THE ABC, THE AUSTRALIAN CHILDREN’S TELEVISION FOUNDATION AND THE EMERGENCE OF DIGITAL CHILDREN’S TELEVISION IN AUSTRALIA

Abstract

This article analyses the campaign to establish terrestrial digital children’s public service broadcasting in Australia. It finds that the development of the Australian Broadcasting Corporation’s digital children’s channel (ABC3), an initiative initially embraced somewhat opportunistically, enabled an expansion strategy for the public service broadcaster that ultimately helped determine the shape of its current digital channel portfolio. Contrasting the collective and divergent interpretations of future audience behaviours and needs developed by the Australian Children’s Television Foundation (ACTF) and the ABC, it argues that both organisations developed strategies and made policy decisions that were influential in conditioning the current digital television ecology.

Advocates for public service broadcasting have long considered children’s programming to be one of its twin pillars – news and factual/documentary being the other. Prior to the advent of pay TV in 1995, the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) faced little competition as a provider, and often a significant producer, of dedicated children’s and educational programming. However, with changes brought about by the transition to multi-channel subscription television, alongside a deregulated global television ecology that has seen traditional public service broadcasting (PSB) challenged by commercial transnational competitors, the ABC has been forced to defend the continued relevance of its traditional areas of programming strength. This article examines the process of strategic planning, responses to regulatory interventions and innovations in platform, infrastructure and content deployment through which the ABC established digital terrestrial children’s broadcasting in Australia (1998–2011). The development of the new digital children’s channel (ABC3) will be charted from its beginnings as an initiative of the Australian Children’s Television Foundation (ACTF) to its adoption as a joint strategy with the ABC. The article argues that, while the policy advocacy to establish ABC3 – the niche digital children’s channel – was initially formulated by another institution, it complemented the PSB’s long-standing digital television and content strategies. It finds that the establishment of ABC3 enabled the evolution of ABC’s current digital television portfolio.

The ABC enters digital TV

The news and children’s arms of the ABC are both central to its reputation and cultural legitimacy, addressing, as they do, the traditional Reithian formulation ‘to inform, educate and entertain’ as set out in the ABC Charter. Crucially, in the deregulated
multi-channel era, these are also key areas of competition with subscription television. The recent history of the ABC, however, indicates that while it has been willing to fund maintenance and expansion of news platforms and other productions, children’s content has been contingent on external funding and partnerships. The attempt by the ABC to enter the commercial arena of pay TV has been discussed at length by other scholars (Debrett, 2010; Inglis, 2006; Westfield, 2000). The argument here begins by contextualising the ABC’s entry into digital terrestrial television before turning to a fuller account of the ABC’s digital television and programming strategies that informed the development of children’s content channels at the ABC.

Jock Given (2003: 139) has demonstrated how internationally sourced technologies formed the basis of the transformation to digital broadcasting in Australia, just as international policy settings influenced the final shape of Australia’s legislation. The Australian government began to shape the regulatory framework, technical standards and spectrum allocation decisions to establish a digital television broadcasting service in the 1990s (Given, 2003; Thomas, 2000). Legislative decisions taken in Australia in 1998 and 2000 granted existing licensed commercial and national television services (incumbent free-to-air analogue broadcasters) a ‘full 7 MHz bandwidth digital TV channel’ (Given, 2003: 152) at no extra cost. They would be required to transmit a HDTV digital service while simultaneously broadcasting both SDTV digital and analogue transmissions. The commercial television licensees were not permitted to offer multi-channel television services until the end of the simulcast period. The ABC and SBS were, but after much urging from various industry interest groups – particularly the pay TV lobby – permission to screen national news, sport, drama or films in English on their multi-channels was retracted (Given, 2003: 179). The genre restrictions imposed by the 2000 decisions impacted the implementation of the ABC’s strategy for its digital content streams and increased the profile of children’s services in its television strategy.

ABC Digital Television Content and Programming Strategy 1999
Before turning to what the ABC did with its first digital multi-channel, I will briefly outline what it would have liked to have done had the genre restrictions not been imposed. The ABC’s Digital Television Content and Programming Strategy (ABC, 1999a) anticipates developments that eventuated over a decade later. Significantly, however, it lacks the vision of a stand-alone, niche children’s channel. While the ABC sought to be able to broadcast high-definition television to a standard comparable to that of the commercial networks, its main advantage lay in an anticipated capacity to multi-channel and deliver interactive and on-demand content. Its funding basis insulated it from the effects of market fragmentation on advertising revenue, giving it an adaptive advantage in the transition to a digital ecology. Also, multi-channelling would allow the national broadcaster to extend its reach, and thus its cultural legitimacy, by providing specialist, low-budget programming in areas in which it had staffing and content expertise and existing cross-platform infrastructure (radio, television and online).

The ABC’s Submission to the Productivity Commission Review of the Broadcasting Services Act 1992 details more fully plans to use radio to capture content for ABC Online, stressing existing cross-platform reach, provision of a comprehensive ‘package of broadcasting and online services’, ‘developing cross media production skills’ and hosting ‘one of the most popular online sites in Australia’ (ABC, 1999b). While its submission to the Productivity Commission warned of the anti-competitive effects of the entry of foreign media giants on the ABC’s ability to survive as a purchaser and seller of quality content (ABC, 1999b: 17), its Digital Television Programming and Content Strategy paper to the ABC Board proposed strategies for providing content for an increased digital portfolio of ‘content streams’. In this, it anticipated norms in
the contemporary terrestrial economy for low digital multi-channel content budgets, basing its plans on a style of program ‘significantly cheaper and more cost effective than traditional mainstream television programming’ (ABC, 1999a).

This rationale parallels the economy of historical and contemporary Australian pay TV schedules, with little content origination or first-run imported ‘marquee’ programs, except on premium channels. Significantly, the rights to premier sporting events and studio films – content most suited to HDTV enhancements – were (and are) well outside the budgets of the national broadcasters. Nevertheless, the ABC realised that, in addition to repurposing content from existing program units, an increased allocation of funding would be needed for new content acquisition or origination (ABC, 1999a).

In 1999, ahead of the final recommendation of the Broadcasting Services Act 1992 (BSA) and related statutes and guidelines, the ABC began testing pilot concepts for two multi-channels – ‘Information’ and ‘Learning’ streams – and a ‘datacasting’ service, ostensibly using the digital spectrum. According to the ABC, datacasting would enable it ‘to draw on the programming resources it [had] already developed and make them available to smaller and more specialised audiences on demand’ (ABC, 1999a). On-demand, in a PSB context, is conceived not as ‘pay per view’, but rather as targeting niche audiences to better serve Charter obligations (ABC, 1999a, 1999b; Debrett, 2010: 24). This proposed ‘datacasting’ service was broadly comparable to the current ‘multi-platform’ synergies between programming on radio and TV, delivered via the internet.

Many of the program extensions on ABC Online in 1999, such as Behind the News, were youth or education oriented, as there was an established audience for downloads and discussion. When the 2000 amendments to the BSA interdicted the idea of a news channel, the multi-channel concept developed by the ABC to share a single standard-definition (SD) digital band combined a children’s entertainment block (ABC Kids) and a youth culture block (Fly TV).

**ABC Kids (Version 1) and Fly TV, 2001–03**

ABCKids/Fly TV has been seen as part of a gambit by the then ABC managing director, Jonathan Shier, to coax more funding out of a reluctant federal government, and its consequent demise is viewed as being due to political brinkmanship by his successor (Dempster, 2000; Inglis, 2006). However, as the ABC’s digital content strategy paper of 1999 shows, children’s entertainment and education were key nodes of the programming and branding strategies through which the ABC sought to renew itself in the emergent digital landscape. It can be argued that, strategically, the ABC Kids/Fly TV initiative was also the first move in challenging subscription TV in the emergent multi-channel environment. The situation anticipated the market a decade later, in which the ABC’s real competitor for key demographics relevant to its Charter is not the commercial networks, but the pay TV providers. The Australian scenario thus parallels – albeit with significant differences – the experience of European PSB after deregulation.

Created in 2000, ABCKids/Fly TV also proved to be a crucible for issues and practices that have become crucial in a competitive multi-channel system: rights management; the extent to which content development on the digital channels functions as a kind of ‘R&D’ (Born, 2003) for the ‘primary’ channel (or vice versa); and the television–web synergies that were an early proto-type of ‘360 degree’ multi-platform commissioning (Bennett and Strange, 2008). As its digital strategy documents make clear, the ABC was aware that it needed to embrace product differentiation strategies that were standard practice in Europe and the United States. Such ‘branding’ defined the global ‘corporate personalities’ (Caldwell, 2003) that dominated international children’s television (at the time, Disney, Nickelodeon, the Cartoon Network and Fox Kids).
ABC Kids and Fly TV shared SD Channel 21, with the former broadcasting from 6.00 a.m. to 6.00 p.m., and the latter from 6.00 p.m. to 6.00 a.m. They show the genesis of several strategies that have persisted within the ABC into the current digital terrestrial television (DTT) era, including channel branding, cross-linking to youth brands on other platforms (including radio and online) and schedule-building (managing rights to quality children’s programs that had been made ‘redundant’ elsewhere). Perhaps most crucially, they provide evidence of how much can be achieved with relatively low budgets using cross-platform repurposing of content and skills mobilised across several well-developed platforms.

Instructively, this early digital initiative also demonstrated that, without strong financial commitment from government for new content origination, the ABC would be limited in its ambition to provide Australian market leadership in children’s entertainment and educational content.

Branding, synergies, scheduling and program strategies

ABC Kids (Version 1) pioneered the development of a cross-platform identity, leveraging established online brands (personal communication with Donna Andrews, 2010). It tested the prototype of the multi-platform ‘channel’ and property that has become standard today, exemplified by the ‘on-air’ and ‘online’ content streams that anchor ABC3 and its participatory digital strategy (Rutherford and Brown, 2012). Nonetheless, DTT required new content and rights-management strategies. In realising its first digital channel, ABC television executives had to consider for the first time separate digital rights and repeat rights for ‘legacy’ content, produced for commercial terrestrial networks to fulfil their quota obligations under the Children’s Television Standards (CTS) (ACMA, 2010).

Another innovation in the ABC experience involved content-sharing and time-shifting of content across the multi-channel schedules. The contemporary concept of ‘catch-up’ viewing awaited upon advances in video streaming technology. However, the insight of ‘encore’ screening of drama content – contingent on an awareness that preschooler brands could easily be recycled since the audience was consistently renewed – was registered in emerging audience research (ACTF, 2005). Content acquired or originated for the ABC digital channels could therefore serve another audience on the ‘triplecast’ main channel, with its broader reach. ABC Kids (version 1) originated little content – limited to a few shorts, logos and interstitials – being for the most part an acquired schedule. Yet, because it did have additional funding for acquisitions for the classic children’s content still associated with ABC Children’s – notably BBC and ITV drama – it was able to feed the schedule of the main channel on a time-shifted basis.

Extending the reach of ABC digital: Negotiating carriage on pay platforms

ABC Kids and Fly TV clearly had problems in terms of reach. In 2001–03, less than 3 per cent of Australian households had access to digital television (ACTF, 2005: 31). Despite this, former ABC TV executive Deirdre Brennan advised me that the ABC Kids logo achieved extremely high tracking levels, both locally and internationally, within a year of beginning transmission (personal communication, 2010). In addition, in homes serviced by the Austar platform, the ABC’s was the most popular of the children’s channels (ACTF and McGarrity, 2005). Concern for the low uptake of DTT led the ABC to negotiate with the major subscription television carriers in order to broaden the reach of its new channels. ABC Kids/Fly TV was retransmitted on the basic tier to all subscribers by Optus and Austar, but not by Foxtel, the leading pay TV provider (which was reluctant to admit competition to its Nickelodeon and Fox Kids channels). This meant that the ABC’s digital children’s channels were achieving limited penetration, mainly in regional Australia. The ABC’s managing director, Russell Balding, presented
government with an ultimatum: the children’s and youth channel combination would be axed if the ABC were not granted increased triennial funding (Inglis, 2006). None was forthcoming, and in June 200 the ABC’s first digital multi-channels ceased transmission. Balding issued a media release advising that:

The ABC multi-channels, *ABC Kids* and *FLY*, were established in 2001 to demonstrate the new programming and delivery models made possible by the transition to digital television. In demonstrating the concept, the multi-channels reflected ABC commitment to leadership and innovation in the emerging digital environment. However, they have also been funded on a non-recurrent basis and cannot be sustained without a new on-going source of funds. (ABC, 2004: 4)

However, because of the early indicators of support from audiences and a belief that, irrespective of the funding situation, the ABC could not ‘sit on [its] hands, and lag behind in the digital television revolution’ (Marriner, 2004), another (face-saving) solution was found. In August 2004, the ABC board approved the managing director’s proposal for a new digital television channel, ABC2, to be located under the New Media directorate. Costing only around A$2 million per annum (Marriner, 2004), it represented a low-cost alternative to the former digital children’s and youth combination.

ABC2 was envisaged as a comprehensively scheduled channel, allowing the public broadcaster to purposively shift its repertoire of children’s and adult documentary programs from its main channel to slots that enabled a second viewing window on digital. There were limited resources to acquire or commission content. *Good Game* (2005– ) – a video game review program – was one of the few new, but low-cost, youth formats developed for ABC2.

ABC2 launched with a substantial children’s block – a rebranded ABC Kids – but this consisted largely of programming already screened on the main ABC channels. However, further digital and cross-platform innovations were undertaken in this space. Like ABC Kids/Fly TV, the children’s content on ABC2 was supported by complementary web material such as *Kids Video Lounge, Winged Sandals* and *Behind the News*. In another experiment, following the 2006 carriage agreement with Foxtel, there was an extension of the *Rollercoaster* online brand to iTV, via a red button application (personal communication with Deirdre Brennan, 2010). Using the increased bandwidth of the pay TV platform, ABC2 was able to offer rich audience participation of the kind previously envisaged in the 1999 Digital Television Programming and Content Strategy.

The road to ABC3

ABC2 (New Media) was a low-cost compromise. The article now analyses the historical policy interventions that enabled the transition to a branded children’s channel, designed from the outset as to exploit the cross-platform reach enabled by digital television. It is fair to say that without the policy activism of the ACTF, the ABC would not have won the funding for ABC3 that, arguably, enabled its current digital portfolio. Founded in 1982, the ACTF is a not-for-profit organisation that is the national focal point for children’s media production and policy. In recent years, the ACTF has moved from a ‘production house model’ to focus on collaborations with outside producers and content distribution (ACTF, 2012).

The ATCF was a key driver in mobilising the government funding of ABC3 that shaped the development of the ABC’s current digital portfolio. The first motivation for a dedicated thematic children’s channel was born from the ACTF’s impetus to secure a prominent distribution channel for Australian content. During 2001–02, the Australian Broadcasting Authority (ABA) undertook a review of the Australian Content Standard for commercial television. The issues paper released by the ABA
raised concerns about the production and financing of quality Australian children’s drama programs, questioning whether children’s drama quotas should be maintained. The ACTF commissioned research and made a number of submissions over the period leading up to regulatory reviews of the Children’s Television Standards (CTS) in 2002 and 2005. An oppositional discourse emerged between producers and free-to-air commercial broadcasters about the popularity of dedicated children’s programs with the target audience, and thus the regulatory rationale of the CTS. According to the ACTF’s CEO, Jenny Buckland:

[I]t was that whole argument about do children like watching children’s television really? Because that was the thing that the [terrestrial] broadcasters always argued, that [children] don’t want to watch children’s television … And I suppose it was … the international experience that intrigued me, in that our shows would get – especially if they were sold to a commercial broadcaster – would get tiny audiences here, but would be in the top ten most popular children’s programs in the UK. (personal communication, 2010)

Buckland further notes that the ‘blue sky’ idea of an Australian children’s channel was floated as early as 2004 (personal communication, 2010). In March 2005, the idea was brought to the ACTF board. A discussion paper making the case for a dedicated channel was prepared and presented at the board’s Corporate Planning Day (ACTF, 2005). In August 2005, a scoping study was prepared (ACTF and McGarrity, 2005), and the ACTF Board voted to commission Ian McGarrity, formerly of the ABC and then chair of the Board of Digital Broadcasting, to prepare a full feasibility study (McGarrity, 2005).

The ACTF argued that the complexities of the Australian television system had created a problem of access for most Australian children. The Children’s Television Standards regulated for a steady supply of dedicated Australian children’s programming, including quality drama; however, children were increasingly unable to consume the Australian product because of its placement in the free-to-air schedule and minimal availability on the pay TV channels. The ACTF commissioned its own research, using OzTAM ratings data, as well as detailed analyses of the amount of Australian content available on the pay TV children’s channels. Its analysis of the free-to-air commercial broadcasters revealed an increasing problem of availability, with more adult programs being scheduled in the late afternoons leading up to the evening news bulletins. As a consequence, programs for children, mandated by the CTS, were typically being scheduled in the 4.00–5.00 p.m. timeslot, when most of the target demographic was not yet home from school. The ABC, whose children’s schedule extended right up to 6.00 p.m., remained the leader in free-to-air-only homes, despite its miserly budget for content. In the view of the ACTF, the ABC was ‘effectively getting away with being the leader in children’s television, solely because they scheduled in the right timeslots’ and had the popular preschool program Play School as a trusted brand (personal communication with Jenny Buckland, 2010).

Commercial free-to-air broadcasters were screening only the amount of Australian children’s content required to fulfil regulatory obligations, arguing that children’s programs were severely limited in their ability to generate advertising revenue (FACTS, 2002: 29). They advocated being able to share programs with the ABC, or to trade their obligations to screen children’s programs to the public broadcaster. In effect, the CTS were pumping children’s content into the supply chain, but the low value of the content to the terrestrial broadcasters meant that it wasn’t being made available in such a way as to create audience awareness, and thus demand. Meanwhile, on pay TV, Australian age-appropriate content was minimal and consisted almost exclusively
of programs commissioned in the first place by the terrestrial networks to meet the CTS requirements. This state of affairs created the ground for the ACTF to make a persuasive case for market failure: neither the commercial free-to-air networks nor the subscription channels were able to provide reliable access to dedicated Australian children’s programs.

The ACTF as a policy actor

So where was the ABC while all this advocacy was taking place, ultimately on its behalf and very much consonant with its early digital television content strategy? The ABC was the ACTF’s preferred partner for the new children’s channel initiative from the outset (personal communication with Jenny Buckland, 2010). However, the campaign was carefully designed to be independent of the ABC. To begin with, according to some staff there were concerns about the perceived marginalisation of the Children’s Department within the ABC’s organisational structure, and its withdrawal from the production and commissioning of new Australian content. The ABC was not at that time sending its head of children’s television to engage with international markets, and while Sandra Levy – head of ABC Television – was perceived to be receptive to local children’s product, her budget barely stretched to commissions for the prime-time schedule. Ian McGarrity recalled that another reason for keeping the national broadcaster at arm’s length from the children’s channel campaign was the historical antipathy of the Howard Coalition government towards any new funding for the ABC (personal communication, 2010).

Since the mid-1990s, the ACTF had developed into a key policy actor. As a statutory authority with public service values, it had a history of successful lobbying for government and business funding, and its constituent ministries embraced the Arts and Culture, and Education portfolios at both the state and federal levels. The ACTF’s area of concern – children’s rights – was shared by other government institutions, such as the State Commissioners for Children. It was not restricted to dialogue with a Communications ministry that remained largely hostile to the ABC during the Howard years (Inglis, 2006). During the mid- to late 2000s, its board had members connected with both major political parties, as well as the production, broadcasting, business and government sectors. In addition, its long-standing chairman was, and remains, the Western Australian business magnate, Janet Holmes à Court. Finally, the ACTF had been distributing its product in international markets for many years, and had extensive knowledge of ‘the children’s television community’ (Bryant, 2007).

Key ACTF arguments, 2005–06: Driving digital uptake; returns on investment in Australian content

Perhaps surprisingly, by the mid-2000s most Australians – including members of the ACTF board – had still not grasped the significance of the emerging multi-channel environment. However, the ACTF had been selling its product into the European multi-channel market for many years, and co-financing with its public broadcasters. When the Department of Communications, Information Technology and the Arts (DCITA) released its discussion paper, Meeting the Digital Challenge: Reforming Australia’s Media in the Digital Age, calling for discussion of the business and regulatory impacts of new digital technologies, services and platforms, the ACTF was well rehearsed in its argument that ‘a well promoted Australian digital children’s channel, as an initiative of the Commonwealth Government, would act as an important and effective driver in converting Australian families to digital television’ (ACTF, 2006: 1). The ACTF cited the 2004 Barwise Review of the BBC’s digital television services, which reported that CBBC and CBeebies had ‘been drivers for uptake of terrestrial digital reception’ in
the UK market (ACTF, 2006: 8). The ACTF used the government’s digital agenda to promote both its own interests as a distributor and financer of Australian content and thus, indirectly, the ABC’s core values surrounding service provision to Australian children.

The ACTF drew attention to the existence of ‘legacy’ Australian children’s content, produced largely with government subsidy as a result of the regulatory mandates of the CTS. This discourse invoked core nationalistic values surrounding the Australian film and independent production sectors, as well as suggesting that a considerable investment in cultural production was being squandered as the result of the failure of an outdated policy response to the contemporary media landscape. In April 2006, *The Australian* published the ACTF research demonstrating the ‘market failure’ thesis, thus taking the case for a digital children’s channel to the public at large (MacClean, 2006).

The ACTF strategically scheduled its September 2006 board meeting in Canberra, providing an opportunity for sustained publicity and lobbying. It orchestrated a ‘premiere’ style launch of the children’s channel proposal, with a two-day blitz of meetings with MPs and advisers, and a prepared DVD featuring Australian children talking about Australian programming. In the course of various meetings with broadcasters, government policy advisers suggested that if a partnership with the ABC were negotiated, the digital children’s channel proposal might be considered (personal communication with Jenny Buckland, 2010). In turn, the media and political attention generated by the ACTF proved a catalyst for an official approach by the ABC.

**An ABC–ACTF partnership**

In 2006, the ABC appointed a new director of television (Kim Dalton)4 and a new managing director (Mark Scott). These appointments were perceived by the ACTF as heralding a new era that saw extra-institutional partnerships as a key plank of legitimacy (Buckland, 2009: 122). Crucially, the ABC was now signalling its intent to partner with other national institutions and the independent production sector, and to engage in a new participatory relationship with its audience. For Dalton – a previous ACTF general manager and CEO of the Australian Film Commission – the children’s channel proposal was centred squarely in his main area of interest: the maintenance of Australian content origination. On taking up his post as ABC director of television, as Simon Hopkinson recalled, he shifted its strategies firmly towards partnerships with the independent production sector and away from any residual ABC nostalgia for in-house content origination (personal communication, 2010). For Scott, commitment to the children’s channel proposal was arguably more opportunistic. Nonetheless, both Scott and Dalton were able to perceive children’s television as a ground on which non-commercial values could be defended, a leveraging issue for additional resources for public broadcasting.

In November 2006, the ABC and the ACTF agreed formally to make the children’s channel proposal a joint campaign. During 2007, the ABC restructured to revitalise its children’s section and gear up for ABC3. Roles previously outsourced to other areas, such as scheduling and commissioning, were to be brought back within the new Children’s Department, and the position of executive head of children’s content was reinstated. At the same time, the divisional structure was also rearranged, to bring ABC2 and any subsequent multi-channels under the control of the director of television (personal communication with Kim Dalton, 2010). Some parts of New Media (Television Multi-platform) also came under Television, while a new directorate, Innovation, assumed other functions formerly performed by New Media.

**End-game, 2008–09**

The Australian Labor Party came to power in November 2007, replacing an increasingly hostile Howard government. With the Global Financial Crisis, new Treasurer Wayne
Swan announced that only election commitments would be funded. Nonetheless, in 2008 two important public platforms allowed the ACTF and the ABC to keep the children’s channel proposal on the cultural agenda. The first of these was the Australia 2020 Summit. The second was a review by the renamed Department of Broadband, Communications and the Digital Economy (DBCDE) of the national broadcasters in the lead-up to their 2009 Triennial Funding Agreements (DBCDE, 2008).

The Australia 2020 Summit marshalled an invitation-only list of influential Australians to discuss the nation-building agenda of the new Rudd government. The ‘Creative Australia’ stream’s brief included future directions for the public broadcasters. ACTF CEO Jenny Buckland, and ABC managing director Mark Scott were participants, alongside Foxtel CEO Kim Williams. The ABC and the ACTF submitted proposals prior to the event, outlining their joint vision for the future digital children’s channel (2020 Summit, 2008). Key areas of philosophy canvassed at the summit signalled a clear difference from the neoliberal perspective of the Howard era. There was a new articulation of the role of the state, in conjunction with its public broadcasters and creative industries, in promoting public goods, including regional and digital inclusiveness, technological innovation and participation, and a focus on ‘presenting Australia to the world’ through the mechanism of cultural diplomacy or ‘soft power’. Implicit in this latter idea is the resourcing of Australian cultural products. The way was paved for the funding of ABC3 in the May 2009 federal budget.

The evidence to date shows that the uptake of ABC3 has largely been a success. The most recent available data show the channel performing strongly in overall audience share (Screen Australia, 2013), as well as in comparison to pay TV providers such as Cartoon Network and Nickelodeon. According to the ABC’s 2011–12 Annual Report, the operating target of 50 per cent Australian content on ABC3 is being met successfully (2013: 52).

Conclusion

It might be argued that the resurgence of the ABC and concurrent arrival children’s digital content resulted from an accident of history, a combination of a change in government and the particular ‘end stage of a convergence journey’ (Dalton, 2009) that saw new technologies and delivery platforms drive a change in policy settings to reflect this new media environment. There is also evidence of an ongoing institutional culture of new media innovation, as well as commitment to children as a participatory audience, within the ABC that provided a base for mobilisation once additional resources were available. In hindsight, analysis of the 1999 Digital Television Programming and Content Strategy paper shows it to be remarkably prescient. It sets out the areas in which modest funding could be deployed to extend areas of competitive advantage for the ABC, and that leverage its cross-platform infrastructure to support its Charter responsibilities. The ‘streams’ outlined in that document conform relatively closely to the current shape of ABC News 24, ABC2 and ABC Multi-platform with iView. Only the vision of a dedicated, niche children’s channel is missing, and this difference can be attributed directly to the policy intervention of the ACTF.

This research finds that the success of the ABC3 campaign can be attributed largely to strategic alliances between institutions that share social democratic beliefs in funding public broadcasting and subsidy for original Australian content. The emergence of a digital children’s channel has allowed the ABC to build the strength of its brand around qualities associated with children, nation and the ethos of a participatory public sphere uncorrupted by the ‘limiting’ pressures of commercial media. The former controller of ABC Children, Tim Brooke-Hunt, stated that its new children’s television and multi-platform section formed the blueprint for ABC Television’s restructure into a portfolio
of channels, each with a BBC-style controller, sourcing product from heads of content-generating divisions (personal communication, 2010).

For the ACTF, the risks of a joint enterprise always lay in ceding control of its vision for the channel once it became part of the ABC. Diversity of genres and a large proportion of Australian content were matters of general agreement from the outset, while service to preschoolers and schools, and a less ‘entertainment-focused’ view of factual programming, were matters of ongoing dialogue (personal communication with Jenny Buckland, 2010). However, ABC3 and the extended preschooler block on ABC2 – given a soft relaunch in 2011 as ABC4 Kids – have resulted in new commissions for Australian drama, comedy, non-drama and multimedia production, and constitute a continuing distribution channel for the productions of the ACTF and the independent sector.

Notes

1 ACTF research independently canvassed the economics of genre and format, and their impact on audience engagement (ACTF, 2005).
2 In the case of Fly, this cross-platform repurposing included links with Rage, Triple J national youth radio and youth-focused current affairs. Fly recruited young presenters, including popular youth radio presenters such as Myf Warhurst. A similar strategy was used for the branding of ABC3 in 2009, launched with an online ‘Me on 3’ campaign, to recruit fresh young talent for its on-screen branding.
3 Board members included Shane Stone, then Liberal Party president, and Terry Bracks, the wife of former Victorian Labor premier Steve Bracks.
4 Dalton has subsequently left the ABC, replaced in 2013 by former SBS executive, Richard Finlayson.

References


**Interviews**


Buckland Jenny, CEO Australian Children’s Television Foundation. Interviewed by author, 2 June 2010, Melbourne.


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