

The slow death of Australian children's TV drama

Written by Anna Potter, Discovery Early Career Research Award (DECRA) Fellow, Senior Lecturer Screen and Media Studies, University of the Sunshine Coast



Ebonnie Masini and Rian McLean in *Round the Twist* (1989), one of Australia's most fondly remembered children's TV dramas. Australian Children's Television Foundation

Australian children's TV may have recently picked up an [Emmy Kids award](#) for the ABCME animation *Doodles*, but otherwise kids' TV in this country is in a dire state.

Free-to-air TV networks have to commission certain amounts of children's programs each year. But in recent years there's been a dismaying lack of new live action shows, or recognisably Australian content. Instead, local children's TV has become dominated by animation with little sense of place.

This is a shame, because Australia's most fondly remembered children's TV shows are live action productions such as [Mortified](#), [Playschool](#), [Blue Water High](#), and [Round the Twist](#). When asked in a 2015 survey to name their favourite childhood TV characters, most people chose *Round the Twist* siblings Linda and Bronson, followed by [Mortified](#)'s Taylor Fry.

Before the [2009 launch](#) of [ABCME](#) (originally ABC3), the vast majority of the children's live action drama produced here was commissioned by advertiser-funded networks Seven, Nine and Ten. Series such as [Spellbinders](#), [Ocean Girl](#), [H2O: Just Add Water](#) and [Lockie Leonard](#) proved popular with Australian children, many of whom still remember them as adults.

[The people we surveyed](#) as part of the 2015 Memory Project, recalled how much they enjoyed watching stories set in Australian locations and told in Australian accents, by characters to whom they felt they could relate. They also liked their humour, quirky storylines, the portrayal of a range of Australian lifestyles, and their values, including mateship and egalitarianism.

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Since [Skippy](#) debuted in 1967, Australian children's television has also sold well overseas. International sales are crucial to the funding of Australian TV, because the local market is too small to allow producers to cover their costs. But high quality live action drama is expensive to produce. [Restrictions](#) on scheduling and what can be advertised to children further limit revenue.

Although kid's drama isn't particularly attractive for the commercial networks, [content quotas](#) in place since the 1970s ensure that each commissions 32 hours of new Australian children's (classified "C") drama each year. These are part of broader quotas for children's TV, administered by the [Australian Communications and Media Authority](#) (ACMA).

Relying on animation

But since the mid-2000s, networks have increasingly used animation to fill their quotas, rather than live action drama. Both are allowed under the rules. From 2013–15, animation made up on average [77% of the networks' C drama hours](#). In 2015–2016, not one live action show was [submitted to the ACMA](#) for classification as children's drama, although there were a number of light entertainment programs such as game shows.

Animation is generally cheaper to produce than live action drama, attracts international investment more easily and can be re-voiced for global markets. These give it a significant competitive advantage over live action.

Without a doubt, there have been some fine Australian-made animations in recent years. Some, like [Bottersnikes and Gumbles](#) or the latest reboot of the venerable Blinky Bill are based on Australian stories and have an Australian look and feel.

However the vast majority of animated series produced to fill the C drama quotas carry no recognisably Australian content. Kuu Kuu Harijuku, for example, a show about an animated girl group, was created by US pop superstar Gwen Stefani, yet was classified as C drama by ACMA in 2015.

What about ABCME?

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Unfortunately even though it has Australia's only free-to-air dedicated children's channel ABCME, the ABC cannot necessarily be relied upon to fill the gap in making local live action kids' drama. In a [submission to the 2017 parliamentary inquiry](#) into the film and TV industry, the Australian Children's Television Foundation indicated that the ABC's children's budget has been cut significantly, possibly by more than a third.

(Asked about this, a spokesman for the ABC said budgets regularly fluctuate internally to meet schedule and production requirements. "The budget for ABCME has been slightly reduced from the previous year to meet these demands across ABC TV.")

The ABC's local content targets (not quotas) for ABCME were reduced to [25% from 50% in 2015](#). The ABC also has [no charter obligations](#) to produce Australian content for Australian children. It is free to pull funding from the children's television budget whenever it wishes, without public consultation or transparent processes.



Jordan Rodrigues and Thomas Lacey in Dance Academy (2010). Werner Film Productions

In the years following the 2009 launch of its children's channel, the ABC commissioned a number of live action drama series, including [My Place](#), [Dance Academy](#), [Nowhere Boys](#) and [Ready for This](#). These were very well received by local audiences, indeed a [spin off movie](#) of Dance Academy has just been released. But with the cuts to its budget, ABCME is relying more heavily on repeats to fill its schedule and reducing the scale of its live action drama commissions.

While the channel has two live action dramas currently in production (Mustangs FC, about an [all girls soccer team](#) and a third series of [Nowhere Boys](#)), both will be 13 rather than 26 episodes long. And the recent announcement of the [reboot of Monkey Magic](#) hardly contributes to local content for children, given it is to be shot entirely in New Zealand and is a re-make of a non-Australian original series.

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ABCME may have plans for more original children's drama, but the lack of information about its budget and where the cuts to local content are falling make it impossible to tell what it has in the pipeline.

Reflecting kids' lives back to them

Of course, animation is a perfectly legitimate genre, and enormously popular with children all over the world. Nonetheless the C drama quotas were legislated for in the early 1980s at a time when very little local television was being produced for Australian children. The quotas were intended to provide identifiably Australian television that would reflect kids' lives back to them. These led directly to series like *Round the Twist*, *Mortified* and *Lockie Leonard*.

The question for parents, producers and policy makers is: do Australian children deserve to see high quality drama series that reflect their own lives back to them? If we think they do, clear outcomes and objectives will need to be set for Australian content, particularly C drama.

ACMA will have to do more than rubber stamp animation as C drama (out of 38 programs put forward for C drama classification between 2013 and 2016, [only two were rejected by the regulator](#)).

If we are to preserve identifiably Australian children's screen content we need to ensure that it actually looks and sounds Australian, and safeguard funding for children's television, particularly at the ABC.

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