

# SUBMISSION TO THE SUPPORTING AUSTRALIAN STORIES ON OUR SCREENS – OPTIONS PAPER

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To the Hon. Paul Fletcher, Commonwealth Minister for the Arts,

Thank you for the opportunity to comment on the options paper co-authored by the Australian Communications Authority and Screen Australia, and for your consideration of how best to support Australian stories on our screen in a modern, multi-platform environment.

I am a Brisbane-based documentary filmmaker – several years ago I directed a documentary through an ABC initiative called Opening Shot, a program for first-time filmmakers. At the time I was only 24 and was extremely excited to have such an amazing chance. In the years following I worked really hard – I went to conferences, I networked, I researched my own projects, applied for jobs and sought mentorship. I did lots of project work for other people – work that was often insecure and terminated at short notice. But ultimately, reaching the second rung of making another film, or even surviving in the industry, seemed to be even harder than the first. And the issue is almost always a lack of funding and a lack of support.

There are many more people like me who deserve not just a single chance, but several chances to develop and create amazing work, especially Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander filmmakers. The COVID-19 lockdowns have shown more than ever that content is crucial to keeping us sane.

The industry truly needs to support young creators with seed funding to create work in their own right – grants of \$5,000 for emerging documentary filmmakers for example would go a long way. We are resourceful, enterprising and most of all we have good ideas and interesting perceptions of the world that deserve to be explored. I have observed this through my sessional teaching work at Griffith Film School as well – there are incredible young filmmakers coming through with innovative approaches to storytelling but sadly many of them will finish film school and find that there are not many opportunities.

As a Gen Y, I am an avid consumer of streaming services and to me it's a no-brainer that they should contribute to the local industry just like broadcast television (which I seldom watch anymore, except for news and current affairs). Why should we consume primarily US content when we have many brilliant stories to tell of our own?

With Australia in a strong position in the COVID-19 situation, we have a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to continue to develop our screen industry and export uniquely Australian content to the rest of the world. Not only can Australians learn and understand our own history better, but the rest of the world could as well.

I ask that you give serious consideration to the following information in designing your reforms to media regulation and screen policy more generally.

Kind regards  
Amelia Paxman

# SUPPORTING AUSTRALIAN STORIES ON OUR SCREEN

## *A policy position for the Australian emerging screen sector*

### Overview

There is a need for the Government to harmonise the media regulatory framework in Australia, however such changes will have significant impact on local screen production.

This impact on screen production is not fully captured in the options paper, and the impact on emerging screen content creators is not considered at all.

The options paper states the role of government is to ensure the proper functioning of markets and a **fair approach** for all players. The focus of the paper is principally on service providers (broadcasters, streamers), however the 'players' in Australian media also include Australian content creators, both experienced **and emerging**.

History has shown that without government support, there would be virtually no screen content being made by or about Australians/Australia. George Miller would be a doctor, Paul Hogan would be painting the Sydney Harbour bridge, Chris Hemsworth might be working on a cattle station in the Northern Territory.

The role of the government is therefore to also to be a **dynamic investor, risk-taker and innovator** in respect to Australian content creation.

Additionally, the Options Paper describes the desired end state as being a platform neutral regulatory framework, however cinema screens and emerging mobile platforms (eg Quibi) have been omitted.

In order for **true platform neutrality**, the new media regulatory framework needs to include these all current and future screens.

### Preferred Option

**Option 3 - Screens pay a proportion of revenue into an Australian Production Fund (APF)** – best targets the opportunities for the Australian film and television production sector and optimises its chances for future success.

These changes represent a rare opportunity for the Government, as system designers of Australian local content production, to steward local production towards a more **equitable, efficient and effective** system that incentivises performance and focusses on outcomes.

The rate of contribution of revenues set under this option should be significant in order to reflect the cultural and economic contribution of screen production and its critical function in Australia's innovation eco-system. This includes innovation not just in the types of content but also in the talent that produces it.

### Emerging content creators

New entrants and new ideas are critical to the success of any innovation ecosystem and any industry. Since 2008, both federal and state screen agencies have dramatically reduced funding and support to new and emerging content creators and have made them virtually ineligible for production funding in their own right.

In doing so, Screen Australia has arguably weakened its ability to achieve its statutory obligation 'to support and promote the development of a **highly creative, innovative and commercially sustainable Australian screen production industry**' (*Screen Australia Act 2008*, Section 6 (1)(a)).

In the past, emerging content creators have delivered superior results for the screen industry. Using the Top 100 Australian film of all-time as a sample, the median box office when adjusted for inflation of experienced directors was \$7, 535, 668. For inexperienced (first time directors) the median was \$8,767,137 - over \$1 million more<sup>1</sup>.

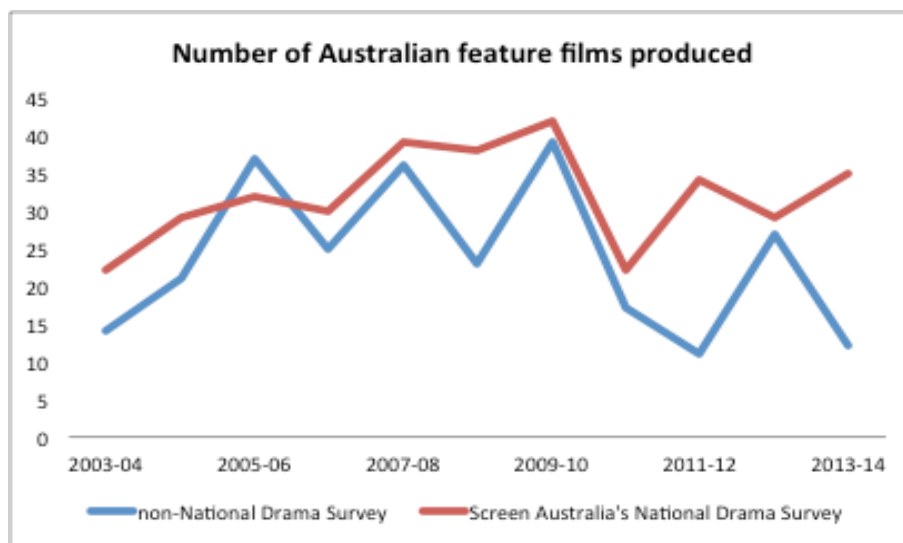
Emerging screen practitioners are a crucial and yet hidden part of the overall health of the screen production sector. There are estimated to be over 1,000 emerging practitioners actively producing screen content in any given year

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<sup>1</sup> This analysis does not include films that were funded by Hollywood studios in order to control for the impact of budget.

from short films, web series and low budget features - most without government funding. The estimated value of this production activity is over \$40 million annually<sup>2</sup>.

Prior to the introduction of the Producer Offset and the creation of Screen Australia, the emerging sector rivalled that of professional production of feature films<sup>3</sup>. The emerging sector is therefore a **significant micro economy** that is unrecognised by government.



Emerging screen content creators also make a significant **cultural contribution** to the Australian screen industry. Between 2005 and 2014, there were 453 screening of Australian shorts (drama and documentaries) across 19 festivals. Over the same period, there were 490 screening of feature films, long-form documentaries and other 'professional' titles at the same 19 film festivals. In some years, the number of awards and festival screenings given to short films exceeded those of the professional industry<sup>4</sup>.

### The policy problem

Between 2008 and 2014, Screen Australia funding for dedicated programs to support next generation screen content creators decreased by 82%<sup>5</sup>. State screen agency support also decreased over the same period by 61%.

While Screen Australia created the Generate Fund in 2018 to allow new works to be developed by new talent, there still remains a significant gap in agency funding for those at the beginning of the career journey – in the important and neglected space between 'learning and earning'.

Government investment in media training is substantial. There are approximately 7,000 media graduates from either university or other higher education courses with an estimated cost-to-government of \$225 million in fee support, not including the \$27 million allocated to the Australian Film and Television Radio School each year<sup>6</sup>. Total employment in screen production in 2015-16 was only 14,638<sup>7</sup>.

The Government needs to increase opportunities for emerging screen content creators, otherwise its investment in education and training becomes hugely unproductive.

### Recommendation

It is recommended that the Government commit 10% of its annual allocation to Screen Australia to the development and production of new works from emerging talent. The same level of commitment should be applied to the contributions made to the Australian Production Fund if this option is adopted.

<sup>2</sup> Metro Screen (2015), *Emerging Visions: Career Pathways in the Australian Screen Production Industry*, pp. 43-45.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid* (pg 45). Some 'professional' productions are actually made by emerging content creators such as *Kenny*, *The Legend of Ben Hall*, or *Red Hill*, the only film to be near to recouping its costs.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid* (pp 46-49).

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid* (pg 61).

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid* (pp. 54-54); AFTRS Annual Report

<sup>7</sup> ABS Cat. No 8679.0