

A very special audience: how layering and drift in Australian cultural policy have affected the production of children's television drama for digital markets

Anna Potter*

*Faculty of Arts and Business, University of the Sunshine Coast, Locked Bag 4,
Maroochydore DC, QLD 4558, Australia*

Layering and drift have occurred in Australian cultural policy surrounding the production of film and television. Children have always been considered a special audience by Australian regulators, deserving of locally made content created especially for them. The production of Australian children's television has enjoyed unusual levels of regulatory support since the late 1970s, much of which is expressed through the policy mechanism of The Children's Television Standards. However the circumstances of contemporary Australian children's television are very different from those of the late 1970s. Industrial, economic and technological change combined with layering and drift in cultural policy have undermined the objectives of policy settings grounded in cultural nationalism and justified by the special status of the child audience. As a result, Australian cultural policy surrounding children's television is being used in part to support the very programming it was designed to discourage.

Keywords: children's television; cultural policy; television production

Children have always been considered a special television audience by Australian policy-makers, deserving of locally made content created especially for them. As a result, Australian children's television, particularly drama, has enjoyed unusual levels of regulatory support since the late 1970s, much of which is expressed through the policy mechanism of The Children's Television Standards (CTS), first introduced in 1979. In their current form, The Standards state that Australia's free-to-air commercial networks must each transmit 32 h of high quality 'C' or children's first-run drama each year. State support for the production of Australian children's drama includes not only the content quotas enshrined in the CTS but also generous funding subsidies and favourable tax regimes, all of which are designed to underpin the production of high quality local content for children.

Cultural policies in this area merit scrutiny because of the transformations that have occurred in the production and distribution of children's television since the 1970s. These transformations mean that the circumstances of contemporary Australian children's television are very different from those that existed when the CTS were first formulated and ratified. Further, Australia has a somewhat paradoxical approach to film and television policy-making, with drift and layering in policy settings obscuring the radical nature of the changes occurring in certain parts of the

*Email: apotter@usc.edu.au

sector. Australian children's drama continues to be made, thanks to the content requirements of the CTS. Nonetheless, due to the industrial and regulatory changes that occurred in Australian children's television from the mid-2000s, there has been a decline in quality in some types of 'C' classified drama as well as a tendency for the production of children's television to be undertaken by transnational corporations rather than small independent Australian production companies. As a result, national cultural expression is no longer coterminous with the goals of cultural nationalism. Such a development makes the CTS content quotas and generous funding subsidies for the production of Australian children's drama much more difficult to justify.

As Parker and Parenta (2008) observe, Australia currently has a policy apparatus that appears to embrace the goals of cultural nationalism through mechanisms such as quotas and funding subsidies for local content (including children's drama), while at the same time encouraging the internationalisation of the industry through for example tax incentives designed to 'ensure Australia remains competitive for large-budget overseas productions' Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet, Office for the Arts (DPCA 2011). Parker and Parenta also note the significance of ideas in policy development and the particular quality of the interaction between old ideas, such as those of cultural nationalism and industry protectionism and the seemingly incompatible newer ideas of internationalisation and free trade. If different ideas of this nature can quietly coexist then, they suggest, institutional change will tend to occur in gradual and incremental stages, rather than in moments of radical adjustment.

The quiet coexistence of seemingly incompatible ideas means that new film and television policies that encourage internationalisation and free trade can be gradually layered on top of old policies imbued with cultural nationalism, while the former prevent any expansion and development of the latter. For example, the signing of the US/Australia Free Trade Agreement prevented the introduction of local content quotas on Australia's new digital free-to-air channels (Parker and Parenta 2008). Further, as the film and television industry changes in response to technological, economic and social developments, gaps begin to appear that are not covered by the ageing policies of cultural nationalism. With new policies such as Free Trade Agreements preventing action being taken to cover those gaps, older policies can become redundant through a process of policy drift. Changes to media technologies encourage this type of policy drift, so that the new policies of internationalisation and free trade eventually become more and more influential, eroding the achievement of the goals of policies grounded in cultural nationalism (Parker and Parenta 2008).

From the early 1960s onwards the Australian Government began to normalise the idea of cultural nationalism in screen policy, of the telling of Australian stories with Australian voices, through policy settings including content quotas. The earliest quotas were for local television advertising; these were eventually expanded to include programmes and specific high-cost genres such as drama (O'Regan 1993). By the 1970s, these supports had been supplemented by newly established government agencies such as the Australian Film Commission, which had their own funding schemes. The 1979 introduction of the CTS and their mandated children's drama quotas supported additional forms of high cost local content. These policy settings were intentionally designed to nurture an independent production industry and the creation of Australian screen content (Cunningham 1992, O'Regan 1993).

In contrast, a shift towards the internationalisation of screen production can be seen in various policy initiatives during the 1990s as governments attempted to encourage private investment in the screen production sector. For example, the taxation scheme 10B was used widely in the 1990s (before being discontinued in 2001) to channel private funds into international ‘runaway’ productions – films that were made in Australia but intended for the North America market. Further, international investment in costly infrastructure was seen as a means of encouraging these sorts of productions while developing local skills and production capacity. The same infrastructure could then be used to produce Australian content by a workforce that had honed its skills on international projects. Thus state government incentives encouraged Warner Brothers to partner with Australia’s Village Roadshow in the development of the Warner Roadshow Movieworld studio and theme park in Queensland, while the 1994 ‘Creative Nation’ cultural policy initiative provided federal government support for Rupert Murdoch’s News Corporation to build the Fox Studios development in Sydney (Goldsmith and O’Regan 2005).

Further deliberate attempts to internationalise Australia’s film and television production industry can be seen in more recent policy developments. For example, in 2001 the Australian Government introduced a tax incentive for productions with budgets over AUD 15 million, which was deliberately designed to encourage the foreign production of big budget films and television series in Australia (Parker and Parenta 2008). Second, as a signatory to the 2005 Free Trade Agreement, the Australian Government agreed not to increase local content levels on free-to-air television, to limit increases in expenditure levels for local production on pay-TV and not to increase content quotas on multi-channel services (Parker and Parenta 2008).

These examples represent the layering of new policies grounded in the achievement of the goals of internationalisation on top of old policies grounded in the achievement of the goals of cultural nationalism, without any moments of radical change occurring. They also illustrate the ‘schizophrenic quality’ of cultural policy, which has been created by globalisation. Thus government is committed to supporting the goals of cultural nationalism while ‘the rhetoric of economy and industry seeks a culture that is internationally competitive, cosmopolitan, dynamic and responsive’ (Craik *et al.* 2010, p. 23). The production of Australian children’s television has been shaped by these different regulatory, economic and industrial influences although content quotas and state subsidies for children’s drama have remained constant since 1979.

The layering of cultural policies with quite different objectives presents a number of issues for scholars and industry practitioners. The discussion here will focus on issues concerned with the production and distribution of one genre of Australian children’s television, namely drama. Transformations in Australian television caused by industrial and technological change since the mid-1990s have led to the development of new business models and distribution platforms for all children’s programming. As a result of these recent developments, incremental change has occurred in the type of children’s drama being supported and subsidised by policy settings such as the CTS. Indeed it will be suggested here that drift and layering in Australian cultural policy combined with industrial and technological change have undermined the objectives of policy settings that are grounded in cultural nationalism and justified by the special status of the child audience. As a result, Australian cultural policy surrounding the production of children’s television is being used to support the very programming it was designed to discourage. Further, the independent Australian

production companies whose existence earlier cultural policies were intended to nurture frequently do not produce this programming. Instead, contemporary Australian children's television is more often made by local branches of the well-resourced transnational corporations that have bought up many independent Australian production companies since the mid-2000s. Meanwhile these local branches remain eligible for the funding subsidies originally designed to assist the Australian independent production sector.

In order to demonstrate how policy drift and industrial change have affected the production of Australian children's drama, the introduction of the CTS and their intersection with the independent production sector first require description. Then, the way the character of this intersection was altered by the technological, industrial and economic transformations in children's television that have occurred since the introduction of the CTS can be examined. It will become clear that these transformations contributed to drift that occurred in Australian television policy as the idea of the achievement of the goals of cultural nationalism was replaced by the idea of internationalisation and free trade. As policy drifted, incremental but ultimately radical changes occurred in the production of Australian children's drama. However, it is not suggested here that Australian children's television is in crisis. Indeed children's television in contemporary Australia is characterised by abundance of supply, pan-platform distribution and dedicated children's channels. These have included, since 2009, a dedicated children's channel ABC3 provided by the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC), Australia's taxpayer-funded public service broadcaster. Nonetheless the decline in quality in some types of 'C' classified drama and the increasing presence of transnational corporations in the spaces of local expression mean financial and regulatory supports for children's drama production have become more difficult to justify. Further, national cultural expression is no longer coterminous with the goals of cultural nationalism.

The CTS and the Australian independent production sector

With a population base of 22 m, Australia has a medium-sized television system. Within this system, Australian children have always been considered a special audience with particular programming needs that include the need for culturally specific, high-quality child-centred programming (Hodge and Tripp 1986, Keys 1999, Mencinsky and Mullen 1999). When television was first introduced in Australia in 1956, a mixed model television system that was considered to incorporate the best elements of the British and American systems was established from the start (Curthoys 1991). However, the fact that two commercial stations were introduced in Melbourne and Sydney in 1956 (and later in Brisbane and Adelaide) compared with only one public service broadcasting station meant commercial television had the advantage over public service broadcasting from the outset (O'Regan 1993). In order to save money, commercial networks tended to rely on imported content or studio-based advertiser sponsored variety programming to attract the child audience (Moran 1989, Horgan 2006). Thus a lack of mandated content quotas meant that societal and regulatory concern about the child audience was not attached to particular regimes of codification and inspection. As a result, various programs and channels could claim to be meeting these ideals and providing significant pro-social benefits without any rigorous external standards for evaluating the nature, merit and amount of their children's programming.

By the 1960s and early 1970s there was widespread community concern about the lack of age-appropriate local content for children, which coincided with a rising sense of cultural nationalism surrounding Australian film and television production (Bertrand and Collins 1981, Edgar 2006). After sustained campaigns by children's lobby groups, significant legislative intervention in Australian children's television finally occurred in 1979, in the form of the CTS and the introduction of the concept of the 'C' or children's programme. The 'C' classification includes criteria that are intended to ensure the production of high-quality programming, in the sense of high production values, thus the Standards define a 'C' (children's) or 'P' (pre-schoolers) programme as one which:

- (a) is made specifically for children or groups of children;
- (b) is entertaining;
- (c) is well produced using sufficient resources to ensure a high standard of script, cast, direction, editing, shooting, sound and other production elements;
- (d) enhances a child's understanding and experience; and
- (e) is appropriate for Australian children (Australian Communications and Media Authority [ACMA] 2009).

The CTS apply only to Australia's free-to-air advertiser-funded networks. They do not apply to the public service broadcaster the ABC, which is separately bound by its charter. In their current form they state that these networks must transmit 240 h of 'C' programming each year and 120 h of 'P' programming. Of the 'C' programming, 50% must be Australian and 32 h each year must be the first-run Australian drama (ACMA 2009).

With their emphasis on local production and the privileging of drama in the achievement of the goals of cultural nationalism, the CTS were justified by the notion of children as a special audience deserving of their own culturally specific Australian content. Australian policy settings thus ensured that public service broadcasting ideology was expressed and applied to commercial free-to-air channels through the CTS. In the years following their introduction, the CTS had a large sphere of influence because they applied to three of the four television networks on air at the time, Australia's free-to-air advertiser-funded networks Seven, Nine and Ten. The CTS ensured that these Australian networks had no choice but to invest in domestic production of children's television, including drama. Demand was thus artificially created in Australia for high quality locally produced children's programming.

By the early 1980s, Australia's well-established and profitable free-to-air advertiser-funded networks were making enough money to be able to invest in local drama production for adults that rated well with local audiences. Mandated content quotas for prime time programming on commercial networks, like the Australian Content Standard, introduced in the early 1960s, provided additional impetus to do so. Government intervention in the form of the 1981 introduction of tax concessions for film and television production including 10BA further supported local content. This local content included feature films, documentaries, a significant number of children's feature films and mini-series. Of the latter, 65 were made between 1981 and 1987 (O'Regan 1993). Importantly, regulatory supports in the form of tax concessions made investment in the Australian production industry attractive to private investors, thus removing some of the need for government subvention. As

more money flowed into television production, particularly the production of what proved to be extremely popular mini-series, production values and output increased along with advertising revenues and international programme sales (O'Regan 1989). Thus economic and regulatory conditions ensured that during this period, popular local content with high production values made up a significant part of the commercial networks' schedules (O'Regan 1993).

The producers of Australian children's television drama benefited from being part of this newly established production industry. They also benefited from working within an agile and resourceful production culture that understood the importance and the requirements of international marketplaces and co-production agreements (Cunningham and Jacka 1996). These elements combined with the drama quotas and quality control mechanisms inherent in the rigorous demands of the CTS meant that Australian children's drama quickly established a reputation for quality in international as well as local markets (Aisbett 2000). Many small independent production companies profited from the boom in demand for Australian children's drama during the 1980s and 1990s. Companies such as Yoram Gross Film Studio, Barron Films, Jonathan M Shiff Productions, Pacific Productions, Beyond International and the government-owned Film Australia all successfully produced and exported children's television during this period (Cunningham and Jacka 1996). Indeed Jonathan M Shiff Productions went on to produce one of the most popular children's dramas ever made, *H₂O: Just Add Water* (2006–2009) which by 2007 was the highest rating children's programme on Nickelodeon UK (Ward and Potter 2008).

Another renowned producer and distributor of children's drama, the government-funded Australian Children's Television Foundation (ACTF) was founded in 1982 by children's television campaigner Dr Edgar. The ACTF soon gained a worldwide reputation for its 'C' drama productions such as *Round the Twist* (1989–2000), *Touch the Sun* (1988) and *Winners* (1986). Indeed it has been suggested that the drama anthology series created by the ACTF under Edgar's leadership has certain distinctive attributes, including a commitment to pro-social models, the defence or scrutiny of Australian culture and a preoccupation with questions of identity and maturation. As the antithesis of sitcoms and imported animation, the anthology series for children signifies high quality and high-cultural values (Rutherford 2001). These children's drama were commissioned by Australia's advertiser-funded networks but also sold to the UK broadcasters including ITV, the BBC and the Disney Channel UK.

The CTS also ensured that high production values, the achievement of goals grounded in cultural nationalism and the child audience's perceived needs remained primary concerns for Australian producers of children's television during this period. For example four episodes of the 1992 remake of the Australian classic *Skippy*, renamed *The Adventures of Skippy*, failed to obtain a 'C' classification from the Children's Programming Committee, set up by the Australian Broadcasting Tribunal, the body responsible for television regulation at the time. The episodes were rejected on the basis that they were not designed specifically for primary school children, were inappropriate from a child's perspective and insufficiently factual (Goldsmith *et al.* 2010). Despite the fact that the series was quality drama that primary school children would enjoy, the episodes were refused a 'C' classification. The rigorous upholding of the quality demands inherent in the 'C' classification has very serious implications for the producers of children's drama as the need to fill 'C' quotas is the only reason networks invest in children's drama. Without a 'C'

classification, a programme's value to the network plummets as it cannot be used to fill content quotas.

By the mid-1990s, a combination of policy settings, industrial developments and market forces had led to the establishment of a small but successful Australian children's drama production industry. Independent producers were creating good quality, exportable drama that was nonetheless understood to contribute to the goals of policy settings grounded in Australian cultural nationalism. From the 1970s to the late 1990s, advertiser-funded free-to-air channels were the primary investors in and publishers of Australian children's drama. This was due almost entirely to the influence of the CTS; a policy mechanism that supported and nurtured the Australian children's television production industry where the free market could not.

Transformations in children's television

Since television's inception, Australian Governments of various political persuasions have consistently, if reluctantly, intervened in the free market operation of the commercial television industry to ensure the provision of certain types of content. They have often used 'honeymoon' periods to allow a service to establish, develop and pay for its infrastructure and set up costs before requiring more stations. Post-establishment, governments have used mechanisms such as content quotas and financial subsidies to achieve these cultural goals (O'Regan 1993).

As a special audience with special programming needs, children provided justification for content quotas because it was clear they were not getting the culturally specific, high quality child-centred programming they deserved until the advent of the CTS. This policy intervention was thus justified by the special status of the child audience and a kind of Australian cultural sovereignty. However, from the late 1990s onwards, the effects of new forms of television on broadcasting's traditional business models and on the distribution of children's programming led to drift occurring in media policies that have existed in one form or another since the 1960s. The effects of this drift were exacerbated by the layering of new policies intended to encourage internationalisation in production on top of older policies grounded in the achievement of the goals of cultural nationalism. As a result, the kind of contemporary children's drama mandated and supported by the CTS now bears less and less resemblance to the programming envisaged by those who campaigned so hard for their creation.

Changes in Australian broadcast television, including the 1995 introduction of pay-TV and of digital multi-channel services in the mid-2000s, transformed the distribution of Australian children's television and led to a rapid increase in the number of dedicated children's services in Australia. These new services included both subscription services from channels like Disney Channel and Cartoon Network and, from 2009 onwards, ABC3. The new channels provided an abundant supply of diverse content to Australian children, in contrast to the lack of supply that characterised children's television in the 1960s and 70s. Policy settings including the Australian Content Standard were subverted by new multi-channel offerings to which the quotas did not apply (Craik *et al.* 2010). Without content quotas on these new channels, Australian content, particularly drama, was proportionally reduced in their schedules because the use of cheaper US product increased. As a result, Australian content across all free-to-air advertiser-funded channels dropped from 52 to 38% in 2010 (Screen Australia 2011).

The proliferation of dedicated children's services also meant that the child audience began to drift away from the free-to-air advertiser-funded channels to which the CTS apply. Children's reduced interest in these channels was compounded by the widespread availability of the Internet in Australia, with 90% of Australian homes having Internet access by 2006 (ACMA 2007a). Free-to-air commercial viewing also dropped from 140 min a day to 121 min by 2006 (ACMA 2007b). Ironically children actually watched more television than ever, but an erosion of the free-to-air broadcasters' analogue-era dominance of their viewing patterns had occurred. As a result, in the 4–5 pm slot on commercial free-to-airs, when children's programmes are traditionally shown, child audiences aged between 5- and 12-year-old dropped as a proportion of total audience share from 8.1% in 2001 to 3.9% in 2006 (Aisbett 2007, p. 4).

For Australia's commercial free-to-air networks Seven, Nine and Ten, existing resentment about the enforced provision of children's drama was exacerbated by the child audience's gradual withdrawal from their viewing space. As part of a long campaign against the CTS, Australia's commercial networks have repeatedly complained that children's television, particularly drama, is expensive to make and rates poorly with its target audience. Producers maintain in turn that children's drama is deliberately poorly scheduled and promoted by the networks so that children cannot find it easily, to support the networks' argument that drama is unpopular with children (ACTF 2007). Nonetheless in the Australian system of financing children's television, free-to-air commercial networks remain important in several ways, including the unlocking of subsidy resources. This is because state subsidies for children's television production are only triggered once a pre-sale to a local commercial network has been achieved. Without the commercial networks' first investor role, Australian production companies cannot access crucial state subsidies. Thus Australia's free-to air commercial networks continue to play a vitally important role in children's drama production, albeit reluctantly and to a diminishing child audience.

The end of spectrum scarcity and ensuing proliferation of television services in Australia and internationally shook the foundations of traditional television business models as audiences and advertising revenues fragmented across multiple channels. Business models for Australian children's television also changed. In stark contrast to the advertiser-funded free-to-air networks, subscription only services like Disney and Nickelodeon and public service broadcaster the ABC actively pursued the child audience with heavily branded channels. Interestingly, both pay-TV provider The Disney Channel and public service broadcaster the ABC assumed similar business models, attracting audiences with content and responding to a multi-channel, fragmented media environment by maximising every opportunity to exploit their programming's merchandising capacities using programming like *High School Musical* and *The Wiggles* (Potter 2012). Merchandising, channel subscription and content-related sales began to rival advertising revenue as important ways of monetising Australian children's drama. The new business models for children's television emerged independently of the CTS, with channels relying heavily on imported rather than Australian content to attract the child audience.

With the child audience's fragmentation across multiple platforms, the sphere of influence of the CTS gradually eroded. Thus in the new digital regimes that emerged post-2001 in Australia, the channels that actively pursued the child audience had programming and production practices driven by entirely different agendas, including for some, those promulgated by their transnational parent

companies. The policy drift that affected the CTS was accompanied and exacerbated by policy layering, as new policy initiatives such as the Australian Screen Production Incentive, the Producer Offset and the Enterprise Funding Scheme (which gave small independent production companies cash grants of up to \$1 m over 3 years) were introduced between 2006 and 2009. These policies encouraged international investment in Australian film and television production and international linkages between Australian independent production companies and transnational corporations. In some cases, these linkages led to the part or majority purchase of Australian independent production companies such as Matchbox Pictures, Burberry Productions, Freehand Productions and Hopscotch Features by international corporations including Universal Pictures, All3media and BBC Worldwide. Thus, between 2006 and 2011 many previously independent production companies effectively became the local branches of their transnational corporation majority owners, while obtaining access to their distribution networks, funding resources and production practices. They nonetheless remained eligible for local funding supports designed to support the independent production sector.

Changing patterns in production practices

From 2006 onwards, as economic and technological developments reshaped the distribution of Australian children's television, and new policies encouraged international investment in local production companies, incremental changes in children's drama production began to occur. Firstly, the production of Australian children's drama became increasingly internationalised, thanks to the growing presence in Australia of transnational pay-TV channels like Disney Channel and Cartoon Network and transnational corporations like BBC Worldwide (owner of 37% of Australian company Freehand Productions), Southern Star-Endemol (owner of Australian production company Southern Star Entertainment) and Fremantle Media (owner of Fremantle Media Australia). These channels and production companies began to move into the spaces of local broadcasting and production across several genres, including children's drama, through either their commissioning behaviours or their production practices. Further, from 2009 onwards the ABC's newly launched children's channel ABC3 began to commission high quality Australian children's drama that conformed to historical expectations and criteria for 'C' drama. However, none of ABC3's programming was submitted to the ACMA for a 'C' classification, because the ABC has no 'C' quotas to fill, reinforcing the irrelevance of the CTS to Australia's public service broadcaster.

Australian pay-TV channels like Disney and Nickelodeon tend not commission large amounts of Australian children's drama. Initially high infrastructure costs, an overcrowded, medium-sized market and government policy designed to protect the free-to-air incumbents combined to make pay-TV's early years unprofitable (Flew and Spurgeon 2000). Nonetheless they are obliged by the *Broadcasting Services Act 1992* to spend 10% of their programming budgets on local content. In 2006, the Disney Channel began to commission drama in Australia for the first time. Its initial commission was a local version of its internationally distributed drama format the six-minute comedy *As The Bell Rings*, made for the Australasian market. Local versions of *As The Bell Rings* are made by Disney in multiple locations including the UK, Israel, Russia, France, Germany, Spain, Singapore and China. As such, the series represents a deliberate corporate strategy by Disney to localise its subscription services with a

local version of a globally distributed programme format. This type of local production is not expected to travel beyond its region of production, Australasia. The Disney Corporation's first Australian drama commission was produced by Fremantle Media Australia, itself a local branch of a transnational media company. One of the Australian local branch's key functions is to produce local versions of globally distributed television formats owned by its parent company, such as *The Biggest Loser*, in Australia. With the Disney commission, Fremantle Media Australia became a producer of globally distributed children's television formats.

Fully funded by the commissioning channel and based on an internationally distributed format, the children's drama *As the Bell Rings* is designed to localise a globally distributed channel, rather than instil any sense of citizenship or cultural identity in Australian children. It is also clear that Disney's concept of the indigenisation of its channels has been used in other territories, territories that do not have local content quotas like those provided by the CTS. Four series of *As the Bell Rings* nonetheless received a 'C' classification from ACMA. It appears to be stretching the CTS to have a 15 min one set comedy conforming to the principle of introducing and developing 'the dramatic elements of character, theme and plot' and in doing so meeting the quality standards so long assumed in the 'C' classification. With this policy drift, the horizon line for producers of Australian drama for children changed, because the success of *As The Bell Rings* demonstrated that a local branch of a transnational super-indie can produce inexpensive, one set format-based programming and still obtain the 'C' drama classification. Indeed the classification itself may be subtly changing its meaning and becoming a less robust instrument than it has been in maintaining quality standards and expenditures on children's programming.

Incremental changes in the nature and quality of Australian children's drama can also be seen through examination of the production practices of another Australian production company Southern Star Entertainment Productions, owned by transnational parent company Endemol Worldwide Distribution. Local branch Southern Star Entertainment Productions produces Australian versions of Endemol's programme formats, including *Deal or No Deal*, *Ready Steady Cook*, *Strictly Dancing* and one of the most successful formats of all time, *Big Brother* (Moran 2009). The Australian broadcasters for whom Southern Star makes programming include advertiser-funded free-to-air networks, public service broadcasters and pay-TV services. Southern Star Entertainment also makes children's programming including drama. These series include *Chatroom Chicks* (2008) for Channel Nine.

Chatroom Chicks received a 'C' drama classification from ACMA in 2008 before being renamed as *A gURLs wURLd* and beginning transmission on advertiser-funded Channel Nine in June 2011. The drama is a co-production with Southern Star Singapore filmed in Singapore, Germany and Australia. It was produced with the assistance of the Media Development Authority of Singapore and with Screen Australia funding. While it is a 'C' classified drama *A gURLs wURLd*'s transnational pedigree suggests it may not be telling Australian stories to Australian children in quite the way those who lobbied hard for the CTS intended. The programme's website advises visitors to 'Watch out for *A gURLs wURLd* when it comes to a television network in your country' (Southern Star Entertainment Productions 2011), emphasising the series' international co-production pedigree, and potential for global distribution.

It what appears to be incremental change leading to a noticeable change in standards, Australia's classification system enshrined in the CTS has moved from a

period when a high quality remake of *Skippy* cannot obtain a 'C' classification but the 15 min sitcom format *As the Bell Rings* and the transnational production *A GurlsWorld* can. As a result of these incremental changes in production and classification, the 'C' classification is degraded as a signifier of cultural nationalism, and no longer a byword for quality. The greater flexibility with which the CTS are being interpreted means content quotas and generous funding subsidies are supporting programming which is not high quality, even though the support of high quality children's programme is their *raison d'être*. Further, these programmes are not being made by a struggling independent sector but by the local branches of transnational corporations.

Between 2006 and 2011, transnational corporations moved into the production spaces previously inhabited by the small independent Australian production companies, making children's drama whose existence owed much to the content quotas of the CTS. The ownership structures and distribution networks of the local branches of these transnational corporations led to a new business model for children's television. These companies are well capitalised and less reliant on government financial supports (although clearly prepared to embrace them when possible). They already have access to an international distribution network and are thus relieved of the pressure of chasing international production partners and distribution networks. As the number of productions they make in Australia increased, a new model of children's drama gradually emerged. Under this business model for drama, the CTS have even less relevance and the 'C' classification does not necessarily denote quality.

Ironically, as the CTS became associated with lower quality, less culturally specific children's drama, the commissioning and production of the high-quality drama intended to achieve the goals of cultural nationalism began to be undertaken by organisations like the ABC and the ACTF. While some of these dramas are produced by previously independent but now US-owned local production companies like Matchbox Productions, they are all made with ACTF involvement and are all identifiably high quality and culturally specific. Thus ABC3's children's dramas, including *My Place* (2009–10), *Dance Academy* (2009–) and *Dead Gorgeous* (2010–) epitomise and embody all the qualities which the creators of the CTS hoped for, although both *Dance Academy* and *Dead Gorgeous* are, like *A GurlsWorld* international co-productions. Nonetheless they are not submitted to ACMA for a 'C' classification because without quotas to fill, there is no point in the ABC undertaking the process. So the Australian children's dramas that are made in conjunction with the ACTF and conform to every criterion of the CTS are not put forward for a 'C' classification because 'C' drama has no relevance to Australia's public service broadcaster or its children's channel. This lack of relevance puts the CTS under further pressure because the CTS were seen to embody and safeguard the goals of cultural nationalism while maintaining the notion of 'quality' in children's programming. They did this by means of detailed specifications pertaining to production values, and in their mandating of minimum amounts of original drama production. Public service broadcasting would seem to be entirely compatible with such cultural objectives, but the CTS have no place in Australia's public service broadcaster's regulatory settings.

Conclusions

Clearly the CTS have been and continue to be crucial to creating local demand for children's drama from Australia's commercial free-to-air networks. However, this

piece of cultural policy is being placed under increasing pressure by technological, economic and regulatory change. The pressure is being exacerbated by the abundance of supply engendered by the advent of the dedicated free-to-air children's channel from Australia's public service broadcaster, ABC3. The existence of a free-to-air dedicated children's channel in Australia in addition to eight dedicated children's pay-TV services suggests the child audience is being well served without the children's drama reluctantly provided by the commercial free-to-air channels.

Although the CTS have undergone various reviews, the last of which occurred in 2009, they have experienced very little alteration since their inception. However, since 1979, Australian children's television has changed in ways that were not even imagined, let alone acknowledged in the creation of the CTS legislation. Local and international settlements in children's television have been transformed since the mid-1990s. Multi-channelling has led to abundance of supply in children's programming, vertical integration of transnational production companies, audience fragmentation and the emergence of similarities between public service broadcasters and pay-TV operators like Disney in their pursuit of the child audience. In the contemporary circumstances of Australian children's television, the CTS are not doing the job they were originally intended to do, which was to make culturally specific, high-quality children's television for an Australian child audience that was not being adequately served by broadcasters. The child audience in contemporary Australia is clearly being well served now, with the abundant supply of dedicated children's channels.

The presence of transnational companies in the space of local cultural expression, in tandem with the tolerance to lower production values on the part of those classifying 'C' drama productions at ACMA, also suggests that we are seeing the emergence of a new model for the production of children's drama in Australia, where the CTS become less, not more, relevant to its financial viability. These kinds of productions will either be transnational productions destined for international markets or they will be low budget first and final market Australian productions, designed to localise a global channel while satisfying pay-TV production expenditure obligations. They are, however, unlikely to enjoy high production values or to be identifiably Australian in origin, but will nonetheless be experienced as Australian by their child viewers. The new business model suggests increased opportunities for the production of local children's drama. Nonetheless the type of drama likely to be made was never the intended policy objective of the funding mechanisms which underpin its existence. Meanwhile the public service broadcaster the ABC, which was never subject to the requirements of the CTS, becomes a guarantor of quality by producing and transmitting the type of children's drama that the CTS were intended to nurture.

Analysis of the production practices of the Australian companies that are owned by transnational corporations reveals the advantages that these companies enjoy within Australia's children's production ecology. They are backed by the resources of the transnational parent company, guaranteed access to the production of local versions of highly successful programme formats and benefit from diverse production slates that spread the risk and minimise the damage if a series or genre does not work. They are also structurally connected to international distribution networks for any of their productions destined for world markets. As such they are in an unassailable position in comparison with the small independent production companies that have been a key feature of Australia's children's production ecology since the early 1980s.

The internationalisation from within that has occurred through these industrial and policy developments appears to be accepted by both the policy-makers and the producers of children's television, all of whom benefit from the current state of affairs and whose previous commitment to the goals of cultural nationalism and independent production is more difficult to discern in this new television regime. While the Australian Government used to be supportive of Australia's independent production companies, it now seems committed to ensuring they are part of transnational corporations with the concomitant market advantages. The CTS were established with particular ends in a particular time when the child audience was ill-served by Australian free-to-air broadcasters. Clearly drift has occurred in this piece of cultural policy along with drift in the meaning of the policy, the policing of the policy and the organising of the circumstances of local production. Now a different end is being achieved, with the creation of new screen business models that have led to policy operating in a way that embraces television which does not appear to satisfy the criteria contained in the CTS even under the most flexible of interpretations and which may well not be made by small independent production companies. As such, this leads to the erosion of an important component of policy as expressed through the CTS, that is the production of high quality, local children's drama. But policy is only one factor in this production environment which is also affected by technological, economic and industrial change. Nonetheless as a result of transformations in children's television and drifting and layering in Australian cultural policy, the CTS are now supporting production of the very television programming they were designed to discourage, while the local branches of the transnational corporations making these children's dramas access Australian state subsidies designed to nurture the independent production sector in its creation.

References

- Aisbett, K., 2000. *Twenty years of C: children's programs and regulation 1979–1999*. Sydney: ABA.
- Aisbett, K., 2007. *Children's television production project*. Canberra: ACMA.
- Australian Communications and Media Authority (ACMA), 2007. *Media and communications in Australian families 2007: report of the media and society research project*. Canberra: ACMA.
- Australian Communications and Media Authority (ACMA), 2009. *Children's viewing patterns on commercial, free-to-air and subscription television*. Canberra: ACMA.
- Australian Communications and Media Authority (ACMA), 2009. *Children's television standards*. Canberra: ACMA.
- Australian Children's Television Foundation (ACTF), 2007. *Submission to the children's television standards review*. Melbourne: ACTF [online]. Available from: http://www.acma.gov.au/webwr/_assets/main/lib310132/49_aust_childrens_tv_foundation.pdf [Accessed 13 January 2012].
- Bertrand, I. and Collins, C., 1981. *Government and film in Australia*. Sydney: Currency Press.
- Craik, J., McAllister, L., and Davis, G., 2010. Paradoxes and contradictions in government approaches to contemporary cultural policy: an Australia perspective. *International journal of cultural policy*, 9 (1), 17–33.
- Cunningham, S., 1992. *Framing culture: criticism and policy in Australia*. Sydney: Allen & Unwin.
- Cunningham, S. and Jacka, E., 1996. *Australian television and international mediascapes*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Curthoys, A., 1991. Television before television. *Continuum*, 4 (2), 152–170.

- Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet, Office for the Arts (DPCA), 2011. *Review of the independent sector 2010*. Canberra: DPCA.
- Edgar, P., 2006. *Bloodbath: a memoir of Australian television*. Melbourne: Melbourne University Press.
- Flew, T. and Spurgeon, C., 2000. Television after broadcasting. In: S. Cunningham and G. Turner, eds. *The Australian TV book*. Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 69–85.
- Goldsmith, B. and O'Regan, T., 2005. *The film studio: film production in the global economy*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield.
- Goldsmith, B., Ward, S., and O'Regan, T., 2010. *Local hollywood: global film production and the gold coast*. St Lucia: University of Queensland Press.
- Hodge, B. and Tripp, D., 1986. *Children and television, a semiotic approach*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Horgan, B., 2006. *Radio with pictures: 50 years of Australian television*. Sydney: Lothian.
- Keys, W., 1999 November. Children's television: a barometer of the Australian media policy climate. *Media international Australia*, 93, 9–25.
- Mencinsky, N. and Mullen, B., 1999. Regulation of children's television in Australia: past and present. *Media international Australia*, 93, 27–42.
- Moran, A., 1989. Three stages of Australian television. In: J. Tulloch and G. Turner, eds. *Australian television: programs, pleasures and politics*. Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1–14.
- Moran, A., 2009. *New flows in global TV*. Bristol: Intellect.
- O'Regan, T., 1989. The converging of film and television. In: J. Tulloch and G. Turner, eds. *Australian television: programs, pleasures and politics*. Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 118–145.
- O'Regan, T., 1993. *Australian television culture*. Sydney: Allen & Unwin.
- Parker, R. and Parenta, O., 2008. Explaining contradictions in film and television industry policy: ideas and incremental policy change through layering and drift. *Media, culture and society*, 30 (5), 609–622.
- Potter, A., 2012. It's a small world after all: new media constellations and Disney's rising star – the global success of high school musical. *International journal of cultural studies*, 15 (2), 117–130.
- Rutherford, L., 2001. The ACTF (Australian Children's Television) Genre. *Papers: explorations into children's literature*, 11 (5), 5–13.
- Screen Australia 2011. Convergence, 2011: *Australian content state of play informing debate*. Canberra: Screen Australia [online]. Available from: http://www.screenaustralia.gov.au/documents/SA_publications/Rpt_Convergence2011.pdf [Accessed 19 June 2012].
- Southern Star Entertainment Productions, 2011. *About A gURLs wURLd* [online]. Available from: <http://www.agurlsworld.com/about/> [Accessed 11 June 2012].
- Ward, S. and Potter, A., 2008. H₂O: just add branding: producing high quality children's TV drama for multi-channel environments. *Media international Australia*, 133, 31–42.

Copyright of International Journal of Cultural Policy is the property of Routledge and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.