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Navigating the hype curve

The business analyst Gartner some years ago developed the hype curve to measure the advancement of any new technology-driven change. It rises through a ‘peak of inflated expectation’ before diving down to a ‘trough of disillusionment’—easing its way back up a lower rising curve of customer acceptance towards real business maturity. Right now we are in the first of those curves, with the maximum opportunity for confusion.

Michael Gubbins¹

[W]ith every moment a world is born and dies.
And know that for you with every moment comes
death and renewal.

Jalal ad-Din Rumi,
thirteenth-century Persian poet

Anyone following the 2006 Australian media-ownership debates could be forgiven for believing that the transformation of the media space would have no effect on what Australians actually see on their screens. While commentary raged about important issues such as diversity, competition and

new services, the issue of *content*—and in particular *Australian content*—was almost completely absent. It was like the child banished to its room while the adults get on with serious business.

This is despite the fact that the Australian film industry has not only been in decline in recent years, with production levels at critically low levels. Now it faces an extremely uncertain future in the form of a multi-platform media landscape, the focus of much debate, that has the potential to blow apart the industry's established business models.

This is not to say that the Government has been ignoring content. The current review of film-funding measures, for example, promises to introduce much-needed reform of film tax concessions that will, we hope, stimulate much-needed private investment in the sector. This is important, and most welcome. However, as with other film reviews, such as the Gonski Report delivered just ten years ago, in January 1997, the weakness of this current review is that it is focused on an immediate production issue—film financing—that needs to be addressed now. What it will not do is examine the broader structural settings within which the production industry operates, or develop strategies to take account of every aspect of the production-value chain. Yet this is what I believe is required, needed desperately, if the industry is to survive and prosper in the new media environment.

It all boils down to a single question: How are we to ensure that Australian audiences twenty years from now will still be able to access a diverse range of original, quality Australian content on their screens?

As an advocate for Australian directors—I have been

Film in the Age of Digital Distribution

Executive Director of the Australian Screen Directors Association (ASDA) since 1998—I have spent many years grappling with both utopian and apocalyptic claims regarding digital distribution, trying to separate myth from reality in the predicted changes. And, more importantly, what all this change actually means and is likely to mean for the Australian film industry in general and for filmmakers* in particular.

Trying to get a handle on the fast-changing media landscape is a daunting exercise, as new developments occur every day—in internet terms, this essay is already light years out of date—and it is easy to freeze in the face of so much hype and hysteria. That said, I felt it important to put some facts on the table for both filmmakers and policy-makers, and to add my mite to the industry's attempts to navigate the new media's hype curve.

The first task in understanding where we are going is to understand exactly where we are now. What does our industry look like, and how does it work? What are the current settings and established business models? How do the overall structures work, or not work?

My next questions address the realities and myths of the internet. Is the net developing as a commercial entity, or will it once again be found to be a hollow shell? And what is the nature of its challenge to existing media models? Is it like any other technological change, or

* I use the term 'filmmaker' deliberately as a catch-all to include anyone involved in the process of generating content, and also to break down the notion that people working in the industry should be expected to only operate in the silos of 'producer' or 'writer' or 'director'. It is also a pitch to reclaim the term 'film' to describe any form of audio-visual production: while it does have some medium-centric baggage, it nonetheless has a copyright meaning, and is therefore in my view richer than terms like 'screen content', which mean nothing outside the industry. In this essay, then, 'film' may refer to any audio-visual work, from a feature film, to a TV series, to an interactive program.