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The ABA marked 20 years of C programs by holding a Children's Television Policy Forum in Sydney on 22 July. The forum explored the nature of the child audience, how it is changing, current and future trends in children's television programming and how program makers, broadcasters and government are meeting children's television needs.

More than one hundred and thirty delegates attended the forum, including children's television program makers and representatives from commercial television and specialist children's pay television channels, film funding organisations and children's media interest groups.

Television and the child audience

Dr Patricia Gillard's address to the forum examined child audiences: who are they and how are they using television and new media? Dr Gillard outlined common views and research during the 1970s which assumed that television 'did things' to passive children.

During the 1980s, researchers began to use observation methods to study how children used television, and found rather than 'zombie' like behaviour when watching television, children were far more 'active' viewers than previously supposed. Their viewing was, 'very sociable, involving friends, dogs, cats and even fish'.

Research in the 1990s has focused on how children shape their understanding of the world, how they share their experiences and how television fits into their world. Key findings from recent research by Lee Burton and the ABA has found:

- children are watching more news
- many children have a greater interest in understanding special effects
- an increased interest by boys 11 years and over in sport
- that children's interpretations of television programs depend as much on their social experience as it does on their age and related developmental level.
- that rules created by families around new media are not consistent with the rules applied to television.

Dr Gillard also welcomed the re-emergence of qualitative research on children's viewing conducted by television stations and producers to test new productions, arguing ratings figures won't tell you much about how children understand and appreciate television.

Although Dr Gillard outlined the effect that pay TV and the Internet have on children, (for example, children are likely to use the internet for interactive and social purposes) she also considers, 'children have always moved between different activities, or done them in parallel and in company'. She believes free-to-air television, 'still has the central role in providing entertainment for most of them'.

Analysis: 20 years of C programs

Kate Aisbett presented key findings from research analysing 20 years of C programs. The ABA, Australian Film Finance Corporation (FFC) and the Australian Children's Television Foundation (ACTF) commissioned the research.

Ms Aisbett broadly reported on trends in the production of children's programming since the introduction of regu-

lation of children's television in 1979 and financing of children's programs.

In terms of output, the total number of hours granted a C or C Drama classification since 1979 is 12 122 hours. Drama programs have risen from 16 per cent to 28 per cent of programs classified. Game shows have increased from 6 per cent in 1979-1983, to 37 per cent in 1996-1999. Magazine programs have decreased from 53 per cent in 1979-1983, to 23 per cent in recent years.

Australian-produced C and C Drama programs increased over the 20 years of the standard. From 1979-1983, 67 per cent of the hours classified were Australian, rising to 88 per cent in 1996-99. Ms Aisbett considered this rise could reflect the increased drama quota over the regulatory period. From 1979-1983, most drama programs were overseas series, with 16 per cent Australian in origin. By 1996-1999, the proportions were reversed and Australian drama accounted for 69 per cent.

The increased 'Australianness' of drama programming has also been reflected in the increase in Australian animation. In 1996-99, 37 per cent of first release Australian drama was animation compared with 6 per cent in 1984-1989.

In relation to financing children's television, the FFC had invested \$150 million in children's drama since 1988 and had, on average, financed 50 per cent of a program's production costs. Producers surveyed commented that productions were increasingly dependent upon international financing and that broadcast licence fees in recent years constituted a significantly lower proportion of a program's total budget (approximately 15 per cent today, compared with up to 30 per cent 10 years ago).

Quality vs budget

Moderated by Mr Michael Gordon-Smith, ABA Member, this panel session featured spirited debate among panellists on the tension between creating 'quality' programs and finding the budgets to make them.

Tom Blackett (FFC) questioned whether quality programs could be made on low budgets. Bevan Lee (Seven network) argued strongly against this premise, believing that quality did not necessarily equate to high budgets. He noted the success of the Seven network's 'The Adventures of the Bush Patrol', which had been made on a similar financial model to adult soap operas like 'Home and Away'. He believed as long as there was a decent script, with believable characters, children would not be as concerned about lower production values.

Virginia Lumsden's experience as a producer with the ABC differed noticeably from others who work within a commercial television environment. She explained financial considerations did not play as central a role in determining which sorts of programs were commissioned or bought by the ABC. Their primary concern was whether the program would strike a chord with children—although she acknowledged the 'luxury' of this position.

Other panellists included Posie Graeme-Evans (Millenium Pictures/Kids Like Us) and Rosemary Sinclair (Ashton Scholastic).

Future trends

The second panel session chaired by Ian Robertson, ABA Member, discussed future trends in children's programming and was .

Dr Patricia Edgar (ACTF) stressed the importance of local programming in an environment which was increasingly becoming 'global'.

Barbara Biggins (Young Media Australia) also stressed the importance of maintaining the Children's Television Standards, because she otherwise believed that children's programming on commercial television would be comprised solely of 'cheap cartoons'. She believed financial considerations continued to be at odds with the production and broadcast of quality children's programs on commercial television.

A heated issue in this session (and generally throughout the day) was the effect of the ABA's new requirement for Australian children's drama to have been acquired for a licence fee (in cash or kind) of at least \$45 000. As explained by Mr Robertson, the requirement was introduced in the latest review of the Australian Content Standard to prevent less expensive programs from New Zealand replacing Australian children's drama on the basis of cost alone. It was anticipated the effect of the requirement, and of other changes in the new standard, would be reviewed by the ABA in 2001.

However, many producers of live action drama programs expressed con-



cern that this requirement had established a new ceiling for licence fees, rather than only setting a minimum, as intended. Animation producers recounted some different experiences, but the \$45 000 licence fee was the 'hot topic' of the day.

Other panellists at this session included Michael Skagerlind (Nickelodoen), Jacqui Culliton (Network Ten) and Nick Herd (Screen Producers Association of Australia).

Celebration

The forum concluded with a reception and a celebratory note. Professor David Flint, ABA Chairman, spoke of the need to remember and recognise the many people involved in the production and broadcast of children's television over the last 20 years:

Some people in particular, have played an invaluable part in the development of an Australian children's production industry which is unparalleled in its knowledge, expertise and passion for its craft. Producers and directors, such as Roger Mirams, Yoram Gross, Noel Price and Ron Saunders, have made a significant contribution. In-

dependent producers such as Paul Barron, Posie Graeme Evans and the self professed 'love child' of the C system, Jonathan Shiff, have continued to balance so well the tensions between financing and producing quality product, and making programs children love.

It must also be acknowledged that within the networks, the hard work, commitment and persistence of children's television supporters such as Ian Fairweather, Penny Spence, Hugh Cornish and Dina Browne, have been invaluable. It is a pleasure to see people such as Cheri Bottger taking on their mantle.

And from the regulator's side, the dedication of past members of the Children's Program Committees, such as Frank Meany, Bruce Harris, Shelley Phillips and Clare Petre, should be remembered. Many thanks also to former ABT/ABA staffers, like Debra Richards, who can still be relied upon to remember what was showing in C time in 1987 and any other year you might like to mention.

A dedicated voice for the child's interests is also a crucial component of the many forces at play in creating quality children's television. In this vein, Barbara Biggins, the long-time director of the Australian Council for Children's Film and Television and Young Media Australia (and a former Member of the Children's Program Committee), has been a committed and persistent proponent for the rights of the child viewer. Also, organisations such as ACTAC have played an important role.

And one can't forget one person who has straddled many categories: producer, regulator, activist: Dr Patricia Edgar, Director of the Australian Children's Television Foundation. Patricia has been tireless over the last 20 years in her contribution to the development of the industry, the standards and our understanding of the obligations society has to provide entertaining, uplifting and relevant television programs for children. In 1996, she brought the world to our doorstep by initiating and coordinating the first World Summit on Television for Children. She has been truly instrumental in showcasing what can be achieved when you have the will power and determination to push for what you believe in.

Dr Gillard's paper is available from the ABA. The ABA expects to release the joint research project analysing 20 years of C programs in November 1999.