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Review of the Australian content standard

The ABA is seeking public comment on an issues paper released in mid-November 2001 as part of its review of the Australian content standard for commercial television.

The current review will examine whether the standard is operating effectively to ensure that commercial television audiences will have access to a diverse range of quality Australian programs into the future.

'The current decade will be one of significant change for broadcasting and associated industries,' said Professor David Flint, ABA Chairman. 'The ABA anticipates that Australian content will continue to be of central importance to commercial television audiences well into the future. The review will examine issues of concern to broadcasters and producers in the producing and funding local content, particularly high quality adult and children's drama, and any other developments which might prevent the standard achieving its cultural purpose.'

The paper forms the basis of the consultation process that the ABA will be undertaking during the review. It provides extensive background information to assist submitters in considering the issues, including program expenditure data and Australian content compliance results for the last ten years.

Background

In broad terms, the Australian content standard appears to be working well. The hours of Australian programs on commercial television have increased over the years ahead of the standard's requirements. Each year there are set amounts of new Australian drama in a range of formats, documentaries and quality children's programs, as well as news and current affairs, sport and light entertainment. Audience ratings reflect the popularity of Australian programs over the range of program types.

The ABA invites comment from all interested parties including broadcasters, the

production industry, film-funding agencies, and the general community, on the standard. Is it achieving its purpose and how might the ABA improve its operation?

Some important issues identified by the ABA are:

Drama

Financing the production of local drama is a continuing issue. There is evidence that access to overseas markets is diminishing. What are the implications of these trends for commercial television audiences, in terms of continued access to quality drama and to a diverse range of such programs?

Does the structure of the current standard appropriately recognise the variation in different drama formats and their relative production budgets and licence fees?

The annual drama requirement has remained much the same since its introduction 12 years ago. Networks have consistently complied with or exceeded points requirements for first-release Australian drama

but there has been a decrease in the first six years of the quota. Are there any implications flowing from this trend? Should the ABA reconsider the points requirement for adult drama to ensure that current hours of drama are maintained or increased?

The definition of 'drama program' requires programs to be fully scripted. Should the definition be changed to allow improvisational script writing methods?

Children's drama

Difficulties relating to the production and financing of quality Australian C drama programs are discussed in the paper. To what extent do these issues impact on children's continued access to a diverse range of children's drama?

In this environment, is the current sub-quota structure and level appropriate? Should an increase in hours be considered? Should the minimum broadcaster licence fee of \$45,000 per half hour for children's drama be removed, retained at the existing level or

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increased to more closely reflect the FFC level? If the minimum licence fee were significantly increased, should the quota hours for C drama be adjusted?

Children's drama on commercial television is not marketed and promoted to any significant extent. What strategies might be put in place to bring C drama programs to the attention of the child audience? Can regulation assist?

Documentary programs

What is the impact of the documentary quota on the quality and diversity of commercial television schedules? Is the current quota level of 20 hours per annum appropriate?

Network expenditure on documentary programs is decreasing. Does this have implications for the effectiveness of the documentary quota? Should this issue be addressed in the standard?

Increased quota flexibility

The sub-quota for adult drama has flexibility in the points scoring system. Should there be similar flexibility within the annual requirement for 32 hours of C drama?

Could the standard be structured to provide greater flexibility in the application of various quotas? In particular, is there scope some 'trading' of sub-quotas? For example, should networks be able to trade-off children's programs between networks?

Australian official co-productions

One of the benefits of participation in Australia's international co-production program is access to local content quotas. It appears that the ABA is no longer obliged to give automatic quota recognition under the standard to Australian official co-productions following amendment of section 160(d). Should Australian official co-productions continue to be an automatic gateway in the standard?

Should all co-productions, specifically series, serials and minority Australian co-productions, be able to qualify for quota in this way?

Conditions on first-release programs

Since 1999, back catalog material has been explicitly excluded from the definition of first-release programs in the standard, to ensure the currency of these programs. Are there any inadvertent consequences of the time limit on acquisition of first-release drama programs that would warrant a reconsideration of this condition?

Drama time band

In 1999, the time band for the broadcast of eligible drama programs (other than feature films) was narrowed to 5.00 p.m. - 11.00 p.m. to more closely reflect actual prime time. Have there been changes in scheduling practices or viewing patterns since 1998, which would warrant a reconsideration of the time band for drama?

Other issues

The ABA invites submissions on these and any other issues relevant to the review.



The issues paper, along with other information about the review, is available on the ABA's web site at www.aba.gov.au.
Details on how to make a submission are included in the issues paper.
Submissions should reach the ABA by 5.00 p.m., Friday 1 February 2002.