other people's children. Children are not their future.

Add to this social upheaval the communication revolution and the impact of mass and social media. Our storytelling and children's entertainment has changed dramatically as a result of these changes.

Neil Postman claimed technology, starting with the invention of the printing press, eroded the concept of childhood. It disappeared altogether, he claimed, with the advent of television, when once again children were fully exposed to the world of adult values and behavior. It has become impossible to maintain the position that children must be shielded from adult secrets. We have returned to the days when stories were shared by the bards for social groups of all ages.[4.]

Marshall McLuhan correctly proclaimed the medium was the message as households were redesigned to accommodate the television set. Houses were redesigned to have a family room with the set in the corner turned on all day talking to itself and preschoolers became the heaviest viewers living, exposed to more hours of programming than any other age group. [5.]

Initially television broke down the pattern that had occurred across the 18th and 19th centuries of separating children from adults for their entertainment, as most houses did not acquire multiple sets. Through television children once again got to know the adult world for what it is but they were not participants in this world. The stories they saw rarely integrated children. But it became clear television could tell stories that clarified life and give, in pictures as well as words, an understanding of the joys and frustrations children encounter. All around the western world people debated how television should be used for the benefit of children and what types of stories we should tell them via the medium.

At first such story telling was seen as the responsibility of broadcasters, who once they were assigned a licence and television sets had been adopted widely throughout Australia, were reluctant to spend resources on what they saw as a minority market. Regulations were enshrined and for more than a decade children's production flourished with subsidy from governments and quotas placed on broadcasters. Even so there was still disagreement among teachers, child psychologists, writers and television producers about what was desirable children's programming. Then in the 90's cable television disrupted the market bringing international children's channels with the realization there was money to be made from branded character-based programming screened all day.

Competition changed the nature of quota programming which had to earn overseas sales in the global marketplace. The conflicting views among the story-telling industry stakeholders that followed and are current are not dissimilar from positions espoused over the last two hundred years. The difference is, media companies are now big businesses and children are big business. In this climate do we still try to target, isolate and 'protect' children or do we expose them to programming made for the mass market? What needs do we try to fulfill when commercial broadcasters have demonstrated clearly if they are required by regulation to schedule children's programming there is no way known they will meet the spirit of those regulations.

Creating children's stories in any medium is tough work, not because the production demands are greater than with most entertainment for adults, but because there is so much humbug surrounding so many issues that relate to children. Although we understand child development much more than we did when the romantics first emerged they are still around. They seem to have completely forgotten how they felt as children. They remember only the good things about their childhood and block out the unpleasant, the traumatic and the naughty and fearsome villains, whom they believe do harm to children. They may know the world is a tough place but they would like children's programs to compensate for all the other unsuitable trash they might view.

The 'neo-puritans' are still about as well; those who believe we should only portray good, morally correct views, through characters who are very well behaved models for children to emulate. They think that if children don't see the homeless or victims of child abuse they don't exist. They would never attempt to explain why grown-ups fight wars and kill other people. Then there are the 'realists' who believe children are only capable of literal thought. They give no credit to the power of the imagination. They insist people don't fly or disappear or walk through walls. There is no Father Christmas or Easter Bunny.

The merchants who have always been around are now pervasive, propagating banal fodder to fill the television schedules - particularly for preschoolers, who have less power to be discriminating. Stories for them are required to be suitable to be linked with a range of products, but not so offensive that the mass market would turn away. Globalisation has turned children's television into a billion dollar business.

Children have always been exploited and the merchants seem to think they are fair game - if children's programs must be made the merchandise should pay for them. The market they argue can best determine what is viable and appropriate for kids and many parents argue they don't mind if programs have books, music, games, toys and DVDs associated with a program. They believe they are adding to a child's experience of life. But when the books become depressingly insubstantial and sanitized they fail to provide that experience. And when the toys offer only momentary joy, why acquire them?

Parents buy the toxic, plastic, junk toys that fall apart before the battery goes dead; the monstrous phallic guns; the dolls that can wet their pants. They are happy to buy the baby chinos, throw their toddlers disco parties and before they know it, their pre- pubescent child wants to dress like mum and the market provides matching outfits. What sort of programs should we be producing in this environment?

If children's programs are to be supported by subsidy and regulation **they should serve the best interests of children and respond to their needs.** Despite their ability to bear children, everyone is not an expert in child rearing. We have learnt much from the sciences about children's developmental needs that should be applied to the production of media for them.

So what are these needs in 2017?

Fundamentally every child deserves the best chance to develop her full potential. Media for children have an important role to play in this regard in remedying the provision of early childhood education. We now know that a child' s brain cells make connections at an astonishing rate and the strength of those connections depends on what they are exposed to, how frequently they are used and reinforced and how others respond to and guide their efforts to understand. The first four years – from conception to age three – are the most critical period of human development. The brain is at its most absorbent and every child can learn to walk, to talk, and to work out how to fit into the family and the wider society if it is given experiences that help them master those important skills. If children are not encouraged to use a skill they will lose it.

Accessible, early childhood education, is vital to all young children. Australia has lagged behind the OECD average for industrialized nations in the provision of early education until very recently. We now have 90% of four year olds who receive 15 hours a week of early education, (they would watch television longer) but this program is funded only up to 2018. We have only 68% of three year olds receiving education which is a provision well below the OECD average and because market considerations dominate what should be an essential service, child-care workers are paid poorly. Given we know how important brain development is at this stage, for later life opportunities and success, we cannot afford to continue to regard programming for this age group as simply entertainment and time-filler.

The benefits that flow to pre-schoolers from good storytelling are many. Parents who understand this will read to their kids daily from the first year. If you cannot read, then you are handicapped for life. One of the most important teaching tasks in the early years is to engender a love of reading through well-chosen stories that will introduce children to the private pleasure of a rich fantasy world and motivate them to want to visit that world on their own. When children develop an interest in reading they will acquire skills in language and vocabulary and their future at school and in later life will be enhanced if they learn to read well when young.

Not every book is equal. Too many books today are the products of branding, tied to television programmes and character merchandising. Such books are generally cheaper and parents think that their children will be encouraged to read by seeing illustrations of their favourite character. The problem is most such books are churned out by contract writers; they are not the product of an author's vivid imagination and they will do little to stimulate the child to think and ask questions. And books produced without substance and imagination do not inspire reading.

When you consider the forces at work that counter enthusiasm for reading: the boring, technical, repetitive writing within some school texts; the censoring and sanitising of stories that are meaningful by well-meaning adults; the lack of enthusiasm for reading when parents can't be bothered to read to their children, it's not surprising that many children don't want to read. Children who are read to and are encouraged to read regularly are more cooperative, less antisocial, and cognitively more advanced, because stories help them think about what it feels like inside another human being. Fictional stories about family life can teach children emotional empathy, values, communication, and conflict management skills.

Film and television should be as rich in their offerings as the best library of books yet this is not how it has turned out. Because of the demands of the global market and the growth of children's channels that are voracious in their need for programming, mediocre, commercial, bland programming have undermined the objectives that were built into the Children's Television Standards. As well, the advertising industry has turned children into a niche market and changed the nature of most of the storytelling even on the public broadcasters.

Further, since the regulation of broadcasting in an attempt to draw out the potential of this medium for storytelling to children, new technology has changed the media landscape in ways we could never have imagined. And children are the earliest adaptors. They are not surprised by technology; they have grown up with it, mastered and transformed its use, while as adults we try to catch up. Social media, Facebook, Google and YouTube are playgrounds for children which have transformed the nature of childhood. Amazon and Netflix are media giants changing the rules of the game as well.

The child protectionists are still active, fearing the repercussions on children; the alleged impact on the brain, multi-tasking, shorter attention spans, the loss of privacy, the isolation, bullying and so it goes. There is little hard evidence for the general impact of these charges except on the poverty of ideas that has followed from producers in television. They are at a loss. But the horse has bolted and we need to consider the best use of this technology in the interests of children. We should not go back to the future by clinging to regulatory standards which were carefully thought through but for a different world.

The second part of this paper explores the birth of children's television programming under the Children's Television Standards introduced in 1984.

PART 2 : The birth of a Children's Television industry

No Children's production industry in Australia can exist without a viable, film and television industry which must be sustained to tell Australian stories. That is a given. But what sits under that for children must be driven by children's needs.

When done well, film and television programs can stimulate a child's imagination and open up the infinite opportunities that life presents. Like good books, good television programs can extend children's understanding of their world. Stories are particularly effective in helping children develop emotionally. That is why Australian and local programming is important for children. In 1980 television was the medium best suited to delivering these experiences to children. The media most suited today are the new media.

Under the Children's Television Standards that have been in existence for more than 33 years a children's program is one which is made specifically for children or groups of children; is entertaining; is well produced using sufficient resources to ensure a high standard of the script, cast, direction, editing, shooting, sound and other production elements; enhances the child's understanding and experience; and is appropriate for Australian children.

A number of very ordinary programs and programmes of dubious value for children have slipped through this quota net because of globalization and financial pressure on networks and producers. Animations made for a global audience have dominated the drama quota and much live action has been reduced to soaps. The need to have an international investor on board has compromised cultural integrity in some cases and allowed interference in the process. Such programming has become bland and conservative, or controlled creatively outside Australia. It cannot be claimed the regulations are now providing the rich experience intended when the CTS were designed and implemented.

The networks initially insisted they could police themselves with self regulatory codes and they resisted all attempts to persuade them to confirm to guidelines, taking their objections as far as the High Court before legislation was passed that ensured stations could lose their licence if they did not meet regulated quotas. But the evidence has shown networks will not produce programs that meet the spirit of the standards and they insist existing quotas are one more reason they cannot compete in the global marketplace against players such as Google, Facebook, Amazon and Netflix.

So government is in the position where it must decide how best to intervene in the market place and for what purpose. Standards relevant to today's media environment must be based on principles that serve children's needs or it is a waste of effort and resources.

The fundamental question is what are children's programming needs today?

When I chaired the Advisory Committee on Program Standards for the Australian Broadcasting Control Board in 1975-6 we came up with an approach that we thought could work at that time. Programs were to be pre-classified by an expert committee before they went to air as suitable children's programs. They were to be shown at the same time across the networks to create an even playing field and broadcast at a time when children were available to be in the audience. The proposal was for one hour a week day 4.0 - 5.0 pm with 30 minutes for preschoolers earlier in the day.

In 1979 I began my tenure as Chair of the Children's Program Committee (CPC) of the Australian Broadcasting Tribunal (ABT) and given the task of drawing up the guidelines to implement the C and P classification scheme, much as was described in the 1976 Report. At that time, I undertook a study of children's responses (8-15) to children's television programs from the UK, USA and Canada that had not been seen in Australia before. The study, called *The Unknown Audience,* documented the fact that drama programs were more popular with this age group than any other form of program. Comedies were also popular, and the least favoured programs were magazine formats. [6.]

The guidelines the committee drew up, defined the types of programs the CPC were calling for and emphasized the need for drama programs in the broad quota mix. But the programs the networks submitted for C classification were low cost studio-based game shows and magazine programs along with repeats of programs more than a decade old. (591 episodes of *Lassie* was one example) No original Australian drama was forthcoming until the CTS were implemented under new legislation, calling for a drama quota in 1984.

Many advocates who supported the concept of children's programs were clearer about what they did not want than what they wanted. In the 70's and 80's Australian parents were still caught up in the fear that television's power to influence children adversely was such that, like the romantics of old, we should be protecting children from real life including, violence, sex and stereotypes. Such advocates wanted pro-social programs with characters who were positive role models.

The Senate Standing Committee on Children and Television (1978) listened to submissions from advocacy groups and endorsed their concerns. During this decade, when calls for children's programming were at their peak, Australia's censorship rules were stringent and indeed galling to filmmakers working in our emerging industry. Australia was a very conservative country in the 60's and early 70's and books such as Norman Mailer's *Why are we in Vietnam?*, James Baldwin's *Another Country*, Barry Humphries' *Barry McKenzie,* Ian Fleming's *The Spy who Loved Me*, Phillip Roth's *Portnoy's Complaint*, as well as *Mickey Spillane, Lolita and Lady Chatterly's Lover* were banned. The Hollywood Motion Picture Production Code with its moral guidelines prevailed from 1930-68. The Code was wide-ranging resolving 'that special care be exercised in the manner in which subjects are treated, to the end that vulgarity and suggestiveness may be eliminated and that good taste may be emphasized': Concerns ranged from the use of the flag; attitudes toward public characters and institutions; men and women in bed together; the institution of marriage; sympathy for criminals; excessive or lustful kissing'. They are issues that would raise few if any concerns in 2017.

There were few models of children's television programs to go by in 1970-80. In the post World War Two years, simple adventure stories became popular and censorship boards accepted such fare. *Lassie Come Home* was one example that spun off 7 feature films and 591 episodes of a series called *Lassie* made from 1954-73. It seemed you couldn't go wrong with animals so eighty-eight episodes of *Flipper* were produced from 1964-67 and ninety one episodes of *Skippy* from 1966-77. Adventure was a genre believed to be popular with children and Roger Mirams, a pioneering New Zealand film-maker produced a series of children's adventure series including, *The Terrific Adventures of the Terrible Ten* (1959), *The Magic Boomerang* (1965) and *Funny Things Happen Down Under* (1965). But after this burst of activity live action local drama gave way to re-runs of American sit-coms which took over the schedules. Because television sets had penetrated the Australian market, there was no

need for the networks to bait parents to buy with promises of entertainment for children; the imported shows were very much cheaper.

 I was appointed to run the Australian Children's Television Foundation (ACTF) in 1982, to develop exemplary programs for children in order to demonstrate Australians could produce to a standard equal to any producer in the world, prove our children could act and would view programs made for them.

As a teacher I had experience teaching 11-17 year olds. As a mother I watched my children grow and observed their tastes and interests. As a researcher I studied children and read academic works about them, questioned them, surveyed them, talked to them and played with them. Communication research was a developing field and several research studies, were emerging from around the world that helped clarify the fact that children are not so easily influenced and parental, school and peer influences are more potent than entertainment programs. [7.] I was teaching and researching mass media research and was convinced misinformation was holding back innovation in children's programming.

I read the scientific journals and listened to people speaking about and on behalf of children and I was often in fierce disagreement with what I read and heard so I had to think carefully about what I was doing and on what basis I was doing it. I found I kept going back to the best source of knowledge I had – my own childhood and what I had felt, thought and experienced as a child.

I was a popular culture enthusiast. I collected comics, I listened to the top ten, I loved going to the pictures and would watch any film showing. I was an avid reader and my favourite time of day was when the lights went out at night and I was left to indulge my own imaginings without interruption. I remembered what it was like to be a child.

I believed we needed to accomplish two main goals at the ACTF, one was to extend the notions of genre typically associated with children's programs and the second was to delve more deeply into the child's secret world. I wanted to go beyond simple family and animal adventures, to tell Australian stories to children about their lives that reflected their social, cultural and emotional reality. Five years chairing the CPC convinced me the commercial networks would not make such stories and I believed briefing writers, to emphasize pro-social lessons, was not going to lead to programs of interest to children.

My first task as Director of the ACTF was an experiment in developing an anthology series, *Winners,* which would showcase diversity in children's drama and address contemporary issues children were experiencing growing up in the 80's. The series included contemporary, historical, fantasy, comedy, science-fiction and social-realism genres. They had male and female protagonists and children of different ages as actors, and I wanted to encourage reading and their use by teachers so all ACTF programs were accompanied by books and learning materials. Programs were designed to entertain but with an educational purpose at their core.

Winners had to succeed; credibility for the ACTF was at stake. I called on the top creative people in the Australian film industry; the writers, directors, producers with a track record to work on this series. When the scripts were submitted to the CPC for approval, the committee did not want to approve them. I had spent five years chairing the ABT's Children's Program Committee, I was the major architect of both the C classification and had written the guidelines for the standards, so I could be forgiven for thinking that I understood

their meaning and intention. But some Committee members thought the series did not conform to the CT Standards. Their feedback included: adult characters were 'put down', a character in a story cheated, the stories were not relevant to the age group (they were too old for them), kids wouldn't comprehend the issues raised, the stories were considered too emotionally dramatic. Most members came around to accepting the scripts in the end but one child advocate dissented, arguing *Winners* were not suitable programs for children. The Australian Film Commission and Film Victoria, from whom we were seeking funding, said the scripts weren't good enough. New South Wales invested and *Winners* did get made and the series proved to be a success. It won multiple national and international awards, sold into 75 countries and established a reputation for the Australian children's production industry.

 But as a symptom of the way adults can get in the way of telling stories relevant to kids, the Director General of Education in Victoria read one of the books based on the script *Just Friends,* set in the western suburbs of Melbourne which dealt with low self esteem, teenage drinking and pregnancy. He sent a memo to all Victorian schools saying the book was not suitable for young readers because it used, 'the worst form of gutter language'. This amounted to 'pissed off', 'bitch' and 'shut up', rather typical teenage expressions at the time. The *Winners* books remained in print for more than 10 years and sold 170,000 copies. The feedback from teachers using the series as a resource was overwhelmingly positive.

Winners was a huge step forward for the children's production industry because, along with other quota programs produced, it raised the status of programming for children – it was shown in prime time on the Ten Network – it proved children would watch programs made for them, proved Australian children could act and that there was an international market as well as a domestic market for Australian children's programs. Unexpectedly, ACTF programs won a raft of awards overseas and international broadcasters began to look at Australia with new interest. *Captain Johnno,* a program in the second ACTF anthology series *Touch the Sun* (1988), made for the bicentennial year, won an International Emmy, only the second Emmy ever to be won by an Australian production.

The success of *Winners* and *Touch the Sun* gave me confidence to try the next radical experiment. The second major shift I wanted to make was in exposing the world children really revelled in rather than the politically correct world the do-gooders wanted them to inhabit. This was an even tougher project. I searched for an idea that explored the underground culture of childhood. I aimed to produce a program that spoke to the unique larrikin Australian spirit, in our vernacular, with our sense of fun; the culture our children were growing up in. It took some months to identify what I thought might work.

When I read Paul Jenning's short stories I knew he understood children. He had written a number of short, plot-driven tales that had a funny twist. There were no consistent characters or context but they made me laugh out loud and I thought here was something to work with. Paul Jennings had never written a script and knew nothing of the film industry, but I knew just the person to put him together with to design the series I was after. Esben Storm, a talented writer, director, actor and funny man, had worked on *Winners* and *Touch the Sun* and I knew he could work with Jennings and create on screen what I was after.

Together they came up with *Round the Twist.* We took a year to develop the scripts, writing draft after draft as I searched for funding. I was told repeatedly this idea could not translate to the screen; the stories may be funny on the page but they would be visually disgusting. Eventually I persuaded Anna Home the Head of BBC Children's to acquire the series. That was the break that led to financing. [8.]

The series, although idiosyncratically Australian, became, and remains, a hit with children from all over the world – from Zimbabwe to Brazil, Japan to France. *Round the Twist* was made for Australian children but was the most commercially successful children's international program the Australian Film Finance Corporation funded in the decade; it was popular and acclaimed, and is still cited as a seminal program favored by almost all young Aussies. I rarely meet a young adult today who did not grow up with *Round the Twist* and regard it as a special program in their childhood. When it went to air in the UK it was a massive hit with the kids, but there were numerous adult complaints and The British Broadcasting Council sent a please explain letter to the BBC.

The path to the child audience was one of obstacles. What I was endeavoring to do through ACTF programs was both to preserve the experience of childhood and its associated values of spontaneity, enthusiasm, humour, idealism, humanism , curiosity, imagination and adventure; to show the struggle involved in growing up and learning to make decisions; to show how to be resilient and resourceful. To delight but also document the environment and social situations in which children live today. And to show parents the pressures children face as well as those on themselves. *Round the Twist* proved it could be done. The debate about children's television has too often been dominated and misinformed by imagined concerns about negative effects and political correctness. The result leads to conformity rather than experimentation and programming that contributes little to children's needs.

The debate has now been overtaken by changes in technology that raise a myriad of quite different issues and have reshaped the needs debate. Part 3 describes a new programming approach for children today.

PART 3 : A new programming approach for children today

There is no justification for the Government to fund children's television and media, if it is not for the clear developmental benefit of children. There are ample other opportunities for children to amuse themselves and support for children's programming should not be about providing jobs for producers. What remains important today is the same fundamental issue as when we started in the 70's – the contribution to and impact of the media system on the young.

Any regulations for children's programs designed in 2017 should be crafted to suit the media world children are living in today. The commercial networks are no longer fit for purpose. The programs they are making for the quota add little value beyond diversion and it makes no sense to attempt to change their ways now. We have done that with limited success for 40 years. A completely new approach to children's programming is required. That said, the $30 million the networks should have been paying for quota programs should be required as a payment to be allocated to a dedicated fund for a new service.

Children's Television Standards today should serve the essential programming needs of Australian children in two main age groups.

The first group is the **0-8/9 year old audience** where the educational need is paramount. These children should be serviced by programs which will support their development in the

crucial early years, helping their emotional growth and readiness to learn. This is rightly the role of the ABC as our public broadcaster. These children are not a market, they are an audience with special needs. Programs made for them require creative teams who understand child development and see media education as a part of a service for them.

Just as we need to subsidise schools, we need to subsidise the media programs that will support the development and enlightenment of young children. A program that is well designed and takes into consideration the child development process will enhance their progress more effectively than those geared towards commercial ends. As well, the children who will benefit most are those whose parents find ways to interact during viewing and take advantage of learning opportunities embedded in the program.

Fifty years of research shows the children of low income parents enter school with poorer language skills than their more affluent peers because of parenting styles and home learning environments. By age four children in middle and upper class families hear 15 million more words than those in working class families and 30 million more words than children in families on welfare. The word gap is established by age two. If parents don't talk to children and read to them regularly their cognitive development is impaired. The word gap leaves children disadvantaged for life. Their early math and reading skills, emotional and behavioural control, and physical well-being are undermined if they are not ready for school. [9.]

Neither government advisers nor early childhood experts talk about television, advertising, or the internet when they speak of early childhood education, health, and social policies. Nor do they apparently see the potential of quality early childhood media programs that employ drama, music, stories and information to enrich the lives of children to play a positive role in the development of the young child's brain power. We seem to have lost sight of the positive potential of the media to help children learn to understand the world they live in, and to gain some control over it. This enquiry offers the opportunity to rectify this serious omission.

The ABC should be supported to cater for this age group by developing new programs incorporating the potential offered by new media and designed around the goals of the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework. This would be a major contribution to education as programs would be accessible to all children in their pre-school years which would help compensate for the fact that so many children are not attending preschool before age four.

If the task of early childhood and early schooling is defined as 'learning to find your way around in the world', then mass media and the tools of modern technology have the potential to help in this task by taking every child well beyond the intimate confines of the family home to a wealth of 'life experiences', to discover who they are in relation to the wider human family and their social and physical environment. Media can provide visual, verbal, emotional, social and even physical modes of dealing with the world.

There are a number of principles that should underlie the production of media for young children today that justifies subsidy and regulation.

> - All media aimed at children should be trustworthy, putting the interests of the child as citizen and outcomes worthy of the good society above the interests of profit.

- Media producers should work in partnership with educators. The new media context for children requires risk-taking, both on the part of producers who should test new boundaries and on part of the educators guiding the young.
- Exploration of ideas should include storytelling, but games and interactivity are an important part of the mix today.
- All current preschool programming should be reassessed to ensure qualifying programs have a sound and up-to-date educational development basis and do not exploit children.

The ABC should rationalize its current children's channels, maintaining one channel only, supported by online and mobile platforms and focusing on the 0-8/9 age group with a fresh approach to programming.

The second group is the **9-16 year olds** who have moved away from scheduled television and now require an online, on-demand service with new content that would serve their best interests. This group could take part in helping to run this service.

Young people have taken ownership of the new media. They want to see themselves, their real lives, reflected in this media. They want to participate and make their own media programs, in their own ways, albeit for their own entertainment. But their interest in digital stories is also about finding meaning in their lives, seeking relationships and sharing with peers, and through this means they can play their part in influencing political and social decision-making. Their films should have a global reach, for interaction with other cultures. We are in a world where all children can become active producers of online content, as they are already doing on *You Tube.*

The phenomenon of *YouTube,* reputedly created (2005) by two friends who were having difficulty sharing a homemade video, demonstrates in startling terms how much material is 'out there' and how much young people are interested in engaging in small scale production. Kids love *YouTube*. Schoolyard word-of-mouth and texting mean they can promote their own little films and share very funny experiences widely with their friends. Trawling *YouTube* is a lot more fun than watching the umpteenth repeat of children's channel programs.

A new service for them should be a project-driven experience which leads to rewarding outcomes for the participants and also engages the wider community. It has to be a destination that is distinguished from existing services. The kids could develop projects on a managed basis. Drama would be a small subset. Kids do enjoy excellent drama and comedy and are attracted to controversial content, but this should not be the main focus for they have a wealth of television drama series to choose from that was not available when Standards were first introduced. There are other formats to consider when the goal is to invoke truly challenging interactive exchange. Examining the motives of a production would be a good way to dissect the media and could be part of a project. Kids are very good at sending things up, disrupting and pulling things apart; spoofing programs and characters. They should be encouraged to turn the spotlight on the media and dissect it. This process would aid their understanding.

In deciding on a service for this group we need to understand they are not the children of the 80's; they are much more worldly and they are not going back to that more sheltered world. Their family life style and exposure to the world around them makes them different

people from what they were in the 80's. Children's quota drama was always watched by children younger than the targeted audience producers thought they were going for, invariably because children are usually underestimated. Worldwide there has been no media organization that has targeted teens successfully; they are a most elusive audience. But we know now what interests them.

This group is maturing earlier because of their different life experience and exposure to the realities of the world they live in; domestic violence, alcohol, drugs, climate change, pornography, pedophilia, terrorism are issues talked about everywhere. Children cannot be isolated as they were in the 80's when there were single household television sets and no social media. Today they are mobile, with a range of devices at their disposal and they can access any content they want. Parents have lost control of their children's viewing and media interactions. They are viewing adult and family entertainment, not children's programs and when they watch television they view reality shows which did not exist in the 80's. They have the entertainment they need but they still enjoy and need challenge, education and guidance which we could be providing through an online, on-demand service, suited to their needs and interests.

Their needs can't be fulfilled by quotas on the commercial networks. They need a dedicated service built from the ground up, a not-for-profit enterprise that can be funded from a variety of sources including corporate sponsorship. The $30 million from the networks, to be paid annually, should go to this service along with government funding.

The media this group generates for themselves is an important part of the mix. Children and young adults are the new communication nomads, always on the move, using media and its tools adaptively to suit their own purposes and control their own virtual space. The internet is a magnificent way to distribute their culture, serving this generation as the library did previous generations.

Productions by children with new and experimental formats should be encouraged. Hybrid programs that link television, computers, mobiles and the internet should also be part of the mix.

An online multi-platform service for children should also include an interactive cyber-literacy destination developed in partnership with educators. [10.] Media literacy would provide important tools to help children in this age group navigate new media and the internet which have thrown up new challenges impinging on their social development. Media literacy in the past has focused on basic technological know-how. A broader approach is called for today in four main areas which would cover children's ability to: *access* the media; *understand* the media they access – children must learn the difference between reality and representation, how to cope with upsetting emotional responses to media content, and to make critical judgments about fake news, privacy, bullying, sharing online, TV violence, advertisements and branding. They need to learn how to c*reate.* Even though children's own production of media content is rapidly expanding, there are new developments to master with smart mobile phones and website interactivity. Fourthly they need to understand how to *learn* through the media in the areas of physical growth and health, language and communicative competence, self-understanding and interpersonal skills, cognitive skills and general knowledge.

Conclusion

The regulation and the preservation of children's programming content is justified but with the proposed restructure drama quotas would not be necessary. In 2017 there should be a new approach to funding children's content. The ABC should be responsible for early childhood programs for children up to the age of eight to nine years. A new online interactive service should be established for children aged 9-16 more relevant to their needs and interests which is paid for in part by the commercial networks relinquishing their responsibility for children's programming.

As a tool for the voice of children, as a tool for the education of children, as a tool for cultural identity, the media is unequalled. Children come to media willingly yet we do not use technologies to develop and teach children; we use them to market to them. In order to attract children to relevant, appropriate material that is designed with their best interests at heart, producers need to take risks and to engage with the education revolution. Children should be a part of that process.

The importance of media in the education of children has not been well recognised by the education system because there has not been a whole-of-government perspective linking education policy and communication policy. Communication and technology policies should be seen as integral to the nation's education policy.

Media Education should be expanded beyond a narrow focus on cyber-literacy skills to include the content and learning potential of all forms of digital media and their social impact in order for children to fully understand and benefit from the communication revolution

Footnotes:

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