



Submission to the Senate Inquiry into the Communications Legislation Amendment (Prominence and Antisiphoning) Bill 2023

22 January, 2024

The authors from the Australian Children's Television Cultures (ACTC) research group – Associate Professor Liam Burke, Dr Joanna McIntyre, Dr Jessica Balanzategui, and Dr Djoyimi Baker – are grateful for the opportunity to contribute to the Senate Inquiry into the Communications Legislation Amendment (Prominence and Anti-siphoning) Bill 2023.

Australian Children's Television Cultures (ACTC) is a research project based at Swinburne University of Technology, in collaboration with RMIT University. The project is funded for four years (2021–2024) by the Australian Children's Television Foundation (ACTF) to investigate the role of Australian children's television and other screen entertainment in people's lives, memories, families, and education. The project's chief investigators include academic experts in children's media, audience research, national identity and media, gender representation, and television and streaming. This submission will draw primarily from research conducted as part of the project's "Parents' Perspectives" research stream, led by Associate Professor Liam Burke, with additional material from the "Adult Audience Kids' TV Memories" stream, led by Dr Joanna McIntyre.

This research supports the rationales this Bill provides for the introduction of the Prominence Framework, in particular it affirms the Bill's points about free-to-air broadcasting playing a central role in "social cohesion," and the significance of the impact of internet-connected television devices on the discoverability of local children's content.

About the Research

To track and examine the screen viewing habits of Australian households with children, the ACTC team is conducting a four-year programme of audience research with Australian parents and legal guardians of children aged 14 and younger. Audience research surveys were carried out over the same six-week period (late August to early October) in 2021, 2022, and 2023. The survey will be repeated in 2024.ⁱ



The findings from the 2021 audience research were published in the peer-reviewed report “Parents’ Perspectives on Australian Children’s Television in the Streaming Era” in early 2022.ⁱⁱ This submission will primarily draw on findings from the second national survey conducted in 2022 and some additional material related to “discoverability” from the most recent survey in 2023. The data collection period coincides with the era of “technology-driven changes” this Bill identifies and many of the survey topics are directly relevant to issues this Bill raises, including how Australian families with children use different screen media platforms, and the features and functionality parents and carers most value on streaming services. The surveys have received 756 participants over three years with only 10% and 23% overlap between successive years respectively, which lends weight to these longitudinal responses, as data has been collected from a wide cohort of parents and carers.

The TV Set is Still Number One but Streaming Services Dominate

Despite the availability of an expanding number of devices, 95% of respondents identified television as a device their children use to watch children’s shows/content. Parents reported that older children were more likely to use computers and gaming consoles to watch children’s shows and content than other children, while boys were more likely to use computers. Given the variety of platforms that are now available, the Bill’s definition of “Regulated Television Device” could be widened to include devices like tablets and smartphones, which parents identified as the second and third most used devices by their children.

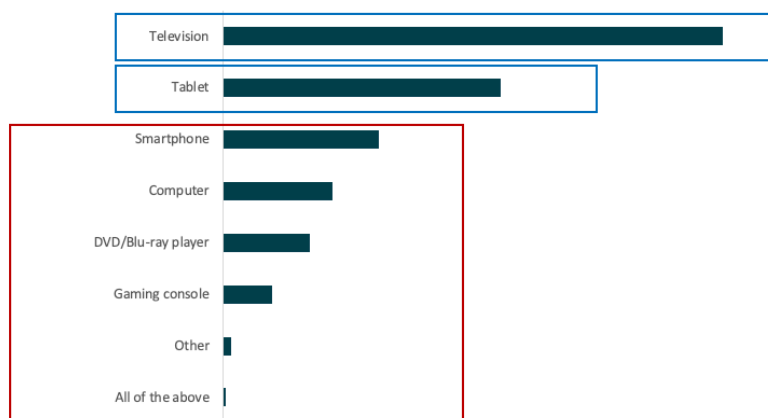


Table 1 Responses to the question: What devices do your child(ren) use to watch children’s shows/content?

Although respondents identified television as the device most used to watch children’s show/content, the top 10 most popular “channels” are almost exclusively streaming services. The ABC is a prominent source of access to children’s shows/content in Australian homes. In 2022, 93% of respondents identified that their children use at least one of the ABC’s services (up from 89% in 2021), with 74% of parents using ABC Kids in particular. Other highly ranked services included Netflix (73%), YouTube (66%), and Disney+ (60%).

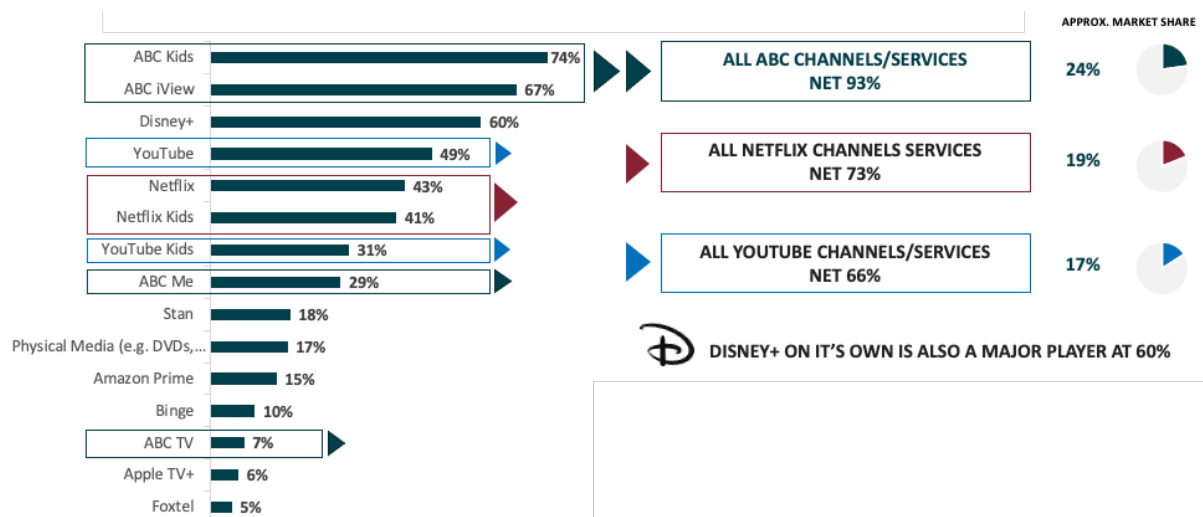


Table 2 Services parents identified that their child uses to watch children's shows/content

Despite many survey respondents reporting that they valued “diverse representation” in children’s television, few have accessed NITV or NITV’s dedicated children’s programming Jarjums (2%). These free-to-air services fulfill a need that parents identify, but the services are not frequently used which indicates a lack of awareness of these valuable services. This unfamiliarity with the full range of free-to-air offerings highlights the importance of the “must carry” Prominence Framework in the Bill, as well as the relevance of the Bill’s citation of Article 17 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC): “the right of the child to access information and material from a diversity of national and international sources”.

Children and parents are already finding and using ABC content under existing arrangements but not some free-to-air services like NITV. Pre-installation and homepage prominence of free-to-air apps will help ensure [1] continuing prominence of free-to-air services like the ABC, and [2] improve prominence of overlooked services like NITV.

Streaming Features and Functionality

To better chart the impacts of the changing television landscape on Australian children’s viewing practices, the 2022 study included additional questions about what features and functionality parents and guardians value in streaming services. Among the streaming service features that survey respondents considered most important were “content you can watch together as a family” (75%) and a “separate children’s section/version” (67%). These findings may partly explain the popularity with parents of services that have dedicated areas for children’s content, like Disney+, as opposed to more adult-skewing SVoDs, such as Prime Video and Apple TV+. The majority of respondents (74%) reported that they value Australian content being available on streaming services.

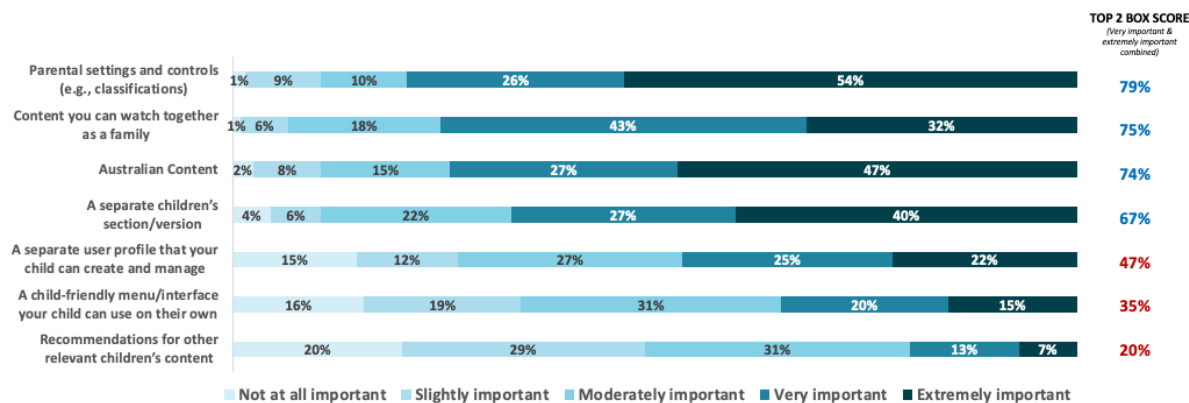


Table 3 Parent responses to the importance of different features and functionality on streaming services

However, in new questions added to the 2023 survey, respondents described their children watching much more international content (51%) than Australian (16%), despite these same respondents reporting they believe Australian content to be better quality than overseas equivalents. Subsequent questions asked why they thought their children watched more international content and the reason most identified was “there isn’t enough Australian content”. An additional question asked respondents what would help them find Australian content. The top responses were a “marker” on streaming platforms that indicates which shows are Australian and an app that “collects only Australian children’s content”.

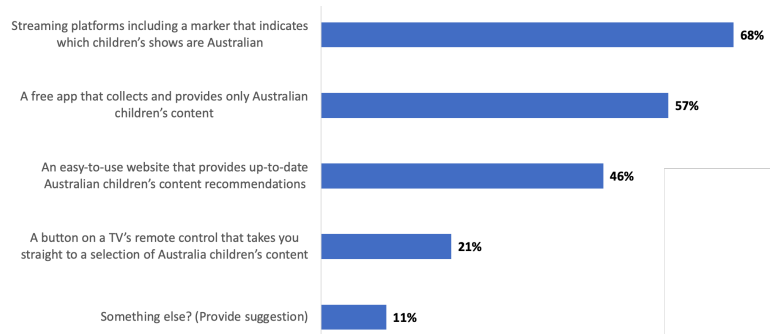


Table 4 Responses to the question: Which of the following would you use to help you find Australian content?

These top suggestions do not require changes to behaviours or routines, which is in keeping with the Prominence Framework’s emphasis on ease of use, particularly for those who lack the “skills and knowledge to navigate to these services on newer devices”. These survey findings also align with the ACTF’s recommendation of the creation of an Australian Children’s Content App that would be prominent on regulated television devices, as mentioned in the Bill’s post-consultation analysis.



Parents Value “Relatable” Australian Children’s Content

In each iteration of the survey respondents were asked how “important” it was to them that children’s television was “Australian”. To gain nuanced responses a Likert scale for “Australian” was embedded among five other criteria such as “fun” and “educational” so as to alleviate potential confirmation bias. Even with those comparative criteria, 83% of respondents still reported they consider it important that children’s television is Australian. Within the group that valued Australian children’s content, those in “rural” and “regional” areas were more likely to rate Australian content as “very important” than those in a “major city”.

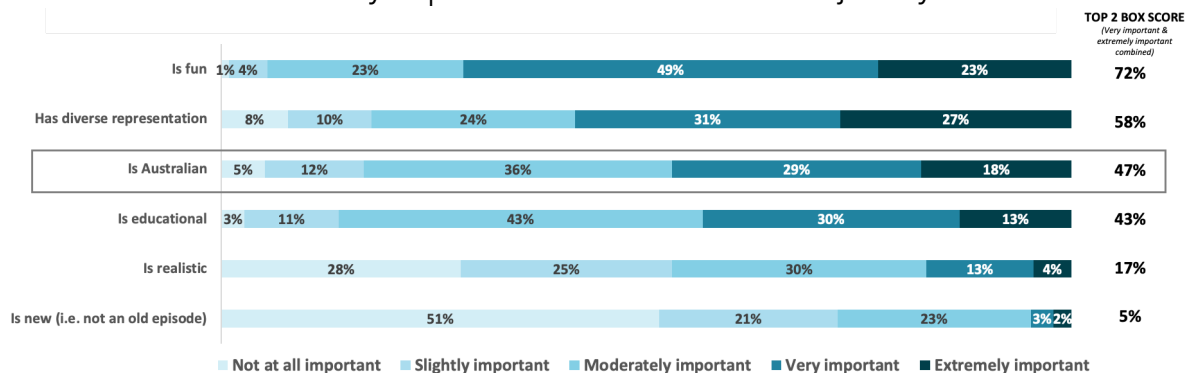


Table 5 Parents rate how important each criterion is for children’s shows/content their child(ren) watch (2022 survey)

Survey respondents were asked to describe what qualities make “good Australian children’s shows/content?” When responses were analysed thematically, “relatability” was the most common theme (47%), which included: Australian accents and slang, identifiably Australian settings and iconography (e.g. Queensland houses, local wildlife etc.), and “warts-and-all” portrayals (often contrasted with “overly sanitised” US shows).

Great Australian content reflects our society, cultures, languages and environments. It allows kids to see their own lives reflected on screen, validating their experiences. – Mother-of-one from Victoria

It leans into our unique heritage without alienating those who have other experiences. Teaching about what it means to be Australian without creating a firm definition. Showcasing different experiences. – Dad-of-one from New South Wales



Good TV reflects Australian kids' reality, is free of American psychobabble and melodrama, is either 'light' or introduces heavy themes in child-appropriate ways. I am a huge fan of the Australian shows Little Lunch, Are You Tougher Than Your Ancestors?, Teenage Boss, Bluey, Mustangs, Play School and its spin-offs. – Mother-of-two from Victoria

The findings of the “Parents’ Perspectives” research were reinforced by findings from another of this project’s research streams, which looked at the long-term value of Australian children’s television. This study surveyed 557 adults who watched television while growing up, with representative percentages of respondents from across all adult generations. This research’s findings were published in the peer-reviewed report “Kids’ TV Memories: Audience Perspectives on the Roles and Long-term Value of Australian Children’s Television” in late 2023.ⁱⁱⁱ This research found that 7 in 10 respondents had revisited Australian children’s television shows as adults. The top reason Australian children’s shows were remembered was for their “relatability,” which included shows featuring Australian accents, locations, and people. Two thirds of respondents had shared Australian children’s content with someone else in recent years through practices such as sending clips via social media, making recommendations, and watching together. Respondents shared Australian children’s television from their own childhood to bond with peers and provide friends and loved ones, including those who grew up overseas, with an insight into Australian culture.

The value parents and adult audiences place on *relatable* Australian children’s television is in keeping the Bill’s objectives to allow free-to-air broadcasting to continue “supporting our national identity, cultural diversity and social cohesion”.

Conclusion and Recommendations

This research establishes that in an often fragmented streaming landscape, Australian parents and guardians value clearly demarcated Australian children’s content that is organised in easy-to-access platforms dedicated to children’s shows/content.

This research:

1. Supports the provisions in the Prominence Framework to safeguard the availability of free-to-air television services and increase the discoverability of Australian children’s shows/content
2. Suggests the Bill’s definition of “Regulated Television Device” be widened to include devices like Tablets and Smartphones
3. Supports recent calls from industry stakeholders, including the ACTF, for a Children’s Content App that would be given prominence on regulated television devices^{iv}



Australian Children's Television Cultures is a Swinburne University of Technology research project in collaboration with RMIT University and in partnership with the Australian Children's Television Foundation.

For more information on related ACTC research, please see the submission by Dr Jessica Balanzategui (RMIT University) to this inquiry that draws directly on research on children's streaming video platform habits, as well as the project website <https://www.actcresearch.com/>

Queries to A/Prof Liam Burke



Host Institution



Partner Research Institution

ⁱ This research is funded by the Australian Children's Television Foundation (ACTF). Qualitative research consultation was provided by a strategy and insight specialist at T garage.

ⁱⁱ Burke, L., McIntyre, J., Balanzategui, J., & Baker, D. (2022). *Parents' Perspectives on Australian Children's Television in the Streaming Era*, Swinburne University of Technology. <https://doi.org/10.26185/xxt0-d294>

ⁱⁱⁱ McIntyre, J., Burke, L., Baker, D., & Balanzategui, J. (2023). *Kids' TV Memories: Audience Perspectives on the Roles and Long-term Value of Australian Children's Television*, Swinburne University of Technology. <https://doi.org/10.26185/cchb-wf43>

^{iv} "Prominence Framework for Connected Television Devices Proposals Paper Incorporating a new proposal for an Australian Children's Content App", ACTF, February, 2023 https://actf.com.au/assets/uploads/2023-02/actf_discoverability_submission_fa.pdf