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# The Merger: Some History and Background

**The administrative separation of the arts and communications policy areas has had ramifications on the development of our broadcasting system for generations.**

*The television system was set up without regulation to protect Australian culture.....The technology has since developed to enable the distribution of cultural events from all over the world as they happen and the Australian broadcasting system has taken advantage of this. The cultural price of this development has never been measured. A regulatory system of quotas designed to preserve Australian culture has been introduced only as the negative impacts produced by market forces have become sufficiently apparent to stimulate a demand for action. This demand has come primarily from the cultural workers rather than cultural consumers.*

Julie James Bailey, *Cultural Impact of Broadcasting Policy* (Sept. 1990, p.41)

The most recent manifestation of this tension came in the debate over the new broadcasting legislation, and in particular the Australian content provisions for pay TV, when those in Communications responsible for the new broadcasting legislation opposed such requirements for new services. Without any formal role in the drafting process, the then Minister for the Arts and her department, backed by the arts/production lobby, had to fight a rear-guard battle to achieve a modest requirement for drama.

The first semi-official endorsement of the idea of bringing the arts and communications closer together occurred in the late 1970s when Susan Ryan, as Shadow Minister for the Arts (1977-1983), advocated a move in this direction.

Ryan told *CU* recently that she had felt that there would be benefits in the employment area from recognising overlaps between workers in the arts and electronic media. At the same time, while overall government funding for the arts was declining, significant funds were being directed to the ABC, the SBS and the major performing arts companies. Yet there was little or no productive co-operation: for example, the broadcasters were not using subsidised arts performances as the basis for programs - a situation which has since changed significantly.

Ryan did not remain in this portfolio in government, and her ideas were not pursued. Since that time, the notion of bringing arts and communications closer together has been floated from time to time, for instance through Donald Horne's Ideas for Australia forums and by an increasingly influential arts lobby.

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## Excesses of the 1980s

During the 1980s, however, the Hawke Government presided over an unprecedented period of deregulation and micro-economic reform in which the emphasis swung away from social considerations towards economic and technological ones. This was particularly evident in broadcasting, where fortunes were made and lost with little concern for the welfare of viewers and listeners, and starry-eyed

entrepreneurs saw limitless possibilities for new technologies to provide new sources of profit.

Meanwhile in the bureaucracy, the innate conservatism of Communications, which in the past had delayed the introduction of many a broadcasting innovation, was thrown to the winds as the Department enthusiastically embraced the new orthodoxy and adopted an approach, to paraphrase Chairman Mao, of 'let a thousand services bloom'. As ever, primacy was accorded to the potential of technology, while the issue of what kinds of programs might be provided and where they might come from, if raised at all, was brushed aside with such mantras as 'consumer sovereignty' and 'the bookshop model'. At the same time, the stocks of communications were rising; it began to be seen as an important portfolio, important enough to be in Cabinet.

The Department of the Arts, which at various times over the years has been bracketed with all manner of other areas including sport, the environment, territories, even Aboriginal affairs, has never had much clout. (Only once had the arts been a Cabinet portfolio, when Prime Minister Gough Whitlam took it on in the early 70s.) The Arts were traditionally low in the Canberra pecking order, and this was reflected to some extent in the ability of the area to attract staff. The 'wet' economic approach of the arts was distinctly out of favour in the prevailing environment of the 1980s.

This has slowly changed, and as might be expected, changing perceptions started from the top, with a Prime Minister who takes a close interest in matters cultural. The combination of sport-oriented anti-intellectualism and economic fundamentalism which characterised the Hawke years of the 1980s gave way to a softer approach. The importance to our society of artists (especially when they swing behind a Government's re-election campaign) was recognised, with the first arts minister in cabinet (Bob McMullan, now Michael Lee) and other rewards, of which the arts/communications merger - albeit later than expected - is one. □