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Major study into the impact of Australian content rules

The ABA has announced that it will conduct a major study of the wider cultural and industry impact of the rules for Australian content on commercial television. The study will be in partnership with the Australian Key Centre for Cultural and Media Policy and supported by a grant from the Australian Research Council.

To be undertaken in 2000, the study is titled 'The Cultural and Industry Impact of Local Content Regulation'.

'This collaborative research project will be the first investigation of the impact of the new broadcasting content standard introduced in March 1999 to meet Australia's obligations under the Closer Economic Relations agreement with New Zealand', said ABA Chairman, Professor David Flint.

The ABA's announcement comes at a time when the Government is considering the recent report by the Australian Film Commission and the Australian Film Finance Corporation on the state of the film and television production industry. Debate about the place of local content requirements in the changing communications landscape has intensified following the release of the draft report of the Productivity Commission.

'If broadcasters are to continue to provide Australian audiences with the local programs they demand and appreciate, all players must come to grips with the forces shaping the global broadcasting environment. This study will provide a good understanding of the complex interplay of cultural and production issues,' said Professor Flint.

The study will analyse the cultural objective of content regulation policy, including an assessment of overseas approaches and will track New Zealand programs' access to and impact on the Australian market.

Australian content standard

The *Broadcasting Services Act 1992* has as one of its primary objects to 'promote the role of broadcasting services in developing and reflecting a sense of Australian identity, character and cultural diversity'.

The new Australian content standard took effect on 1 March 1999. The ABA announced at that time that a formal review would take place by 1 July 2001.

The ABA and the Queensland-based Australian Key Centre for Cultural and Media Policy have been successful

in their application for a grant to the Australian Research Council (ARC) under the strategic partnerships with industry scheme. The scheme is designed to encourage strategic alliances between higher education institutions and industry to research specific problems facing the Australian community.

The full title of the collaborative study is 'The Cultural and Industry Impact of Local Content Regulation: *The Broadcasting Services (Australian Content) Standard 1999*'.

Under the new Australian content standard, the obligation to broadcast Australian programs may be decreased by the extent to which New Zealand programs, Australian/New Zealand programs and Australian official co-productions are broadcast by the commercial television licensee.

This joint research project will provide the first detailed analysis of content regulation and cultural policy in a changing international television production sector. It will be a significant piece of research because local content regulation plays a critical cultural and industry role in preserving and developing distinct-

tively Australian audio-visual productions and in developing a local industry in this area.

An important aspect of the research is its international dimension. Audio-visual services and the place of cultural protectionist measures such as content regulations will be central elements in next year's World Trade Organisation's negotiations. The project will make an innovative and substantial contribution to the international study of the achievement of cultural objectives through content regulation.

The research will ask: where does public policy need to go? How do different regulations mesh with the realities of internationalised television production? Do local content provisions strike an appropriate balance for audiences in terms of the production industry needs for flexibility, the cultural objectives and the need for international sales?

The study will provide a series of briefings and reports arising from the project, and a workshop towards the end of the project to present the key findings.

