CONFERENCE REPORT

THE FOLLOWING TALKS BY STUART CUNNINGHAM AND SUE MURRAY WERE PRESENTED AT THE ABA'S FUTURE DIRECTIONS CONFERENCE, HELD FROM 31 JANUARY TO 3 FEBRUARY FOR ABA MANAGEMENT AND STAFF.

The cultural integrity panel at the conference discussed a number of issues with speakers including Stuart Cunningham, Queensland University of Technology; Hilary McPhee, Pan McMillan; Nick McMahon, Village Roadshow Pictures; and Sean O'Halloran, Seven network.

Chaired by Debra Richards, ABA, the panel covered a number of issues ranging from the review of the Australian content standards to matters of cultural policy and industry development in the converging environment.

CULTURAL IDENTITY AND BROADCASTING IN THE 1990s

BY STUART CUNNINGHAM, ASSOCIATE PROFESSOR OF MEDIA AND COMMUNICATIONS, QUEENSLAND UNIVERSITY OF TECHNOLOGY.

Cultural 'integrity', the title of this panel, is a loaded phrase, usually suggesting the need to draw up the portcullis against the tides of change. In the Commonwealth's developing Cultural Policy statement - one hopes that it will not suffer from the loss of Bob McMullan from the arts portfolio - the key watchwords are cultural identity, access, industry and export, coordination and co-operation, and education. The lead term here, 'cultural identity', is probably a less loaded term to use than integrity, although I will also say a few things about cultural integrity and the issue of co-production and internationalisation of the industry general.

Most of the rest of what I say will be about the central role of the ABA as an implementer of cultural objectives for broadcasting in the 1990s and more specifically about the vexed question of Australian content. This role is not an easy one and is subject to market forces, audience preferences and other influences of an increasingly global nature over which the Australian industry and regulators do not have the determining influence. So it is good to give a little breathing space and say that there are other significant things that relate crucially to cultural identity. The ABA should be congratulated for moving - comparatively speaking - so fast in licensing community television. Properly nurtured and resourced, its cultural importance is set to equal that of com-

munity arts and community radio, two areas highly developed in Australia, in the medium term future.

Community television's cultural rationale lies in two essential areas. It compensates for the probably irretrievable loss of local emphasis in both the national and commercial sectors, and it provides an unparalleled platform for access and participation. It thus should be seen as a key development in addressing the watchwords of the national cultural policy. The rather worrying words in the Department of Transport and Communications' paper *Broadcasting Reform: A New Approach to Regulation* (January 1993: p.22) that community broadcasters can expect to move away from their free access to the radio spectrum is not a hopeful sign that community television is regarded in Canberra as here to stay in its own preferred forms.

MODIFIED REGULATION

Turning to cultural identity and Australian content, I would like to throw out some ideas for modified regulation in an emerging multichannel environment, and then say a few words about some broader issues of cultural vis-a-vis industry policy and export drives. In all this, I am taking account of the thrust of recent ABA statements.

Essentially I think that there are two broadly different philosophical directions that local content regulation might

Stuart Cunningham
Photo: Robert McFarlane

go in the 1990s, particularly now that red herrings such as doctrinaire market liberalisation have been scotched and also because we can expect a growing sense of the importance of content regulation generally in the light of strengthening community concern about values and in an increasingly audiovisually dominated society.

Both take seriously the economic bottom line of how local content - which is always more expensive to bring to the screen than imported product but remarkably consistently across all program types, except feature films, is more popular with audiences - can continue to be a feasible proposition

for broadcasters. But the answers to the conundrum are different.

One direction is to move toward treating established terrestrial broadcast television and new pay services as more similar than they now are treated in the legislation. It has always been one side of the existing networks' arguments that, when new services come on line, they will erode established market share and advertising revenue and that this trend must weaken the rationale to be regulated as heavily as they believe themselves to be.

If this argument is accepted - while the fundamental cultural rationale for regulation continues also to be accepted in an environment which sees fragmentation of share and revenue - then we might wish to see a system evolve which is different from the present in two ways.

SAFETY NET

It would be a system that would treat all program types as needing a regulatory underpinning or safety net, as all would be more threatened than they currently are in the new environment. In this it would draw out more clearly than is presently the case, the fundamental fact that TPS 14 applies to all program types.

And it might move towards a revenue expenditure model for regulation rather than a quota driven model, as is presently the case. This would have desirable and presumably undesirable consequences for the existing networks: it would meet the complaint that quota driven regulation produces uniformity in program content, but it would also require more disclosure of financial information, as the system would be based on flexible adjustment of regulatory thresholds as broadcasters reported on ups and downs in revenues and expenditure. Obviously, market share and financial health would dictate that existing networks would attract higher levels of mandated investment in local production than new services, but their respective position in the broadcasting ecology would be on a continuum.

This would also have the advantage of dealing better with a likely scenario

for pay TV in Australia. What will emerge when the dust settles a bit on the present engineered competition and bewildering array of delivery paths? It may be an industry shaped by the historical forces of a comparatively small and dispersed market: one powerful consortium commanding the lion's share of the emerging pay industry. If this does in fact eventuate, such a regulatory system would be well equipped to treat it as a player quite similar to the existing networks.

The other direction is to treat the two types of television as less similar than they now often are. The rationale for this derives from the philosophical attestations of pay providers that it is a new kind of industry with a new relationship to its audience, but also from the experience of audiences and the data to be gleaned from mature and evolving multichannel situations elsewhere. Even in the most mature multichannel market, the US, you get a roughly two-third/one-third split in share between traditional networks and other services. The later reach a sort of plateau and perhaps stabilise there. The evidence in rapidly evolving markets, such as the UK, is intriguingly similar in structure - that is, in those homes with satellite and/or cable - the viewing split is also roughly two-thirds/one-third for the terrestrials versus the new services.

SENSE OF PLACE

Although it is still too early to really tell, there may be a rough ecology in that split which tells us that the traditional broadcasters are doing a somewhat different job for their audiences than the new services. US media scholar Joshua Meyrowitz's lament that television no longer offers a sense of place is answered by the possibility that the world's audiences will continue to switch predominantly to their 'home' broadcasters for that sense of place. They will continue to engage with what another US scholar, Horace Newcomb called many years ago the defining virtues of 'home' television - 'continuity' and 'intimacy' - no matter how numerous the new services become, no matter what jazzy new means of delivery serve them up.

For the new services offer something

qualitatively different - the possibilities for customising, individualising, and the frisson of global reach, the glance across the world that defeats space, the postmodern experience. Many people will want this, but the evidence to date suggests that they don't want it to displace the other experiences of community solidarity and cultural identity.

PUBLIC INTEREST

From this derives the suggestion that regulation might travel down the path that says the established broadcasters will continue to be treated as 'burdened with the public interest' and that the structure of oversight should not change, while the new services should be treated in terms of a fairly pure form of the publishing model, with the lighter touch regulation that is now in place in the legislation remaining or even withdrawing further, allowing audience demand (including demand for local content and parental overrides on access to the services) to shape the content. This would have the advantage, in the event of powerful established media interests emerging as the main purveyors of pay TV, that they can differentiate their business practices quite clearly.

Undeniably, there are problems with both pathways. I don't wish to prejudge debate by evaluating these two options, rather I think it might be helpful to lay out possible scenarios and their implications.

Turning now to cultural and industry policy and audiovisual export, I would like to adopt a rather Cassandra-like position in considering the problems inherent in the adoption of export-led and industry policy thinking. This is notwithstanding that I am as convinced as anyone that the only way high end Australian production can prosper is through increased international linkages. The old debates of the 1970s and the 1980s between culture and commerce, between the authentically local and the vapidly international, have changed so that we are now in a dialogue mainly about forms of internationalism which advance or retard Australia's cultural identity and maturity. When we view 'The Magistrate', 'The Leaving of Liverpool' or 'Brides of Christ' or follow the fortunes of the Lim family,

newly arrived at Ramsay Street from Hong Kong, in the 1993 episodes of 'Neighbours', we can feel confident that cultural integrity through social pluralism and greater industry internationalism can be reconciled.

But the rhetoric or export is often not thought through sufficiently. One of the laws of international trade is that the most harmonious relationships tend toward equilibrium, with imports and exports balancing out. Embracing globalisation can mean greater industrial as well as cultural reasons to import as much as export.

INDUSTRY POLICY

With the debate about Australian television tending toward industry policy and export these days, it is also well to remember that cultural policy and industry policy don't necessarily match, or rather are not designed to do the same job. The current emphasis on industry policy has the potential to eclipse the original reasons for having a cultural policy for broadcasting.

The clearest example of this currently is the argument that we need to change TPS 14 to a more Canadian-style system because of the industry benefits that would flow from robust off-shore production being able to count for local quota. It seems to me that there are powerful reasons to underpin these developments with unequivocally strong and supportive industry policies and initiatives, but these should not be confused with, or allowed to eclipse, a cultural policy for broadcasting.

The central cultural rationale for Australian content regulation is to ensure that Australians see themselves, their lives and society, reflected on their screens in reasonable amounts and that this reflection take account of the pluralistic nature of our society. Now, it is arguable that when you put these two principles together, you get a rationale

for more imports, for instance the perfectly reasonable assumption behind SBS' importation of a wide range of non-Anglo television material as speaking to the growing multicultural complexion of Australian society (though this of course as nothing to do with regulation per se).

Indeed, it may be that the cultural policy underpinning of Australian content regulation is quote different from the cultural policy elements caught up in current government Asianisation. One is fundamentally about cultural maintenance, the other is about cultural outreach. How these are reconciled is a matter for the creative energies and vision of the country's image producers and traders, not for regulators.

While the dollar amounts involved in export and co-production should not be slighted in the least, the audiovisual sector will never be a major player leading the way out of Australia's endemic balance of payment deficits. Its function as a platform for greater international cultural understanding, profile and acceptance will continue to be as important, in the widest sense of Australia's national interest as an internationalising society, as the actual dollars earned as export income.

It may be that one of the factors leading to decreased license fees from the networks for drama production lately is precisely the increased export success of Australian television, on the assumption that producers can top up with foreign earnings.

Further, for every inroad (the language of international trade is as dominated by military metaphors as sport is) made by English-language programming and services in the Asian region recently, there has been a defensive response from national governments or business leaders. Mr Murdoch's investment in STAR TV was responded to by a media consortium in the region decid-

ing they would start a rival transborder satellite service. China recently moved to ban domestic satellite receivers, joining some other major nations of the region. Malaysian government representatives used the threat of banning Australian television programs as one of its strategies in the recent Mahatir-Keating imbroglio. A recent survey of viewer preferences in Indonesia, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, South Korea, Malaysia and Hong Kong conducted by Frank Small and Associates found that in five over 90 per cent of the top 20 programs were local, while in Hong Kong it was 100 per cent. (Interestingly for the point just made, only Malaysia showed a preference for foreign programming).

An Australian export activity becomes the norm, we might even see the re-emergence of the old 'infant industry' argument used against continued government support. That is, that because the industry has matured into an international player, it does not need the iron lung of the taxpayer support any longer.

Can and should the ABA be in the business of encouraging audiovisual export through the embrace of regionalisation and internationalisation? The most pressing issues facing it in this respect are not very auspicious ones. Allowing New Zealand productions to count for local content quota under CER would have the net effect of more imported local content. Having official co-productions as a quarantined category in TPS 14 would involve some gymnastics for the on-screen indicator prologue to the standard.

I'd like to see a more realistic assessment of the complex cultural consequences flowing from regionalism and internationalism, together with a robust awareness that effective yet flexible content regulation has contributed to the current strengths of our industry and can continue to do so.

Stuart Cunningham is Associate Professor of Media and Communications, Queensland University of Technology, and a Commissioner of the Australian Film Commission. He has researched and written extensively on Australian film, television and contemporary audiovisual policy. His books include *Featuring Australia*, an industrial biography of pioneering filmmaker Charles Chauvel, *Framing Culture,* a study of contemporary cultural and broadcasting policy, and he coedited *The Media in Australia* the standard tertiary media studies textbook. Forthcoming books include a review of contemporary Australian television called *Tele-Visions of the Nation*, and studies of Australian television in the international marketplace and an edited collection comparing the audiovisual export activities of small or peripheral nations. He has worked recently as a policy adviser at the Communications Law Centre, and is an editor of *Media Information Australia*, the major media journal founded by Henry Mayer that links the research community with industry and government. He is featured regularly as a commentator in the national print and electronic media.