

Throwing off the TV policy cringe

Mark Armstrong argues that Australia's television, having arrested the mass importation of foreign culture, is now poised as a promising export earner

Australian novels, films, plays and TV series have been widely accepted in their own country since the 1960s. It is easy to forget that until recently 'history' meant European history, an 'educated' accent meant an English accent, and the UK and US were the most respectable sources of academic qualifications. At last, the cultural cringe has passed.

Television was the major force in unleashing the demand of Australians to know about themselves, to dream their own dreams and explore their own reality. Without the large critical mass of risk capital delivered by commercial TV, we might still be seeing the world and ourselves through Northern Hemisphere eyes. The ABC played a vital role in developing local production, particularly in current affairs, documentaries and drama.

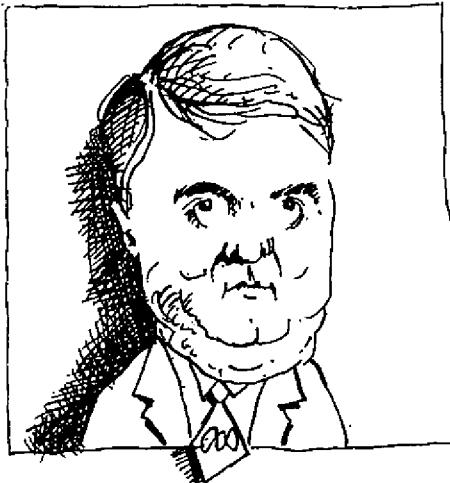
A mixed industry

Since the 1930s, Australian broadcasting has enjoyed a mixed economy of privately owned commercial channels and publicly owned non-commercial channels. The UK moved to a mixed system decades later, and the US is still struggling to create a non-commercial public TV sector. The experience of diversity is an advantage to the ABC, which has long experience of succeeding in a commercial environment.

For all its wealth, power and resources, the US has nothing to compare with the ABC or SBS. There is no universal service like the ABC, which offers nearly every Australian citizen free access to the best entertainment and information, ranging from popular comedy to the arts, religion, education and science. Even Europe, with its many languages, has no equivalent of the SBS.

The traditional Australian approach to making policy is to collect material from the Northern hemisphere, especially the UK and US, then copy it. Much of our communications planning comes from this 'policy cringe', which has lasted longer than the 'cultural cringe'. Where the overseas policies are based on different conditions, copying can be dangerous. Both the US and UK have self-sustaining markets for local TV programs. Both have significant locally-owned electronics industries. Australia has neither.

The Canberra policy agenda for TV is not success-oriented. Major issues are: limiting ownership and control, cutting 'fat' out of



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existing players, and devising new kinds of licence fees and spectrum fees. New opportunities are mainly for 'new players'. Companies which have achieved success in existing media are by definition 'old players', and therefore viewed with less favour.

A clever country?

On the other hand, we are told that Australia must become a clever country, and that it must build up its information industries, particularly in the services sector. This case was strongly restated in the *May Report* of the House of Representatives Standing Committee for Long Term Strategies, chaired by Barry Jones. The report says that Australia has failed to develop high value-added exports in the information sector, or 'brand-name goods or services which sell internationally by reputation, rather than price.'

Australia's audio-visual industries appear to meet all the criteria demanded by the 'clever country' advocates. What could be better examples of high value-added tertiary sector exports than *Neighbours*, *Beyond 2000*, and *A Country Practice*, which are viewed on TV screens around the world. They are 'brand-names' which include Australia's image in their selling message. US television helped open new markets to American products and services in the 1950s. TV and film are the ultimate 'corporate advertising' for a country and its products. Yet the connection between the audio-visual industries and the clever country is rarely drawn. Sometimes it seems that science and technology are the only kinds of cleverness.

TV, film and music are among the few sectors where Australians have achieved world-ranking successes in supplying domestic demand for high value-added services and breaking into overseas markets. Our media and entertainment industries are essential to economic survival, as well as to culture. Ability to sell programs overseas will become more important as technology puts all the developed world's television on-line around the globe. *The Economist* estimated that the world entertainment industry brings in roughly \$150 billion in sales each year, with increases between 10-15 per cent each year. Media/entertainment is the second-largest net US export earner, after aerospace.

Software not hardware

In order to build on success, we need to change some basic attitudes. The technological cargo cult which sees communications hardware making everyone rich and prosperous needs to be exposed as an illusion. Australians will never grow rich from creating telecommunications facilities, although we do need some local manufacturing to decrease the enormous cost of importing. The facilities add value only when used as channels for software. Current policies, emphasising expansion of telecommunications infrastructure and increases in numbers of broadcast channels, may see scarce Australian capital consumed in building channels for other people's programs.

Other countries have clear competitive advantages in communications manufacturing, but there are many niche markets in media software which Australians have already developed. The 'brand names' and the good reputation are already established, as witnessed by international awareness of Australian film and TV programs. Broadcasting is just as 'clever' as computing, or telecommunications, or science.

To seize the opportunities we need to throw off the policy cringe, which borrows policies from countries whose strength is communications hardware; and which borrows ideas from the US and European literature without asking whether it suits us or our region. Now that we have overcome the cultural cringe, surely we can throw off the policy cringe.

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