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## **2016 BRIAN JOHNS LECTURE**

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### **CULTURAL INSTITUTIONS AND IDEAS OF AUSTRALIA IN THE AGE OF FANG**

**by Julianne Schultz**

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#### Abstract

In the Age of Fang (Facebook/Amazon/Netflix/Google), the cultural industries have never been more important or filled with greater potential. Even for a wealthy, well-educated, English-speaking country, however, to be heard internationally means rethinking the purpose and capacity of our cultural institutions. Many of these—including the Australia Council, National Library, National Gallery and SBS — were created within the last half-century. They were part of a global trend to celebrate and resource the expression and exploration of national cultural identity. Even News Corporation, one of Australia's most successful corporate creations, was born in this environment.

In the Age of Fang, we need to refresh the idea of Australia if we are to be more than a marginal content provider. Our cultural institutions are crucial to such a revival. Over the past 50 years their governing legislation has been redrafted, and new organisations created, but the fundamental architecture remains unchanged. Although cherished, they are under-resourced and often defensive when they need to lead. An urgent national discussion would ensure that the cultural infrastructure of the 21st century is fit for purpose and resourced to respond to the challenges and opportunities posed by the Age of Fang.

Distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen. It is a great honour to be invited to deliver the second annual Brian Johns lecture tonight, the first since his death on the first day of the year.

As others have already noted, this week should have been when we celebrated his 80<sup>th</sup> birthday, but sadly that was not to be.

Instead I would like to take this opportunity to seek to apply some of his insights, from a life devoted to expanding and enriching the idea of Australia, and apply them to the new cultural world order. We now live in the Age of Fang – the shorthand term for the new global era dominated by the oligopoly of Facebook, Apple, Amazon, Netflix and Google and others. These companies have made globalisation real and personal, thanks to the intimate objects we carry with us and access many times a day, unwittingly transmitting digital data like dead skin cells all the time.

It is particularly appropriate that this lecture be delivered at SBS. Brian loved his time here as managing director. Its mission had been close to his heart since the earliest days of its imagining when he worked for prime ministers Whitlam and Fraser – a period when most of the national cultural institutions we now take for granted also came to life.

Although many think that multicultural Australia was a post war creation, Brian knew from his childhood in Far North Queensland that it had far deeper roots. Growing up there, in the part of Australia the *British Medical Journal* had once declared a place ‘unfit for the white man’, an observant boy could not have helped but be aware of its rich and diverse history of human settlement. From descendants of the Indigenous nations, who had seen off Dutch explorers hundreds of years before Captain Cook sought safe harbour in the town that now bears his name, to the settlers drawn over the previous 80 years from China, Germany, Italy, Ireland, the British Isles and even Russia.

Far North Queensland was multicultural before the word was invented. Indeed a Russian physicist born in Atherton won the Nobel Prize for Physics early in the Cold War. It was also poor, hot, remote and lushly beautiful. A unique environment most enduringly captured at the time by artists and writers – Ray Lawler in *The Summer of the Seventeenth Doll*, the Australian answer to *Death of a Salesman*, by Xavier Herbert in his grand opuses and in the paintings of Ray Crooke and Ian Fairweather.

When Brian arrived at SBS to take up the role of managing director in 1987 he was steeped in the quest to develop and communicate the many layers of the idea of Australia. He was an advocate of the importance of telling the full range of Australian stories, of finding, developing and nurturing the talent to do so – reaching citizens here and audiences abroad.

He was not alone in this. Indeed, as I will explore later in this talk, the movement to tell distinctive national stories, to emphasise the cultural dimension of national identity was not unique to Australia. It was a movement that found expression all around the world in the post-war, post-colonial period, and produced great works of art, screen, music and literature. In the process it fostered a distinctive sense of belonging here.

We are in a new epoch, and again face the challenge of how this might be done. In the Age of Fang, we need to find persuasive and creative ways to answer those who argue that the national and local are just window dressing: we're all global citizens now. But everyone still comes from somewhere. That is part of the reason we need strong national cultural institutions, not vulnerable defensive ones, to enrich global diversity.

Immediately before arriving at SBS in Milson's Point Brian had been a transformative publishing director at Penguin. There he had championed literary fiction, immersive non-fiction, found new ways and authors to write about history, culture and current affairs. He had a distinctive style that endeared him to many, as Bruce Sims captured so beautifully in his 23 March 2016 [essay](#) for *Sydney Review of Books*, 'How many and how much? Remembering Brian Johns'. It was a very successful time for the ambitious Australian branch of the British firm. It was a period when many of the household names we read today got their start, a time when Australian authors first published here began to make an impact internationally and the Australian publishing industry came of age.

At the time though even the most successful Australian books sold only in the tens of thousands, a rare blockbuster might reach into the six figures. Those in the business took comfort in the certainty that numbers alone were not a mark of success or impact.

So when he arrived at SBS Brian was accustomed to the discipline of sales, to the importance of watching the numbers, of being aware of the interests of readers. But still the relentless metrics of television came as a shock.

Years later he used to love to tell the story of how on one of his first days at SBS he was given the ratings from the previous night. Several SBS shows were marked with an asterisk. What does that mean, he asked. Less than 40,000 people watched the program, he was told by a somewhat nervous executive. Well that's not so bad, he said, to the astonishment of those in the room.

Coming from the world of publishing 40,000 would have been an instant best seller, but in TV-land it literally didn't rate.

It's all relative.

There is a difference between noise and influence. Controversy doesn't necessarily indicate lasting impact. Especially in the world of popular culture, which is by its nature topical and often ephemeral. But in the heat of the moment it is sometimes difficult to tell them apart.

This is particularly apt in the Age of Fang. The numbers that attach to the most popular items that whizz around the globe in an instant are truly remarkable – exceeding even the wildest dreams of the gatekeepers of the age of mass media. Millions of views, shares and likes, followers counted in the hundreds of thousands.

This is an almost unimaginable world away from an asterisk on a ratings chart, or the tally of a bestseller in one country.

Digital disruption has become the new cliché that is supposed to capture this phenomenon. But it is inadequate. It suggests that what is happening is just the latest technological change. Albeit one that has created a new class of self-interested global consumers, fostered remarkable new businesses, transformed or trashed old ones. The speed is unprecedented and the reach without parallel. But technology has been transforming business, and by extension the way people live, since the industrial revolution.

This is different. What is at stake is more profound, with implications that encompass, but go well beyond, the commercial.

The speed and reach of the technology these companies deploy now challenges the mechanisms of public administration, regulation and taxation that have been refined and developed over a century or more. They may in time even challenge fundamentals of the nation state itself. In the past, great realignments like this were the outcome of war – so far this has been avoided, but the tension between the global and the local is starting to play out in unpredictable ways.

As the British scholar Martin Moore from the Centre for the Study of Media, Communications and Power at Kings College London, noted in his ground-breaking paper in April 2016, [\*Tech Giants and Civic Power\*](#), ‘Democratic societies don’t understand the phenomenon of the tech giants, what the phenomenon might mean in civic terms, what benefits it might bring to governance and the dangers inherent in it’.

Most importantly as scholars are beginning to draw out, and people are feeling in their bones, this disruption is not just about technology. It is cultural and political. Although we haven’t yet got our heads around what it might mean and how it might play out. You can see it in the Brexit debate in Britain, in the Trump rallies in America and authoritarian responses in China and India.

What we do know though, is that technology companies have figured out how to make money in an unprecedented way from the marriage of technology and culture. As a result we are seeing a massive redistribution of wealth from the cultural sector – where meaning is created – to the technology sector, which has figured out how to market, distribute, reach and make money in ways the cultural industries never imagined possible.

Now in the Age of Fang there are a handful of global companies shaping tastes, distributing and exploiting information we didn’t even know we generated. In the process they are creating a new world which produces unprecedented wealth, yet which gives us enough of an illusion of choice and being in control to feel we are free agents, global citizens even.

It is hard to think of historical precedents. The new oligopoly exceeds the control and reach of the East India Trading Company. Even the grandest colonial empires did not manage to secure such willing and active participation. The international reach that characterises the companies at the heart of the Age of Fang dwarfs even the ambition and scope of the American monopolies of the early 20th century that built that country before anti-trust laws constrained them.

You could say that each of these epochs collapsed, but it took a long time for regulatory mechanisms to define and assert the public interest.

What makes this different to say, the rise of multi-national firms of the middle years of the 20th century, the great corporations that sold energy, transport and consumer goods that were led by engineers and accountants, is that culture and the art and craft of making meaning are at the heart of these new corporations.

The old technology companies only sold machines and systems, software and business solutions. They are still there but have been displaced on the league tables by the biggest and most influential those that intrude into the most intimate areas of our lives. The new mega profitable firms make their billions by capturing and creating meaning and belonging: from personal information, news, video, copyright, education, music, and the information that is the sinew of everyday life – directions, health, banking, shopping. There is an enterprise that is as much cultural as it is technological.

Some would argue that no one saw this coming – but that is not strictly true. While the particularity of Facebook, Google and the others was not foreseen, the notion that ‘content would be king’ has been around for a long time.

More than 20 years ago the Keating government appointed Brian to chair the Broadband Services Expert Group, when the internet was a shadow of its current form. Thanks to the brains trust that made up that group Brian applied what he knew about the importance of cultural products to the new environment. The questions in his mind were: what would it mean when information became the raw material of the new economy, how would content evolve to suit new mediums and platforms, how could access be guaranteed for all.

It is fair to say that the technological future BSEG imagined, when it reported in January 1994, was filled with content like the products the experts on the group had always known: books, films, TV shows, music, games, creative works imagined and produced by writers, producers, composers, artists, designers and others – with new forms of distribution.

This has now been supplemented with the rich lodes of data drawn from the underlying building blocks of life in the capitalist 21st century: personal information and history, networks, photos, preferences, purchases, location, movement, causes and other atomised digital data we are not aware we are shedding like dead skin cells.

So the prediction that content would be king has proved to be true. But the role of the creator of that content has proved to be somewhat more precarious than anticipated, as we saw in the Productivity Commission’s draft report on copyright, [\*Intellectual Property Arrangements\*](#), released on Friday 29 April 2016.

As a result support for sustaining, growing and exploring cultural identity is also more valuable, but more fragile, than those who came of age in the middle of last century could have ever anticipated.

Facebook's 31-year-old founder Mark Zuckerberg is alert to this. Not surprisingly he takes a different perspective. He explained the risks to the 2,500 developers who gathered in San Francisco on 12 April 2016 paying \$595 each to attend Facebook's F8 conference and hear him deliver what was described as more like a state of the nation address than a keynote speech. He warned of 'the danger of people and nations turning inwards' against 'this idea of a connected world and community ... It takes courage to choose hope over fear,' he said.

We might nod in agreement if we think about China at its authoritarian worst. But what about in an open place like Australia? Do we run the risk of becoming invisible and losing our moorings? Is that the price of embracing hope over fear?

As Zuckerberg said, 'We have gone from a world of isolated communities to one global community, and we're all better off for it.'

Certainly Zuckerberg and his shareholders are better off for it. Arguably so are many of the 1.6 billion people who regularly use Facebook.

Just pause for a minute: 1.6 billion people using a service that was invented 12 years ago – that is significantly more than the population of China or India, more than the total number of Muslims in the world, more than North America, Europe and Japan combined.

Content is the glue that brings people back to Facebook, personal stuff, photos, articles, video, news, music. It also means there are fewer and fewer reasons to leave.

In the last three months of 2015 Facebook generated revenue of \$5.8 billion, and last week reported a first quarter profit for this year of \$1.5 billion – that is profit, in just three months in the universal US dollar. It is little wonder that the F in Fang stands for Facebook, and includes its rapidly growing services like WhatsApp, Instagram and its free internet service in thirty-seven developing countries, where the provision of national infrastructure is being outsourced to a company led by a man born in 1985.

The stock analysts who came up with Fang as a way of describing the companies that are at the heart of this new era were acutely aware that the list of the top companies has changed fundamentally over the past two decades. Where there were once energy, banks, pharmaceutical companies there are now companies that

with the exception of Apple, Amazon and Google did not even exist at the end of the millennium, with a couple of banks and energy companies just hanging in.

It is a remarkable tribute to the resilience and opportunism of American capital that this has occurred – no other country (with the possible exception of China) can point to such transformative renewal. For a reality check look at our top companies – banks, mining, insurance and a couple of former state-owned enterprises, the names and ownership may have changed but the structure is, with the exception of News Corp, more or less as it was 20 years ago.

There is not enough time to do a full analysis of the Fang companies and their role and significance, but it is important to provide a few numbers to sketch why what is at stake is so profoundly different to anything we have known before. This is particularly crucial if we are to shape a meaningful cultural and civic response.

Apple is the granddaddy of these companies. Despite recent slowing I expect it will go on doing what it has done so well since it was founded in 1976 when it produced stylish and functional devices that appealed to the cognoscenti. I bought them then and loved them.

They called us early adopters ‘apple seeds’. And like all the best genetically modified seeds we have gone on to produce an unrivalled crop – in our house we have nine devices we use every day and three in reserve.

In January there were a billion Apple devices operating and communicating with the Apple cloud, and more than 800 million people, global consumers, with an Apple iTunes account. Yet according to recent research by accounting academics from UTS Apple paid tax in Australia at the rate of 1.2 per cent on the billions of dollars in revenue it earned here, thanks to what in other circumstances would be regarded as a disappointing 3-4 per cent net profit. For an idea of scale, for several years Apple’s revenue here has exceeded the combined sales of David Jones and Myer.

I prefer to spell Fang with two A’s – so it is F-A-A-N-G. This is to include Amazon, which recently turned twenty-two. Amazon did not take long to recognise that those who buy books, were also likely to buy other stuff. Last year 244 million of them did so – in many cases Amazon knew what they wanted to buy before they did. It is a ruthless operator, the Walmart of the online world, but much more glamorous and convenient.



Amazon has relentlessly pushed prices down, squeezing publishing companies and their authors, using the power of its algorithms to make books virtually disappear, or pop to the top of the wish list.

In the trade books sector it is estimated that Amazon accounts for about \$250 million of the almost one billion dollars' worth of annual Australian sales. It is worth noting that books by Australian authors account about a third of all books sold here, but would only rate an asterisk at Amazon HQ.

Amazon is not a flash company. It is focused on keeping costs down, profits up and goods moving, and while global in its reach it is another quintessentially American enterprise.

I had an interesting insight into this a couple of years ago. I met with one of the senior editors responsible for originating long form essays for the Kindle in his cubbyhole office in an unprepossessing building in midtown Manhattan. After a fruitful conversation full of praise for the essays published by *Griffith Review*, he told me Amazon would be very interested in publishing the pieces we generated, the technical formatting was compatible, that was often a hurdle with others he said. There were just a couple of issues: we'd need to Americanise the essays, preferably with American examples and locations. There was no point in me saying we Australians are happy to read stories set in obscure American towns, people are people, does it matter if it is Des Moines or Brisbane? But I knew not to ask.

The next condition was that Amazon would have to publish first, there would be no advances or guarantees about income or placement. Finally as I prepared to leave he asked, 'We can work with either, but what is your currency, the euro or US dollar?'

Somehow I didn't think it was going to be worth the effort, and we'd remain wrapped in the bandages of global invisibility.

N comes next, and Netflix, the company that spectacularly made the transition from renting videos and DVDs to streaming and creating global content. The convenience, the ease, the choice, and at its best the quality of the long form television series that pin you in your seat, hitting the button for the next episode. There are more than a million people in Australia whose credit cards are debited \$11.99 each month from Netflix, Los Gatos, CA for their subscription. There are virtually no Australian employees. The only Australian content is recycled programs often under a different name – so *Utopia* the wonderful Working Dog production has become *Dreamland*. In the first week of May 2016 you will be pleased to know there

were two other Australian features: *Restaurant Australia* season one, and that old favourite *Yindi the Last Koala*, a 1996 documentary about a baby koala injured in car accident.

We know the American screen industries have always been ruthless: charging top dollar or dumping product depending on what the market will tolerate, vertically integrating the distribution chain to the disadvantage of local film makers in Australia, or Mexico, or Europe or wherever, taking state subsidies wherever they can find them, and remaking the best ideas with American accents.

With this comes alertness to opportunity and ideas. An admirable trait. The most striking example of this approach I am aware of now is the new series *The Crown* which Netflix describes as an American series, albeit one that it is making in the UK with multi-million pound budgets for each episode and much of the best British talent of a generation. Thanks to the Downton Abbey effect, and the American and Chinese love affair with the British upper class, the number of episodes keeps growing. Initially it was to be ten, but at last count it has expanded to six series of ten episodes each. Whether the real Queen lives or dies, the series will go on forever, maybe like the monarchy!

Meanwhile the British government recognises the economic value of culture, invests and takes it seriously. *The Crown* ticks many of the British boxes for cultural investment – jobs, infrastructure, image, money and an essentially British story on billions of screens. Rather better than koalas or cooks, which seems to be where we are stuck – maybe that is the next challenge for the Utopia/Dreamland crew.

Finally the silent G in Fang. Google is ubiquitous which in itself is a remarkable corporate achievement. It only emerged in 1998 and last year reported earnings of \$75 billion and gross profits of \$48 billion.

In many ways it is the glue that holds all this together. In the course of writing this speech I must have made thirty or more Google searches – it accounts for 89 per cent of global searches, even more in many countries, its video streaming service responsible for about two thirds of the desktop video watched on devices everywhere. A few years ago it digitised 20 million books for a grand Google library, without the approval of authors or publishers, fair use in an information marketplace. And that is just the start.

There is a paradox at the heart of this – the way that global digital monopolies are able to sell themselves as enablers of greater consumer choice. The new platforms are important and seductive, but ...

In Australia we are more committed to free trade than most. We want to believe in the level playing field, in the opportunities to trade, and have done okay out of this. But it works better for minerals and agriculture than for services or cultural products, as we will see as the copyright and IP debate unrolls in coming months. Even though the global cultural sector continues to grow faster than any other segment – we still don't take it seriously.

To my mind, the Europeans are more clear-minded about what is at stake. Australian media companies grizzle about the impact of the Fang companies. Generally they prefer to blame the public broadcasters and regulation, rather than the global enterprises that are eating their lunch. It seems the TV networks are likely to see their license fees for using the public resource of the airwaves reduced in the budget tomorrow night, which might help their profits, but is unlikely to do much for extra content creation.

European companies and regulators are more adept at cultural protection and export. They get particularly agitated when they see their revenue streamed off to American companies, even if they have tax domiciles within the EU.

European regulators have demonstrated they are more willing to use legal and other tools to ensure a level playing field, protect cultural products, secure a local return and reach international markets. So there are tax and antitrust, privacy and right to be forgotten cases against Google and the other Fangs.

It is interesting to read the commentary about this – the *New York Times* reports these cases with meticulous detail, allowing the case to be made in the best tradition of disinterested reporting. But when you click on the link to the comment page, you see American exceptionalism in the raw. I consider the *NYT* comments section by far the most mature and sophisticated, but when news of the latest anti-trust case against Google broke, the page lit up – poor sad old Europe, time to get used to the steam roller of American genius.

I was struck last year when talking to European media executives about the clarity of their vision of why this mattered. Sure there was the commercial dimension, if advertising income is growing, as it is, but 80 per cent of it is going to Google and

Facebook, that is a problem. If Google and Facebook and the others are not paying anything like the tax they should, that is a problem.

And yet one of the oldest lessons of American business shows that that they are not only tough, but always ready to find ways to co-opt the best ideas and neutralise the opposition. So there is the sweetener of Google's [Digital News Initiative](#) – 150 million euros to provide opportunities for innovation in news, new ways of European story telling – at the same time broadening and deepening the content pool, and putting a gloss on one of the most spectacular global monopolies ever known. The first tranche of 27 million euros was announced in February – but across 23 countries, with hundreds of organisations, it won't go far.

This snapshot is I think you will agree, somewhat chilling. It goes some way to explaining why the Age of Fang is quite different to anything those of us engaged in cultural exploration, production and participation have known before.

It is true that the internet has made the long tail of information more accessible than ever before. There is more, but most of it remains invisible, most of the time. When the habits of human nature are combined with the algorithms designed to recognise patterns it becomes inevitable that increasingly we go back to the same handful of sources. There is a long tail but it is odd shaped – more like a fat sausage with a tiny sliver of the intestine it was stuffed in to, dangling at the end. And it is in that sliver that most of our cultural product resides, virtually invisible to the rest of the world, and increasingly hard to find at home.

Last year's report by Oxford University's Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, [Digital News Report, 2015](#), showed that Australians were the most likely people in the world to use a digital device to obtain their news. Most strikingly international sites accounted for two-thirds for this. It was tempting to explain this as a product of Australia's undoubted multiculturalism and outwards looking nature.

But I think really it is a testament to the power of the great English language sources – the BBC, *New York Times*, *Guardian* and the other international news generators that fill our Facebook feeds and pop up at the top of most Google searches. While our brands remain strong Australians are increasingly going to the world for their news, information and entertainment.

Being English speaking is both a blessing and a curse. Canadians, Irish, Scots, New Zealanders all have the same challenge: how to remain visible and distinctive when living next door to a pushy, noisy neighbour. It is scarcely surprising that some

of the most innovative and distinctive cultural products should emerge from countries with their own language – the Netherlands, Germany, Denmark, Korea come immediately to mind. Their people may be effortlessly fluent in English, but with an additional layer that makes them unique adds meaning at home, and creates global opportunities.

The big question is how do we with 24 million people living in an Asian time zone respond, and what is the role of our cultural institutions in this.

Before I attempt to answer that I want to take a side step and trace the process of developing an idea of Australia that is culturally grounded – that is more than koalas and celebrity cooks, much as we love them. Understanding this, as part of the process of trying to make sense of this new world order, is important, otherwise we risk operating with the cultural equivalent of terra nullius.

*Terra nullius* is a good place to start, because in recent years we have come to realise that one thing that makes Australia unique, that is not replicated anywhere else, is being home to the world's longest continuous civilization, one that is different in structure, tone and content to any other. This is now centre stage in Australian cultural engagement, though it still fails to be realised politically or economically.

But it is a big step from where we were 50 years ago.

It came as something of a shock to me recently to realise that with the exception of the ABC, all the key national cultural institutions in Australia are only about 50 years old.

Of course there are great state libraries, galleries and universities that were founded before federation, but it took more than 60 years after federation to create national cultural institutions.

Certainly a sense of cultural distinctiveness was on the agenda in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries – it is there in the paintings, novels and early films. But this was not captured and celebrated with national institutions until decades later.

I was with a group of chairs of these institutions when I realised this, and I must say it took me by surprise – the National Library and Gallery, the Australia Council, AFTRS and others have been fixtures in my life. But they are younger than me. The National Library began its 50<sup>th</sup> celebrations last month and more will follow in coming years.

This reminded me that they were created as a result of persuasive argument, gathering supporters and connecting with the public. Brian and his generation relentlessly pursued this. They wanted to look inwards and project out. The institutions, buildings and collections we now enjoy are the result. You see it in Canberra, and in the great state arts precincts, and in the talent we have nurtured. They are both an expression and enrichment of the Australian experience.

These institutions are now facing the greatest financial challenges they have ever confronted. This is due to budget cuts, the rupturing of bipartisan political support and the exclusion of culture from the innovation and comparative advantage agendas (even when a quintessential cultural industry – education – is one of our biggest exports).

With my Pollyanna hat on, this gave me an apple seed of optimism. If such a transformation could happen during the apparently dull years of the 1950s, maybe it can happen again. Maybe in an era when culture is more important and more profitable than ever we can find a way to reinvigorate the cultural understanding of the idea of Australia.

The creation of these cultural institutions was a product of the post war world. If you take a long view it is possible to see it as part of an assertion of national cultural identity that can trace its origins to the battle for American independence. In the 20th century the dismantling of empires after the great wars created new urgency for the expression of national identity in the post-colonial world. As we have been reminded recently with the wonderful documentary screened on SBS, the chaotic Irish Rising in 1916 helped create a template for the power of asserting cultural identity.

It took a while in Australia. To varying degrees political leaders understood this. Post war mandarins, particularly Nugget Coombs, following in the footsteps of John Maynard Keynes, recognised – in a way that would be alien to many in comparable positions today – that culture is as important as legal institutions, trade, land and people in creating a strong nation.

A generation of writers, artists, editors and scholars who had seen the horrors of the war pursued this in little magazines, art, books, on stage and radio. Brian was one of many involved in this, and over the last year of his life it was a privilege to listen to him describing some of the interpersonal and political dynamics of this to my son Carl Reinecke as he researched the forces at play in the cultural moment that

created the phenomenon of *The Lucky Country* and wrote for publication as '[The Vanishing Point](#)', in *Meanjin*, Winter 2016.

It is worth noting that News Corp, one of the greatest companies Australia has created, was also founded in this milieu – but that too is a story for another day.

The result was the cultural architecture we now take for granted, the national institutions – the places where the material of being Australian is collected, curated and displayed – and the funding agencies, which foster excellence and innovation and make it possible for skilled artists to tell old stories and imagine new ones on the page, screen, stage and canvas.

For people of my generation it created a sense of belonging and opportunities to explore, to see ourselves reflected back, to dig deeper into the forgotten layers, to make sense of place and time.

But then something happened. The interrogation slowed down, no go areas appeared, we stopped telling stories to ourselves, happy with the first version. The Aussie Aussie Aussie Oi Oi Oi of the Olympics made us cringe and the politically sanctioned history wars forced people into defensive positions.

We stopped telling different stories and got stuck with a handful of tropes, on television and in books, Gallipoli, Ned Kelly, Eureka (without the women until Clare Wright came along and wrote *The Forgotten Rebels of Eureka* published by Text in 2013), Donald Bradman and more recently 1970s pop culture, *Puberty Blues*, Molly (Meldrum), Ita (Buttrose).

No wonder young people hankered for a bigger global stage, and felt somewhat embarrassed about being Australian, preferring to take their skills and education somewhere they would be valued and challenged. Individual Australians are conspicuous in film, music, television, media, theatre, design, fashion, and architecture all around the world: our companies are not.

But if we are not to be a net exporter of creative talent – the country town that sees its best and brightest leave and never return – we need to make more effort. There are many more layers of stories to be told and explored. We need to find the songlines that connect the past and the present and share them at home and with the world. This is even more important in a country that welcomes hundreds of thousands of new people every year but fails to value the tales and experiences, warts and all, that have shaped us, or in turn to actively learn from them.

In the Age of Fang this forgotten history, these neglected stories risk becoming even more invisible – hidden on an algorithm that is almost never accessed, unless it pops up with sob stories about injured koalas.

As understanding of cultural identity weakens, and fails to be actively renewed, it is easier for politicians to cut budgets, if neither the economic or intangible value is recognised. We saw this last year with the extraordinary and disrespectful cuts to the Australia Council, and the swingeing MYEFO efficiency dividend cuts to the tiny budgets of the cultural institutions – while some of the biggest agencies, like defence, are not expected to find efficiencies – and the broken promises in relation to public broadcasting.

Unless there is a reprieve in the federal budget tomorrow night<sup>1</sup>, we can expect up to a third of the small and medium key organisations – agile generators of innovation – funded by the Australia Council to be told next week that their funding will cease next year.

But paradoxically in the Age of Fang, it is the cultural richness, the democratic, inclusive, pragmatic, egalitarian, highly skilled, educated and creative elements of Australia that make us attractive and distinctive. More *Utopia* than Yindi the koala. It may even be a wellspring of innovation and agility, although this has yet to make the official list of talking points.

Britain, which we still like to emulate, realised this some years ago, and started investing in cultural industries for economic and social returns. This year that sector again grew faster than any other to generate just under ten per cent of GDP. Last year when the British chancellor led a trade mission to China, culture was at the heart of the enterprise, we know that China's growth rates have slower, but the cultural and creative industry sector is still growing at 17 per cent a year. So a group of British cultural leaders were in the advance group, setting up exchanges and new ventures – like the Chinese audience for the new Netflix series *The Crown*.

Yet on the recent Australian Chinese trade mission, cultural leaders and representatives of the cultural and creative industries were conspicuous by their absence.

The purpose of public investment in the cultural sector is not just the output, the galleries, the movies, the books written, paintings and sculpture displayed, the shows staged and music performed, but the outcomes – the building of capacity,

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<sup>1</sup> The federal 2016–17 budget delivered the following night did not restore any of the cuts to the cultural institutions, arts and screen agencies.



sustaining citizens and civil society, fostering creativity, the creation of a sense of belonging, the projection of understanding, the strengthening of a sector of the economy that already accounts for more jobs than mining or agriculture.

Unfortunately the economists who control the public policy agenda in this country have not learnt this from their forebears. They seem to think culture is an optional nice to have. Instead it is one of the engines of economic growth, one that produces outcomes as well as outputs.

So what can be done to join the dots in the Age of Fang?

We need to become better advocates of the value of cultural investment. We need to redefine the purpose of this public investment. We need to find new ways to put the case so we can win political and bureaucratic supporters with hard headed and sustainable arguments.

We need to find ways to embrace the particularity of being Australian in a global context and find new ways to express that. Cultural product has never been more valuable – we need to find a way to earn our share from it.

We need to be willing to challenge the market if it is not delivering – adding our voices to those demanding that the Fangs pay their taxes, and not allowing them to unfairly distort the market.

We need to be prepared to use the legal and other means at our disposal to demand that laws are not broken.

We need to use the leverage we have as the generators of 2 per cent of global GDP to get returns and opportunities to participate that are our due – a Digital News Initiative here for instance, or a major contribution to the digitisation of cultural assets without giving up the copyright. As the Australian talent around the world shows, we have something to offer that grows out of our cultural wealth.

We need to leverage 50 years of cultural investment to ensure our stories are told not only to ourselves, but the world.

If, as Martin Moore and other scholars have identified, the dominant companies in the Age of Fang have the power to command attention, communicate news, give voice, enable collective action, hold power to account and influence votes, we need that to be done on our terms.

This power needs to be institutionalised so that it is civically accountable. The smartest Fangs understand that playing a civic role brings extra kudos and wealth, just as the newspaper industry realised the benefits of embracing the special standing of

being the fourth estate. But there is a need for vigilance to sustain this and ensure the civic benefits are obtained.

Getting the settings of this institutionalisation will be a challenge of the next decade. It will require a carrot and a stick.

Some Americans are suggesting a royalty should be paid on data mining of personal information, as is done with the mining of minerals, and returned to the country of origin. Europeans are challenging anti-trust and privacy, G20 is focussing attention on tax to ensure that the wealth generated is spread appropriately, and not left to a few rich dudes to distribute to suit their personal philanthropic ambitions and whims.

The market alone won't do this. We know from the process of creating cultural institutions that there is a role for the state – a place where in the words of Robert Menzies, the future and past can connect in the present. This is a time when they need to be stronger, better resourced and more innovative than ever, not defensive and vulnerable.

Even in this rapidly globalising age, the nation state remains the best organising principle we have: we should not yet be ready to give up on it. I am not alone in feeling uneasy about the proposition we should give it over to a new oligopoly that is present every moment of our lives.

Finally, to go back to the lesson from Brian's observation about the SBS shows that rated an asterisk. As a nation, we need to take this seriously now if we are not to become an asterisk. If that happens we will be reduced, as citizens and countries, to passive consumers in the digital market place that values us only by our ability to pay.

The purpose of cultural investment in the Age of Fang needs to be restated, funding maintained and opportunities to innovate and export enhanced. Otherwise we will become invisible at best and tribal at worst.