



media, entertainment & arts alliance
the people who inform and entertain

Media, Entertainment & Arts Alliance Submission to Screen Australia

Funding Australian Content on “Small Screens”: A Draft Blueprint A Review of Screen Australia’s role and objectives in television funding

January 2011

The Media, Entertainment & Arts Alliance

The Media, Entertainment & Arts Alliance (Alliance) is the industrial and professional organisation representing the people who work in Australia’s media and entertainment industries. Its membership includes journalists, artists, photographers, performers, dancers, symphony orchestra musicians, freelance musicians and film, television and performing arts technicians.

Introduction

The Media, Entertainment and Arts Alliance (the Alliance) welcomes the opportunity to provide following comment to Screen Australia regarding its revision of its television funding guidelines.

Project assessment

The Alliance believes that in developing project assessment criteria for “small screen” content funding, Screen Australia must, as a priority, have regard to three issues: the declining level of its base funding; the fact that the Department of Broadband, Communications and the Digital Economy is undertaking a review of the media environment to examine the impact of convergence upon Australian content and seeking ways to ensure levels are maintain and increased moving into the future and Screen Australia’s functions under its enabling Act.¹

Given this, the Alliance recommends that Screen Australia funding should only be directed towards projects that are distinctly Australian in character and have a high degree of cultural resonance. This would also necessitate funding to be predicated on the use of 100 per cent Australian cast and crew. Australian taxpayer money is being used to assist the development of the industry and this must necessarily include the development of the cast and crew sector.

The Alliance notes that the Blueprint proposal includes as its first criterion

“strength of the proposal, including its national and cultural significance”

While the Alliance supports the inclusion of this line, it believes that Screen Australia could be stronger and needs to emphasise an organisational prioritisation of those projects that are distinctly Australian in character. The guidelines could include, for example, direct reference to the Screen Australia Act’s own wording:

“ensure the development of a diverse range of Australian programs that deal with matters of national interest or importance to Australians, or that

¹ (3) In performing its functions Screen Australia is, as far as practicable, to:

(a) ensure the development of a diverse range of Australian programs that deal with matters of national interest or importance to Australians, or that illustrate or interpret aspects of Australia or the life and activities of Australian people; and

(b) place an emphasis on:

(i) documentaries; and

(ii) programs of interest or relevance to children; and

(iii) programs with a high level of artistic and cultural merit; and

(c) promote the open market as the primary means of support for projects with commercial potential; and

(d) promote the development of commercially focused screen production businesses; and

(e) promote the efficient, effective and ethical use of public resources.

illustrate or interpret aspects of Australia or the life and activities of Australian people”

Series funding

Screen Australia proposes to limit funding to the first two series of any production but possibly will:

“only fund the first season of a production that is demonstrated to be very successful. This is important as it ensures Screen Australia’s funds are available to fund a broad range of content and not continue to fund already successful content.”

While the Alliance supports the statement, the term successful may need to be clarified to ensure that the policy intent is sustained. Success could refer to financial or commercial success (DVD sales, advertising sales), critical success (awards etc) popular success (ratings) or a raft of other measures. From the Alliance’s perspective, it is the financial success that is the critical element here. As per its enabling Act, Screen Australia should promote the open market as the primary means of support for projects with commercial potential. Once a series has been demonstrated to be commercially successful, the market should be left to produce it, and Screen Australia funds be diverted to new series or those that while commercially less than successful have “a high level of artistic and cultural merit” as per Screen Australia’s enabling act.

Eligible drama formats

Screen Australia states that:

“Currently ‘series’ (as opposed to miniseries) are not eligible to receive funding. It has been raised that there is a somewhat artificial distinction between the two types of television drama (created in part due to regulations relating to commercial free to air broadcast licenses and previous tax incentives).”

ACMA defines series, serials and mini-series in the following way:

“Series: Comprises a potentially unlimited number of episodes, each being a self-contained plot which can be screened in any order.

Serials: Comprises a potentially unlimited number of episodes and contain a number of interweaving and overlapping plots continuing from one episode to the next.

Mini-series: A limited series of drama which is less than 13 hours in total length, and which is either made to be broadcast in several sequential parts featuring a major continuous plot for which there is an expectation of an ending resolving the major plot tensions, or an anthology of drama works for television made to be broadcast under one generic title. Individual episodes must be 55 minutes or longer unless the material is for children in which case it must be 25 minutes or longer.”

The Alliance would be concerned if serials were to fall within the definition being proposed by Screen Australia. The Alliance could not support funding being directed to formats similar to *Home & Away* and *Neighbours* – most of which are historically supported by broadcasters and have long been commercially viable within the context of a regulated environment. Again the Alliance believes that as per its enabling Act, Screen Australia should promote the open market as the primary means of support for projects with commercial potential.

Drama licence fees

The Alliance remains concerned with the issue of children’s animation versus children’s live action drama. The Draft blueprint notes that:

“There is currently an absence of children’s live action drama production and a relatively small demand upon this program’s funds. Some have suggested that this is due to (relatively) cheaper animation productions being preferred by the commercial broadcasters.

The Alliance believes that the increase in the children’s drama licence fee may not assist the problem described above. There is in fact a potential that higher licence fees may lead to broadcasters continuing to fill their Australian Content Standard quota with cheaper animation and not seek to rely on funding from Screen Australia. The Alliance notes that increased flexibility under the co-production guidelines may also promote greater levels of animation – particularly those under the Canadian treaty. There has to date been a serious imbalance in the employing of Australian voices and performers on these productions. As the Alliance has argued in previous submissions to Screen Australia, animations have a disproportionate impact upon children and the Alliance believes tighter rules are required here to ensure children have access to culturally relevant material.

The Alliance believes that this situation needs to be monitored by Screen Australia to ensure that there remains an appropriate balance between live action and animation.

Acting in good faith

The Alliance notes that under Screen Australia's Terms of Trade:

"expects all successful applicants to act fairly and reasonably to third parties involved in their project. Fairness and reasonableness includes (a) paying at least award minimum rates for all work performed by third parties on their project, including cast and crew fees;"

The Alliance believes that Screen Australia needs to support the development of a professional industry and that involves expecting all applicants for funding to engage third party crew and cast to be on industry standard agreements and not simply at award minimum rates. These agreements such as the Australian Feature Film Agreement 2003, the Actors Television Programs Agreement 2004 and the Motion Picture Production Agreement 2007, are developed by relevant industry representative organisations (including the Alliance and the Screen Producer Association of Australia among others). They have become the standard above award conditions for employment in the industry and need to be acknowledged and supported by Screen Australia.

To expect producers to merely meet the award rate already required as a minimum under the law is to undermine the work by industry organisations to professionalise the industry and develop sustainable careers for cast and crew. Since Screen Australia is required to promote the development of commercially focused screen production businesses under its enabling legislation, it must therefore ensure that these businesses do so within its proper industrial context. If Screen Australia is seeking to develop sustainable businesses, this should be within the context of appropriate labour practices – not at a cost to performers and crew. A sustainable industry is one where it is sustainable for all participants in that industry including cast and crew.