

Re: Senate Inquiry ABC - Questions on Notice

Thank you for the questions on notice from Senator Wright.

My answers are as follows.

1. Do you acknowledge that there may be qualitative differences (in terms of mission and commercial imperatives) between a producer of programs like the not-for-profit, government-funded ACTF, and a private, for-profit production company? If so, what would they be?

The producers who run production houses are creative people and they are all very different. It is not possible to categorize them as "commercial" or "non-commercial." There are definitely qualitative differences between production houses, but it is not as simple as the difference between being not-for-profit and for-profit. In the way that some authors write blockbusters or "Mills and Boon" books with little literary merit, and others write substantial literary works which reach a smaller, more educated audience, producers work on projects that appeal to their area of interest, and some are more motivated by financial return than others.

A drama producer of the calibre of Penny Chapman, of Matchbox Pictures, may never have produced a drama for a commercial broadcaster. A documentary producer like Robert Connolly may never have produced a documentary for a commercial broadcaster, either.

Their work is inherently in the public broadcaster mould. Other producers work across the sectors or exclusively for the commercial sector. At the ACTF we have produced work in our own right for both commercial and public broadcasters, we have co-produced with independent producers and we have invested in script development and distribution of independently produced work. There are producers we would not work with and who would not be interested in working with us, because their work is inherently "commercial" and does not meet our mission and vision in terms of raising the stakes for children's television and stretching the audience with the work we create for them. Equally, there are producers that eagerly seek out the opportunity to work on high quality projects for children and who bring us their ideas for unique projects.

Commercial imperatives are highly influenced by the relevant broadcaster. For instance, no production on a public broadcaster may include product placement, whereas a commercial broadcaster might insist on it because they have a relationship with a particular brand. (This is far less likely to happen in children's television, which is highly regulated on the commercial broadcasters.)

Once a project has been commissioned by the ABC, whether it is a children's project or an adult project, and everyone knows it must meet ABC editorial guidelines, I am not sure what the "commercial imperatives" would be that would compromise the program. The production company must make the program that the broadcaster wants. An independent producer who has pre-sold a production to a number of international broadcasters might be juggling the script feedback and competing vision of several broadcasters, but traditionally the "home" broadcaster has made the larger contribution and has the last word. Most adult ABC programs are not pre-sold to other international broadcasters, anyway. Whatever the merits or otherwise of a program like Crownies, it has to be said that the program must be the way it

is because that is the kind of program the commissioning editor at the ABC wanted. It is not an accident that happened because it was independently produced.

2. Are there particular regulatory guidelines or constraints on the making of children's programs that are not there on the making of programs for adults? If so, can you identify what these are?

Regulatory constraints are imposed on commercial broadcasters in respect of the production of children's programs. Under the Children's Television Standard (CTS) all programs that commercial broadcasters want to show as P (pre-school) or C (school age) children's programs must be pre-classified by ACMA as meeting the CTS criteria which relate to the quality, age appropriateness and entertainment values of the program. Children's programs broadcast on commercial television therefore go through a much more stringent process than programs made for an adult audience. The CTS does not cover the ABC, however. The ABC has its own internal compliance department which reviews all programs to ensure they meet the broadcaster's own broadcasting standards. All ABC children's programs, whether produced internally or externally, have to be viewed by the ABC compliance department, which engages with the commissioning editor on the suitability of content and must be satisfied that children's programs shown on the ABC would receive a G rating if they were classified by the OFLC.

Determining the suitability of content for the children's audience is therefore much more a matter of judgement for ABC staff, than it is a regulatory issue. The aspect they must be most careful about is ensuring that they schedule programs in such a way that parents know whether programs are suitable for young children, or not, as some programs for older children will inevitably explore themes and issues that may not be suitable for the very young. This has been a complex issue in the past, but now that the ABC is identifying ABC 2 as the home of pre-school content, and ABC 3 is identified as a channel for school aged children, the age of children a program is intended for is much clearer to most viewers.

I hope that this information answers Senator Wright's questions satisfactorily. Please don't hesitate to let me know if I can provide any further information.

Yours sincerely,  
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Australian Children's Television Foundation