



ABA Carries on Publishing

Kathryn Paterson and Robert Hellmers, *Classification Issues: Film, Video and Television*, Monograph #1, Office of Film and Literature Classification and Australian Broadcasting Authority, 38pp.,

Linda Sheldon, Kate Aisbett and Nick Herd, *Living With Television*, Monograph #2, Australian Broadcasting Authority, 1993, 34pp.

Stephen Nugent, Milica Loncar and Kate Aisbett, *The People We See on TV: cultural diversity on television*, Monograph #3, Australian Broadcasting Authority, 1993, 43pp.

Lester Bostock, *From the Dark Side*, Supplement to Monograph #3, Australian Broadcasting Authority, 1993, 38pp.

The ABA recently released these three monographs based on research initiated by its predecessor. It is gratifying to see that the ABA apparently intends to continue to conduct in-depth audience research, and to maintain the ABT publishing program which has added significantly to the body of research and analysis of the Australian broadcasting scene in recent years.

Each of the studies involved a two-phase audience research program, with, in each case, qualitative research (focus groups, in-depth interviews, research clinics) followed by quantitative research in the form of a national telephone survey of between 1000 and 1200 people.

Classifying Programs

The first of the monographs marks an interesting collaboration between two public bodies with a degree of overlapping interest - the ABA, which is responsible for the standards whereby licensees classify programs and commercials, and the Office of Film and Literature Classification (OFLC), which deal with films and videos.

The research focused on attitudes to existing classifications for film, video and television, and explored such questions as the extent to which people use classifications as a guide to their own and their children's viewing; their understanding of the meaning of each classification, including the restrictive video X classification; the kind of material they expected on pay TV. Using film/video clips and in-depth discus-

sions, the research also explored attitudes to depictions of violence, sex, nudity and coarse language.

An important finding of this study was the high level of support (79 per cent) for a classification scheme which was the same for all three media. As things stand, the ABA's identifying classifications are G, PGR, AO, C and P, while the OFLC'S are G, PG, M, R and X. No wonder people are confused!

How We Live with TV

Living With Television explores the different ways people use television, and their awareness of and attitudes to the introduction of pay TV.

The survey found that 99 per cent of Australian households have a TV set, and 60 per cent have more than one set. In the absence of other forms of pay video, VCR penetration, now at a staggering 83 per cent according to this study, puts Australia ahead of the world.

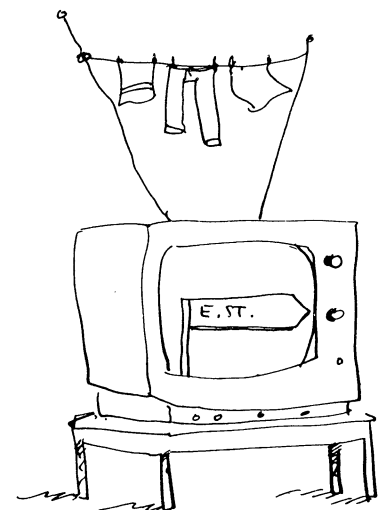
The monograph offers some fascinating insights into the role played by television in the everyday lives of Australians. For instance:

- TV as wallpaper - over half the respondents (54 per cent) tend to leave their set on after they have finished viewing.
- Nearly half (48 per cent) usually eat their evening meal in front of television.
- The remote control plays a major role, with 60 per cent saying they habitually flick between channels.

Less than one quarter of the sample were light viewers (under two hours a day), and these people also relied more heavily on radio and newspapers for information (35 per cent and 24 per cent respectively) than did heavy viewers (17 per cent and 13 per cent). Television news was nominated as the program most watched with full attention (34 per cent).

The study's findings on pay TV contain little to excite would-be providers. While 25 per cent thought it was a good idea, 27 per cent disagreed. The writers note however that the high level of uncertainty - 23 per cent did not know enough about it to offer an opinion - 'indicated that a large section of the Australian public had a low awareness and knowledge of pay TV'. There was a very marked gender difference on this question: only 16 per cent of women thought pay TV was a good idea, compared to 34 per cent of men.

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There were many reasons for negative attitudes, but the three main ones were related to cost to viewers (10 per cent), perception that there was enough or too much TV now (9 per cent) and lowering of program standards/quality (7 per cent).

TV People: How Diverse?

The third, and possibly most important of these monographs, concerns television's performance in reflecting the cultural diversity of Australian society, and attitudes to that performance among television viewers.

This monograph involved an additional phase of research, namely a content analysis of one week's programs.

The monograph also offers some results from a parallel study carried out by the UK's Broadcasting Standards Council, which considered similar issues. The British survey found a significant level of dissatisfaction with the amount of time given to various cultural groups on TV - though a large number of Poms (48 per cent) thought that British TV gave more than enough time to Australians!

The quantitative research shows a degree of enlightenment on the part of viewers: for example, 89 per cent agreed that television should actively promote good community relations by showing different ethnic groups getting on well together, and 73 per cent thought soaps should show people from the full range of ethnic backgrounds. However, when the questions became more specific, the responses became more equivocal. For example, less than half (47 per cent) thought Aboriginal people should be seen more often, and only 28 per cent thought people of Muslim background should be seen more often.

There was however a high level of agreement that the portrayal of Aboriginal people on TV was largely negative, and that they appeared far less than American blacks. The content analysis confirmed this perception: not

one Aboriginal appeared in the 12 hours of Australian-made programs analysed, while 35 black Americans appeared in 14.5 hours of US programs.

This monograph contains a great deal more than can be touched on here. It provides much food for thought, and should be read by everyone involved in Australian television, particularly those working in the production of both drama and news/current affairs.

Kooris Put Their Own Views

The level of concern revealed in the above survey about the portrayal of Aboriginal people encouraged the ABA to explore this issue further, and in particular, to hear from Aborigines themselves.

To this end, it commissioned research on the attitudes of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to their portrayal in the electronic media. Black program maker and writer Lester Bostock undertook this project and the results are published in *On the Dark Side*, a supplement to Monograph #3.

The paper begins with an outline of current Aboriginal involvement in broadcasting ranging from the various Aboriginal Media Associations to community broadcasting groups and participation in mainstream ABC and SBS programs.

Bostock backgrounds the paper with a personal view. While acknowledging that there have been improvements in Aboriginal access to the media in recent years, he says 'little has changed in the way mainstream media portrays Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders'. The images of Aborigines, in drama programs particularly, equate with those of American Indians in Westerns, he says. The negative stereotypes purveyed in these programs shaped the thinking and attitudes of mainstream Australian society about our indigenous people, and these images persist today.

Bostock prepared a questionnaire and administered it to a total of 124

people in three NSW and one Victorian country locations as well as two Sydney suburbs with significant Koori populations.

Viewing patterns among respondents equated roughly with those of the wider population, though where both ABC and SBS were available, the percentages claiming to watch primarily these stations were somewhat higher.

The survey showed very clearly that people felt that there was nothing on mainstream radio or television that they could identify with, nor was there anything that gave them a sense of pride or self esteem.

There was a strong desire to see Aboriginal people portraying ordinary, everyday Australian characters, and the fact that they are Aboriginal should be irrelevant.

A typical comment was: 'I am dismayed that we don't have Koori people in ads, yet they use exotic blacks from other countries like in the Campbell Soup ads'.

Among the other findings of Bostock's study were:

- A universal belief that there are too many negative, drunken images of Kooris. 'They are often portrayed as people who have drinking and social problems.'
- Respondents said that it is very rare to see an Aboriginal person doing something positive on radio and TV. Channel 7's Stan Grant is the first Aboriginal current affairs presenter on a commercial station and as such is providing a role model for others.
- Respondents wanted more Aboriginal people as presenters and news-readers, more Aboriginal dancers, actors, music, and Aboriginal people rather than white people actually acting as Aboriginal people in soaps and drama (viz *Boney*). Aboriginal people should appear on programs like *Playschool* as storytellers, and there should be profiles on Aboriginal sporting personalities. □

All three monographs are available from the ABA, PO Box 1308, North Sydney 2059, for \$9.95 each. The Bostock paper is free with Monograph #3 or \$5.00 on its own.