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Independent financing of ABC drama and comedy should not be feared

A new essay written by the former director of television at the ABC is a timely and worthwhile contribution to the debate about the future of the public broadcaster and its role in nurturing a home grown screen industry, says the union for performers and screen crew.

'Missing in Action: the ABC and Australia's screen culture', written by Kim Dalton, raises legitimate issues about funding of the ABC, how money is spent within the broadcaster and its relationship between the ABC and independent screen production sector, says the director of MEAA Equity, Zoe Angus.

Ms Angus said there needed to be a wider debate about these issues. She said Mr Dalton had brought an insider's perspective and insight to how funding was allocated and programming was commissioned within the ABC.

"Mr Dalton's essay delves deeper than simplistic headlines about cuts to the ABC, into how internal decisions have resulted in limited resources being poorly allocated," Ms Angus said.

"It also tackles the sacred cow of the independence of the ABC and whether greater accountability and transparency is necessary."

As described in the essay, increased funding to the ABC between 2009-12 earmarked for Australian content (drama, documentary and children's programs) was crucial to the blossoming of the industry and story-telling in Australia. But since then, as resources have tightened, a significant portion of these additional funds have been diverted away from locally produced drama, documentary and children's programs with little or no consultation or transparency.

"While MEAA resolutely supports the independence of the ABC, this diversion of funds raises concerns that the existing ABC Charter is an insufficient mechanism to ensure the ABC always operates in the public good.

"In contrast to the Charter which governs the BBC, the ABC Charter is a flimsy document with little detail.

"MEAA would support the Charter specifying minimum levels Australian drama, children's and documentary content on ABC.

"The ABC should then be required to report on how it is investing in these areas, including being accountable for how its programming can best reflect, represent and serve the diverse communities of all Australia.

"And while MEAA does not support further privatisation, we believe that the ABC should continue to work in partnership with the independent production sector to produce local drama, documentary and children's programs.

"The independent production sector has proven itself to be a dynamic and distinctive sector for telling Australian stories."

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Ms Angus said that included within the ABC Charter should be the obligation to partner with and work strategically to develop the independent production sector.

“A strong, sustainable and diverse independent production sector is vital for artistic and employment opportunities for our members, as well crucial to generating an interesting and socially relevant slate of Australian stories.

“MEAA supports the ABC working in partnerships with state and federal funding agencies, as well as setting regional production targets.

“Not only will this enable productions to leverage additional funds for quality drama productions, it increases artistic opportunities for actors and crew in regional areas as well as fostering greater diversity in the stories we tell.”

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