

NZ ON AIR DRAMA CONVERSATION

In September 2017 NZ On Air invited drama production professionals to come together and discuss a wide range of issues and questions facing NZ On Air in a fast-changing environment.

Around 130 people took up the opportunity: producers, directors, writers, actors, guilds, broadcasters and other platforms. Presentations and a panel in the morning were followed by round tables in the afternoon discussing challenges which were posed as specific questions. The contributions were thoughtful and measured and the day was widely praised as a useful and timely initiative by NZ On Air.

What we discussed

There was a very wide range of views in the room so, obviously, not always consensus. However a high degree of agreement emerged in the discussion around what success for NZ drama looked like. The main components of success were articulated as drama that:

- Stimulates the cultural conversation
- Secures audience loyalty
- Achieves appropriate audience size to justify investment (eyeballs)
- Contributes to a healthy and sustainable industry that grows the NZ voice

In the face of growing global competition, the NZ voice is our edge and our stories are more important than ever.

The challenges

The main challenges and opportunities were also identified and generally agreed. They concern:

1. Development
2. Diversity
3. Innovation
4. Newer platforms

There is a strong feeling from many that there is an insufficient diversity of stories and people on screen and off screen. NZOA is 'over-serving the same large, shrinking audience'.

There is also a feeling from some that some television production is too conservative/lacking freshness; but also that television output is still very important for developing capability, for retaining talent in NZ to work on projects of comparative scale, and its contribution to showcasing NZ stories and talent to broad and highly engaged audiences.

The scale of telefeatures was discussed. These dramas have been some of most-loved by audiences, and well-reviewed, but those not involved in these productions were concerned about the cost (about \$3m each, similar to a modest domestic feature film) and how this might displace new opportunities. Co-investment will be increasingly important.

There are tensions between:

- mainstream platforms and producers, where television drama that attracts sizeable audiences is developed, commissioned and broadcast under relatively strict oversight and

platform requirements which rarely enable access by new entrants. Not many of the next group accepted the business imperatives of broadcast commissioning and scheduling.

- younger and more diverse personnel, and newer platforms usually with smaller audiences. Here, platform requirements are more flexible and creative freedom more common, but co-investment is constrained and audiences mostly smaller. 'Niche is the new mainstream'.

NZ On Air has insufficient funds both to maintain current production levels and also to effect change: something has to give.

Ideas for change

Core challenges and areas for change identified and discussed include:

1. Development

Each year NZ On Air provides around \$400k for content development. Alongside this work, attendees argued NZ On Air needs to put more focus on key creative talent development. NZOA should support better stepping stones/pathways for talent upskilling. For example attendees argued NZOA should:

- Support a wider range of development
 - Views differed as to whether projects should at least have a chance of being made, or seen as a form of professional development where talent is shaped and where ideas are explored
 - There was widespread agreement that more development, and longer development periods, are essential
- Support writers directly eg. through seed funding: the exigencies of the market should be introduced at a later stage
- Accept that development is the cheapest way to take risks
- Get bigger companies to mentor smaller ones who aspire to mainstream production
- Require talent mentoring plans for successful major funding applications: where does a particular project fit on the pathway of its team?
- Create more opportunities for new ideas and approaches
- Allow room for failure so that real risks can be taken: not every show must succeed

2. Diversity

Concerns were raised about lack of diversity in both people and projects.

Offscreen, there are two key areas where improvement in people diversity could lead to improvement onscreen: women directors, and ethnically diverse key production personnel.

- A strong call for affirmative action for both
 - There should be targets/quotas
 - Both producers and platforms also have to step up and help

Onscreen, diversity of funded drama types is also an issue.

- A wider range of projects and creators should be funded, with realistic budgets
- Worldwide trends should be considered more
- We need more risk-taking in drama: commercially-driven filters are innately conservative
- NZOA should use a wider/revolving range of assessors on the funding panels

Success needs to be measured by wider mechanisms than ratings.

3. Innovation

Some of the matters discussed in the Development section are also relevant here. Other ideas that gained a reasonable degree of support are that NZ On Air should:

- Aim for the sweet spot between ‘commercial’ and ‘good’: a fresh take, original idea, invest in talent who can deliver this
- Encourage more medium-budget online projects rather than the low budget system that does not recognise true cost (mainstream producers also report significant pressure)
- Bring back a specific Innovation fund (or RFP) providing production funding for targeted creative projects that cannot secure platform investment
- Relax our requirement for online co-investment in some cases because this reduces opportunities for risk-taking
- Note that innovation can be big budget: there should be more coproduction and possibly NZSPG access for top-up funding for domestic projects

4. Newer platforms

- Online platforms mostly find it hard to invest cash
 - But few attendees thought NZOA should routinely fully fund content. Producers should be required to source co-investment wherever possible.
- It’s hard to place a value on online-only content without a reliable measurement system.
- Funding for content behind a paywall should be allowed: it would extend diversity but should have a free access subsequent play.
- A significant paywall licence fee should be mandatory.
- SVODs should show a clear commitment to NZ content before securing access to NZ On Air funding
- Clear policy from NZ On Air is important

Options for NZ On Air

Attendees agreed that NZ On Air was facing hard choices, with or without a funding increase. NZ On Air needs a specific drama plan, within its Scripted funding stream, to clearly set out its priorities and to help the industry plan.

Action points for policy work include:

- 1. Reframe drama priorities** to clearly state a wider range of drama investments will be actively sought to provide for both mainstream and targeted drama.
 - a. For mainstream drama, ensure the cultural case includes considering diversity in storytelling and characters.
 - b. Consider how to encourage more mid-budget online projects that have the potential to break through to larger audiences.
 - c. Clarify the type of online projects that may be prioritised (likely different and diverse) and ensure they are adequately budgeted.
 - d. Better promote funding round guidelines and NZ On Air priorities: awareness of the fine detail of the new system is low.
 - e. Seek specific initiatives to encourage women directors.

- f. Seek specific initiatives to encourage ethnically diverse production and storytelling. (NB: this sits alongside and is separate to NZOA's commitment to the Treaty of Waitangi)
 - g. Discuss what type of drama should be reduced to make way for the new: eg. one drama series or one-two telefeatures (particularly if NZ On Air funding does not increase, having already been static for a decade).
- 2. Review development policy**
- a. Consider how much funding should be provided for non-production outcomes and on what basis.
 - b. Consider talent development and frame as a 'pathway' model.
 - c. Review the existing [diverse development fund](#): awareness of this is low.
 - d. Look for collaborative opportunities
 - e. Ask producers of drama applications to explain how the proposal will assist talent development, and consider response as part of assessment.
 - f. Measuring the success of outcomes from any change will be important: eg. having a large development slate that does not proceed to production has a risk of criticism that public funds are being wasted as well as causing industry frustration.
- 3. Consider the Screen Production Grant (NZSPG) and if this might align for large projects (and/or allow a top up fund for domestic projects).**
- a. Consult the NZFC and the NZSPG reviewers.
- 4. Clarify when a platform contribution is mandatory and when this might be relaxed – and why.**
- a. Mechanisms for considering this? The challenge is how to minimise inflationary aspects, maximise positive outcomes, and encourage wider investment.
 - b. When should we ask for more effort by producers to raise third party funds, especially to offset no platform contribution?
- 5. Assess paywall policy**
- a. Possibly more relevant for NZSPG projects but needs to stay under active review.
 - b. Ongoing tension between the public media requirement for free access and the need for exclusive rights: producers would need to develop the business case.
 - c. Case by case consideration possible: quantum of co-investment would be crucial and no proposed free access will be a serious matter.
 - d. Needs wider consultation and a discussion with the Minister.

Next steps

Due to the time required for policy work, drama development, and production, any changes that we make as a result of these and other conversations, will take effect from the 18/19 year. NZ On Air will publish a draft short plan by early 2018 and seek further feedback.

NZ On Air

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