



Child Audiences in the Digital Age: The Role of Australia's Public Broadcasters

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**SUBMISSION TO THE
DEPARTMENT OF BROADBAND, COMMUNICATIONS AND THE DIGITAL
ECONOMY.**

**IN RESPECT OF THE
ABC AND SBS: TOWARDS A DIGITAL FUTURE
DISCUSSION PAPER 2008**

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Child Audiences in the Digital Age: The Role of Australia's Public Broadcasters

This submission addresses the needs of child audiences within the transforming media landscape and argues for continued and expanded commitment to Australia's public broadcasters. The ABC and SBS require charters, mission statements and sufficient resources to enable them to respond effectively to rapidly growing opportunities for, and obligations to, Australian children.

My doctoral research profiling the children's television industry in the analogue environment 1997-2002 and my current research into child audiences in the digital age finds children's television a highly competitive business dependent on government regulatory mechanisms and support for its existence (Keys 2008; 2005, Buckingham 2000, Melody 1973). Without government requirements for yearly quota's of quality, age-specific, Australian pre school and children's programs; investment from the Film Finance Corporation (FFC) and now Screen Australia (SA); and without the continued contributions of the Australian Children's Television Foundation (ACTF) and funding for ABC's children's programming, the industry would have great difficulty sustaining itself. As communications and broadcasting technologies converge, instruments of regulation - such as quotas designed around the characteristics of analogue systems of broadcasting - are being compromised. The ways in which children use television, and the ways in which the children's television (CTV) producers create content, are also being transformed. This being the case strategies are needed to continue to ensure children's television is strongly situated in the evolving digital environment.

Digital, free-to-air, children's television channels on ABC and SBS.

One such strategy this submission supports is the establishment of digital, free-to-air, age-specific, high quality, television channels relevant to young people in Australia. Firstly this channel would ensure the needs of child audiences are significantly involved in any policy initiatives by the Commonwealth Government for the digital age and would also fulfil Australia's United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child obligations. The UN Convention requires that information of social and cultural benefit is made available to young people via the mass media. It also asserts the rights of children to express themselves and to have their opinions heard (UNICEF 1990). Secondly such channels would act as vehicles for the government to promote the up-take of digital technology. Dedicated, free-to-air, high quality children's channels influence families to purchase digital technology and thus act as a catalyst for the government's objective to proactively drive digital take-up by the analogue to digital switch-over target date.

The establishment of digital CTV channels could be achieved comparatively inexpensively due to digital free-to-air multi-channelling technology and regulation already in place. Both national broadcasters (ABC and SBS) will be able to show a range of new content on their multichannels. Importantly, there is currently in existence a large archive of children's television content resulting from quotas, standards, industry investment, and commitment to analogue CTV over the last 30 years. The establishment of digital free-to-air CTV channels would increase the effectiveness of existing policy initiatives by increasing accessibility to this existing content.

Digital television up-take in Australia to date has been slow with only 42% of Australian households watching digital television over the airways (ACMA 2008). Recent research into the impact of digital technology and the trend towards dedicated children's channels in the United Kingdom, Germany and New Zealand indicate that access to additional channels, in particular children's channels, positively influences consumers towards digital services. For example in the UK Professor Barwise's 'Independent Review of the BBC's Digital Television Service', finds that two digital channels CBBC and CBeebies, for children were key drivers in the uptake of terrestrial

digital reception in that market (Barwise 2004:54). If a CTV channel were to be set up in Australia it is highly likely to assist in driving digital uptake as it has done in the UK. Nigel Pickard a children's television producer and president of the British *Save Kids TV* warned earlier this month that Australia must broaden and expand the delivery of children's TV programs. In a paper delivered in Sydney at the conference 'Australia: You're Watching It' he urged Australian broadcasters to begin screening kids TV outside the traditional children's viewing times, particularly in prime time, and for the ABC to set up not one, but two, dedicated children's channels (Pickard 2008). The availability of 24 hour access to age appropriate Australian content would resolve the issue of children not watching television programs during the specified Australian C and P times of early morning and after school. Many Australian children are otherwise engaged in sporting, extra curricular and other activities during these times and are chiefly watching adult programs during primetime viewing hours (ABS 2006).

Conclusion

There are significant challenges facing governments, consumers and researchers as the 'balance of power in the dynamic communications sector is fundamentally shifting from those who own it to those who consume it' (Price Waterhouse Coopers 2006). However, the Price Waterhouse Coopers report quoted above does not, it can be noted, address the fact that amongst consumers there is an inequitable balance of power not only between adult groups but in particular, between adults and children. Children as a consumer group are reliant on inclusion and consideration by adults on their behalf. My research to date investigating the role and viability of digital free-to-air CTV channels and examining the public-interest considerations involved in the management of the media industry and the child audience argues that policy decisions involve consideration of the responsibilities held by society towards children - that is, the responsibility to provide 'special' services, to entertain, to promote constructive maturation and to ensure protective mechanisms to shield children from adult exploitation. Australia's public broadcasters, ABC and SBS play a crucial role in addressing this responsibility.

New delivery services, new delivery platforms, new content, and new policy and regulatory decisions must address the new needs of Australia's newest audiences. Within the context of Australia's broader national priorities and goals the continued support and funding for Australia's public broadcasters ABC and SBS will contribute to the promotion and maintenance of good health and well being for young Australians and in doing so strengthen Australia's social and economic fabric.

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