



Additional comments from the Australian Greens

The Australian Greens support the Committee's recommendation that lifting the 75% per cent audience reach rule should be contingent on safeguarding clearly defined local content in regional Australia.

The Convergence Review observed that the effectiveness of the 75% rule is diminished by online news websites and catch up television that can be viewed across the nation. However, it also noted that geographic markets are still relevant for maintaining an adequate level of access to local news and commentary.

The Greens believe there is a clear public interest in local news and content and that it should not be threatened by media mergers or acquisitions.

The Greens want Australian content standards to be improved so that Australia's actors, writers, producers, directors, and technical skills are maintained and nurtured.

When broadcasters were given a 50% reduction in licence fees, the Greens believed that a doubling of Australian content should have been part of the deal, especially as the content can now be spread across the multichannels and can also include sport and repeats.

The old parties voted down the Greens amendments to double Australian content, to protect Australian producers, writers, artists and technicians, so we are left with 730 hours in 2013, 1095 hours in 2014 and 1460 hours from 2015.

Doubling the content quota would have provided a safety net to adequately protect the Australian public from cheap foreign imports. Imports, that according to Screen Australia, that typically cost around 75% less per hour than the Australian equivalents.

A recent Screen Australia study found that 9 in 10 Australians believe that it is important to have a film and television industry producing local content, and that

the most important benefit was to ensure that we are not overrun by cheap Hollywood imports.

Those surveyed agreed that Australian content brings us together as a community and as a nation, Australian content is important for the strength of our democracy, Australian content enables us to express ourselves as Australians.

In 2000, the Productivity Commission stated on Australian content and drama in particular, 'if availability of these programs to Australian audiences declined, a loss of social and cultural benefits to the community would be likely. Australian drama can be effective in providing information and education as well as entertainment, for example, by canvassing contemporary community issues and concerns. Documentaries have a direct role in providing information and education.'

These are the fundamental cultural objectives of the content standard. With the free-to-air networks so highly protected, the Australian public must not be shortchanged by a safety net that is cripplingly low given that the free-to-air networks enjoy new opportunities for long-term growth once this transitional phase has passed.

The gift of public spectrum comes in return for the Australian Content Standard, the stated objective of which is, 'to promote the role of commercial television broadcasting services in developing and reflecting a sense of Australian identity, character and cultural diversity by supporting the community's continued access to television programs produced under Australian creative control.'

Australian content on the multichannels is comparatively very low, requiring the networks only to screen local content for 12 per cent of the total broadcast hours across their multichannels. The Greens are very concerned that the broadcasters will in fact be bidding down the price of content and effectively gouging Australian content producers.

While sports and repeats include content that many people enjoy, it should not be allowed to simply soak up what should be going into points for creation of quality original Australian drama and Australian stories.

Senator Scott Ludlam