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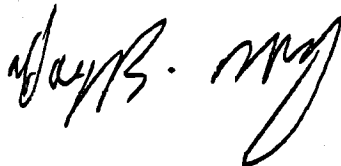
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RE : PRODUCTIVITY COMMISSION SUBMISSION

Please accept this submission for the upcoming Productivity Commission hearings.

I have expressed interest to Julian Thomas that I would like to appear at the hearings to be held in Brisbane.

Harvey May





The following submission is based on my doctoral research at the Queensland University of Technology into the issue of cultural diversity in Australian commercial drama programming. It is based on the examination of broadcasting policy and interviews with policy and industry informants over the last year.

After conversation with the ABA and in consideration of The Object of The Australian Content Standard, it has become clear that the development and reflection of cultural diversity as expressed in The Object is an aspirational goal rather than an "objective" with clear quantifiable outcomes. The wording of The Object does in fact state the Standard will realise its "goal" by supporting the community's (ie: audience's) access to programming produced under Australian control.

This translates to the ABA ensuring that commercial programming is made with Australian creative input (and it can police this aspect) – it does not mean that the ABA will **directly** play a role in advancing how and to what degree cultural diversity is portrayed in programming.

The ABA carry out their duties in order to facilitate the production of Australian Content with Australian creative control. The equation is that this translates to the commercial broadcasting sector taking responsibility for ultimately achieving The Object of The Standard.

FACTS

The MEAA and the CLC combined with various interest groups and organisations carried out a campaign between 1992 and 1995 to address the issue of cultural diversity. This campaign consisted of quantitative and qualitative research, submissions to and meetings with FACTS, two conferences which addressed the issue and a press media campaign to demonstrate a need for policy change. The "best scenario" aim was to secure a new Standard from the ABA which would give it power to police and enforce a Standard related to the portrayal of cultural diversity on commercial television.

FACTS and the ABA did not and still do not support this measure. From conversations with policy and industry people, this avenue of action remains closed.

One clear outcome of the early 1990s action, was the formulation and inclusion of a series of **Advisory Notes** in the **FACTS Code of Practice**. There is a statement within these notes which recommends broadcasters/producers are mindful of the culturally diverse nature of Australia in the scripting, casting and producing of programmes.

These notes have never actually been printed with the Code of Practice booklet and remain as their name suggests "notes", which are unlikely to be at hand. As

they do not form part of the code in a **regulatory sense**, and as they are not printed with The Code, they are of little relevance. Interviews with industry staff revealed a lack of familiarity with the Advisory Notes.

The **MEAA** executive has expressed to me the opinion that the representation of cultural diversity in programming and participation rates for actors from non-mainstream backgrounds has improved from the early 1990s. To what degree is unknown and is currently the subject of further research. The claim from industry that there are not enough well trained actors of NESB background was strongly denied by MEAA. A survey of training institutions on their EEO profile regarding emerging actors would be insightful here.

Interviews with the Australian Writers Guild and **several "A" writers of Australian commercial drama** established that writers are well informed of their responsibility in representing cultural diversity. However, there seems to be a need for a continued effort made in exposing writers to issues surrounding the portrayal of NESB and particularly indigenous characters. A research report carried out for the AWG into the cultural background of writers in Australia revealed a profound lack of opportunity for scriptwriters from NESB background.

Creative workers associated with independent production companies who provide drama programming to the three networks, would generally appear to be "progressive" in their ideas regarding the portrayal of cultural diversity. However, there was heard the accusation that commissioning (high level) staff at networks are resistant to programming which is "too ethnic".

An interview with a network script executive revealed a very sound knowledge of the issues. However, the perception was that as ratings have suffered in the past when "ethnic" or "aboriginal" story lines/characters were attempted in drama, audiences must not be overly concerned with this. The paramount importance of ratings to "jobs" and the network in general, was seen as the "bottom line".

Conclusion

There is some hostility from the production industry and networks to the notion of a regulatory intervention in this issue. As the ABA and FACTS no longer see the issue of cultural diversity as "on the table", it is unclear how the situation can improve at a policy level, as it stands. Enforcing some system of a "portrayal of cultural diversity" factor at the level of policy will be met with strong and wide opposition. The answer may be in investigating where improvement has occurred in the commercial sector (and it appears it has) and use these instances as models for the facilitation of industry-self improvement. Such an approach mirrors the current self-regulatory environment.