

On 5 September 1993 the ABA registered the first commercial television industry code of practice. One year on, **Gordana Marin**, of the ABA's Codes and Conditions Section, examines how the industry is handling complaints directed at it from the viewing audience.

## TV self-regulation: What's the score?

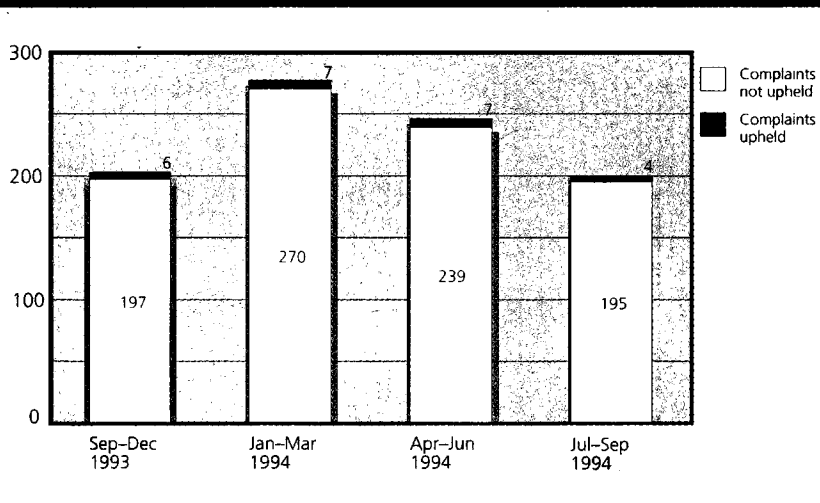
The introduction of an industry code of practice is an enhancement of the self-regulatory approach to program content. Prior to industry codes, broadcasters were responsible for ensuring that programs complied with television program standards set by the Australian Broadcasting Tribunal. Now, under the codes regime, compliance remains the responsibility of the broadcasters, but the guidelines which need to be adhered to are developed by the broadcasters themselves, in consultation with the ABA and the public.

Apart from dealing with program content, codes also address the issue of complaint handling. The *Broadcasting Services Act 1992* requires that broadcasters respond to written complaints within 60 days. The commercial television industry code provides a scale of response times for broadcasters from 10 to 30 days.

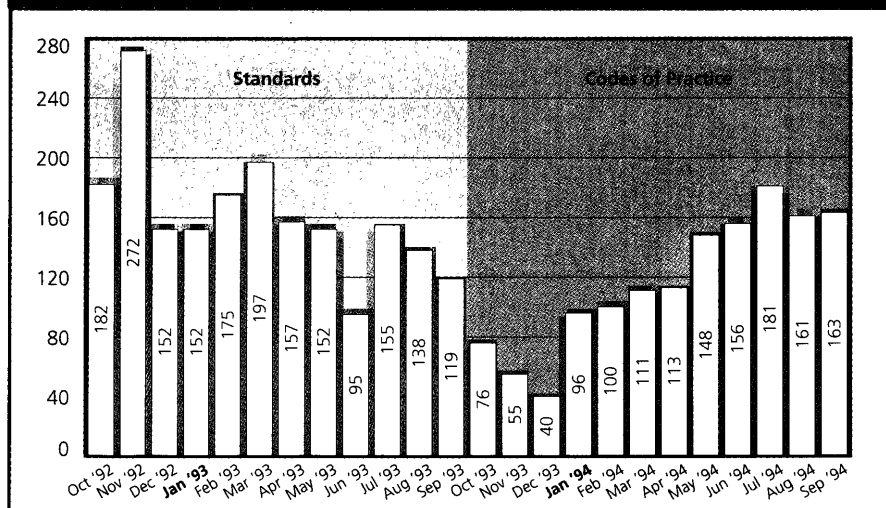
The code also requires broadcasters to publicise the code and the complaints procedures contained therein. A series of public announcements was aired during 1994. The Federation of Australian Commercial Television Stations (FACTS) has advised the ABA that during January 1995, its members would be once again broadcasting on-air announcements to inform the public of the Code and the complaints process.

FACTS provides the ABA with quarterly reports giving the number of complaints about the code received by its members. In the code's first full year of operation FACTS reported that 925 complaints had been received by its members, and that of those, 24 identified a breach of the code (see Figure 1). FACTS, as it is obliged by the code, will shortly be reporting on the administration of the code by licensees for the full first year. This report will be available to the public.

**Figure 1**  
Written complaints to commercial television stations about matters covered by the FACTS Code of Practice, September 1993–September 1994



**Figure 2**  
Complaints about commercial television stations made to the ABA, October 1992–September 1994



In the 12-month period preceding the introduction of the code, 1946 complaints were made direct to the ABA about commercial television. In the first year of the code direct complaints to the ABA were 1400. The ABA found one instance of a breach of the code in the 35 investigations it has conducted (see Figure 2).

The ABA expects to release results of research into the operation of the code in early 1995.

The research and the ABA's complaints and investigations data will form the basis of a 1994 Complaints Review which the ABA will release in early 1995. □