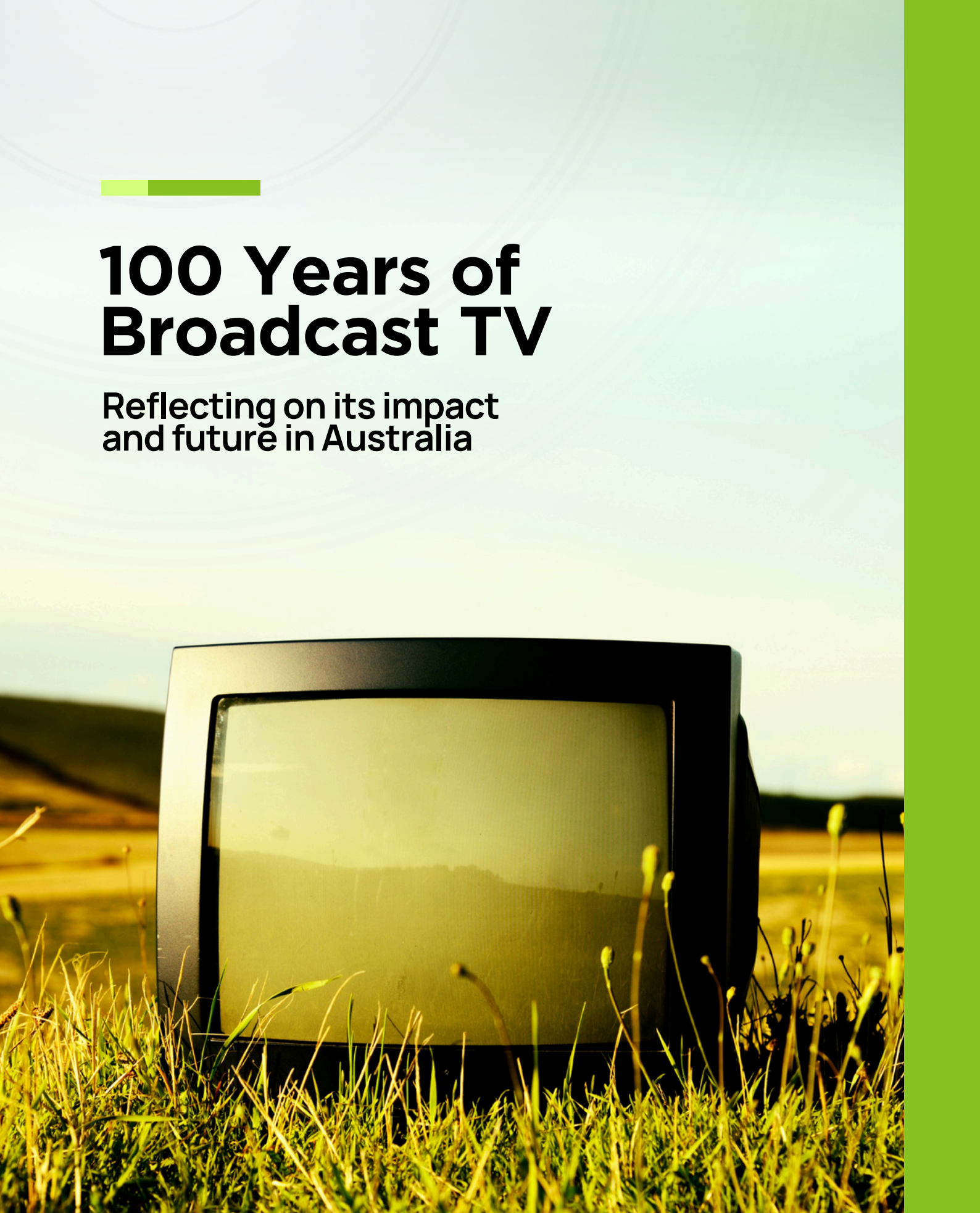




100 Years of Broadcast TV

Reflecting on its impact
and future in Australia

About SIGN

The Streaming Industries and Genres Network (SIGN) brings together scholars and key industry experts to contribute evidence-based strategy, policy recommendations and public understanding around how streaming entertainment – including streaming video (both subscription and user-generated), gaming, and social media platforms – constructs and frames genre. SIGN examines:

- The deep socio-cultural ramifications of shifting paradigms around content categorisation, discoverability and access with the rise of streaming video services and other streaming-based entertainment platforms;
- Shifting policy and industry strategies in relation to the organisation of content on streaming services and platforms; and
- Audience engagement with new and evolving content distribution and categorisation systems, such as streaming video platform interfaces, content recommendation systems, and catalogues.



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The ‘100 Years of Broadcast TV’ report is an initiative of SIGN supported by the RMIT Social Change Enabling Impact Platform.

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Foreword

This year marks 100 years since John Logie Baird's first public demonstration of a true television broadcast signal.

In January 1926, the Scottish inventor invited 40 members of the Royal Institution (one of the UK's most influential science research and education charities) to his Soho attic laboratory to examine a machine he had assembled from everyday items - a tea chest, bicycle lights, darning needles, and scissors. It used spinning disks to transmit recognizable, flickering moving images of faces - that of a dummy, "Stooky Bill," followed by 20-year-old office boy William Taynton - with light and shade. Baird called it a "televisor". While some observers were initially underwhelmed, sceptical of its utility, The Times reported that the apparatus marked a breakthrough in the ability to transmit moving, shaded images. This has been identified as the watershed moment when television transitioned from being a dream into a period of practical reality.

Over the next ten years a television industry formed in the UK. The BBC was established in 1927, and Baird led the work on their frequency tests from 1929. It took until 1936 for the BBC to begin the first regular television service in the world, only for it to cease operations in 1939 due to the war. Meanwhile, the US was also undertaking tests and public demonstrations through the 1920s and 1930s. By the 1940s the UK had resumed regular

television, and the US commercial television industry was established. Australia was a comparative latecomer to broadcast television. It arrived here in 1956, in the most Aussie way possible - just in time for the 1956 Melbourne Olympics, so locals could watch the first Games held outside Europe or the US, and we've been gathering together to watch TV ever since. This year marks the 70th continuous year of broadcast television in this country - no small feat.

Over those 70 years, broadcast television disrupted existing news, media and entertainment to form a multi-billion-dollar industry. As physical infrastructure, legislative moves and regulatory frameworks were developed, broadcast TV reached audiences in nearly every part of Australia, from cities to remote communities. It also became a key cultural institution, where Australian stories were prioritised and made prominent. It's under these conditions that we developed a recognisable brand. From *Prisoner: Cell Block H* to *The Secret Life of Us*, and more recently *The Newsreader* we have created drama that travels across borders. We became known for our high-quality, children's programming, with iconic series like *Lift Off*, *Round the Twist* and, of course, *Bluey*. TV news became a household mainstay, with recognisable and trusted faces fronting the desks for nightly bulletins. And our advertisements became known as catchy and irreverent, capturing a distinct Aussie sensibility.

Our two public service broadcasters and our three commercial networks have played an integral cultural and economic role, keeping citizens informed and entertained and bolstering a vibrant video production sector. Broadcast was not really dethroned by cable in Australia, as it was in many other countries. Instead, it has been vital to a strong and healthy media landscape. But we can't ignore that broadcast TV – both here and abroad – has experienced significant challenges in the last two decades. The disruptor has become the disrupted. Fragmentation of eyeballs across digital multichannels and the arrival of subscription video-on-demand has fundamentally changed how and what TV audiences consume. In the last three years we've witnessed a tipping point, where the number of Australian adults watching terrestrial broadcast free-to-air TV at all dropped to about half of the population. Meanwhile, more than two thirds now use a paid subscription service. Our broadcasters have faced plummeting audiences, ad rates, and revenues, leading to regional closures and government bailouts, including relaxed content quotas that have swiftly devastated our production community. Broadcasters have turned their attention to the personalized potential of their broadcaster video on demand apps. For many Australians this is now how they access free TV - through the walled gardens of ABC iview and 9Now. These apps have now been guaranteed prominence on connected TV interfaces - they have to be pre-installed and visible without scrolling - but they remain unregulated, "unmanaged" as Communications Minister Michelle Rowland has put it, so what are they doing with their prominence? The future of television broadcasting in Australia is highly uncertain, with significant implications for national media access and social cohesion.

In February, RMIT University seized upon the 100-year anniversary of Baird's first public demonstration of the broadcast signal as an opportunity to reflect on and celebrate the medium that his early experiment would become. Broadcast television shaped our childhood memories and formative life experiences, cemented the foundations of our friendships and broadened our understanding of the world and our place in it. It has made us feel part of something bigger than ourselves. It may be changing – how it's accessed, what it's making – but for now, we emphasise, it endures. Broadcast television plays a vital role for those who can't afford increasingly expensive streaming platforms and those that lack the digital skills to download a service from their smart TV's app store. It is essential for communities across Australia with limited internet access and remains crucial, as we've seen all too recently, in times of emergency, of panic, of crisis. It's still the place to turn to watch important cultural events and sports, whether on the big screen in Fed Square or alone, but together. Broadcast is synced with the flow of our daily lives, providing common ground and helping us avoid the crippling choice paralysis that can cloud the on-demand experience.

At the "100 Years of Broadcast TV" symposium we looked back over the last 70 years of TV in Australia and thought about the future – strategizing, imagining, speculating about what the next 10 or 20 years will look like. We want to be realistic about the medium's struggles, but we're not ready to say goodbye just yet – broadcast TV is just too important.

Dr Damien O'Meara and Dr Alexa Scarlata
RMIT University, March 2026



KEYNOTE

What Causes Television?



SPEAKER

Adjunct Professor Jock Given
Swinburne University of Technology



WHAT CAUSES TELEVISION?

Opening the symposium, Jock Given (Swinburne University of Technology) set out a premise about the past and future of TV: If the underlying causes of the thing we have come to call television continue, then something like it will endure. Since it has already endured for a century, we should look closely at what those underlying causes might be. So what does cause television?

Jock began with an image and a story of the “TV towers” on Mt Coot-tha in Brisbane. A mountain offering clear sight across a city was the perfect place to Cause Television in 1959 when services began there. Broadcast services were transmitted over the air and were intended to reach everyone at the same time.

The architecture of the mobile broadband networks that feed a lot of video viewing today is quite different. It’s two-way and cellular, requiring small towers dotted all over, not big towers on a few tall mountains. Only two of the Mt Coot-tha “TV towers” are still used for TV. The mountain is still important but not as important because broadcast TV is not what it was.

Television, though, is still very much with us. Indeed, over the 28 years since Jock’s book *The Death of Broadcasting: Media’s Digital Future* (1998) was published, “Two of the most striking trends in the media landscape to me”, he said, “have been about durability rather than decline: the incredible rise of the drama series – it’s in a Golden Age, some say – and

the rise of the big screen in the home, bigger, brighter, clearer, and more central than ever.

Every home has got one of these things all these years later, connected to a much wider range of inputs, of course – streamers, YouTube, channels supplied by TV set manufacturers – but Television.”

What causes this constantly evolving thing we call television? Jock explored four possibilities: technology, politics and public policy, economics and business strategy, and people.

I Technology

How did technology cause television?

“The technology that first caused television for me was ABQ Channel 2. This is the birthplace of television, as far as I’m concerned, a transmitting station on the top of Mt Coot-tha overlooking Brisbane. It started on the second of November 1959, not 1926 or 1936 or 1956. TV was different in different places.”

Jock Given

ABQ2 was the local ABC channel. There were others, the commercial stations QTQ9, which began three months earlier, and BTQ7, first on air the day before the ABC. Six years later another commercial station TVQ-0 launched. The choice of ABQ2 as the technology that first Caused Television for this one viewer reflects a choice about the programs a particular family watched over the years ahead: the 7pm news, Four Corners, the cricket before Channel 9 got hold of it in the late 1970s.

A plaque outside the (former) ABQ2 transmitting station highlights the almost total transformation in the technology that delivers ABC TV in Brisbane. The ABC – a Corporation since 1983, not the Commission it was in 1959 – now shares the old Channel 9 tower with the commercial networks. It transmits its multiple channels on a different frequency, at a different power, from studios in a different location. Add to those changes the introduction of colour, changes in the nature of programming and the equipment used to make and distribute it, radical changes in the screens used to watch, and all the other devices that are attached to TV screens. The conclusion? About ABQ2 and TV generally?

“Television has endured partly because its technology has proved so pliable. It has absorbed change and complexity, endlessly returning it to audiences and users as simplicity and familiarity. It’s a story well beyond technology. Television has been different things at different times and in different places. It has not always been Television.”

Jock Given

■ Politics and public policy

Jock next argued that television has been an “unusually ‘policy-heavy’ media form”.

“Think of the inquiries, the legislation, the allocation of frequencies, the regulation of content, funding of public service broadcasters, all those sorts of political and policy shapings that have characterised television.”

Jock Given

Compare policy about television with earlier and later media forms – books, newspapers,

theatre, music, photography, the cinema, or personal computers, the World Wide Web, streaming services and AI. The State has not been nearly as central to their early development. This, Jock argued, resulted partly from the timing and circumstances of television’s early deployment.

“Public TV services were mainly creatures of the early post-Second World War period. Nation states had a recent past they were desperate to improve on, tools already in their hands, and a readily understandable technological opportunity. The recent past – a terrible half century, two world wars, a pandemic, the atomic bomb – we had to do better than that. Tools in their hands: governments controlled radiofrequency spectrum; they had just set up national broadcasters for radio broadcasting; and there was a confidence born of Keynesian thinking and wartime controls that governments could plan things and get them done. A readily understandable technological opportunity? Television. It was radio-with-pictures, or cinema-in-the-home, new but familiar.”

Jock Given

Jock illustrated the significance of politics and public policy with three examples. First, Australia got more broadcast TV than most comparable countries, especially more commercial TV. This set up a process of “path dependence”, where these early decisions are still influencing policy. Second, policy decisions were made in a global context. Australia and other countries supported domestic content in ways they had not done with earlier media forms. Australian TV became more Australian than it would otherwise have been. Third, in the early 2000s, Australia did not migrate quickly to all-digital transmission.

Digital switchover took more than a decade, allowing time to reorganise spectrum use so as to simplify TV reception for viewers and maximise the quality of mobile broadband delivered using the vacated spectrum. That demonstrated the limits of foresight, the constant challenge for policy makers to see into endlessly contestable futures.

“Remember, when the early decisions about digital switchover were taken [in the late 1990s], the iPhone was a decade away. No-one could be sure what the spectrum to be vacated by TV would be used for. Watching video? On the kinds of mobile handsets that were common in the late 1990s? That took quite a leap of faith as well as investment and invention.”

Jock Given

Economics and business strategy

“Someone had to pay for television”, Jock said, “advertisers, sponsors, governments, viewers, parent companies with spare cash and big ideas, owners with egos. The economics of the medium are never far away.”

Jock Given

He discussed four examples of the ways television and related media organisations have settled on business strategies that reflected their established interests. Existing holdings “structure your attitude to the possibilities in front of you. They shape the very way you see what is in front of you”.

Organisations like the BBC and RCA in the early stages of television development in

the 1920s and 30s, artificial intelligence today, the creation of the local streaming service Stan by Nine and Fairfax – two companies that had been banned from common ownership for 30 years – the current battle for ownership of Warner Bros – all of these illustrate a specific point:

“Enterprises respond differently to the same technological possibilities and policy frameworks. Business decisions reflect the unique combinations of assets that happen to be held at the time by the enterprises that make them.”

Jock Given

People

Television, according to those who work in it, is a “people” business, a “relationships” business, Jock said. Of the four causes of television explored in his keynote, the one the symposium returned to most throughout the day was this one: people.

“Structures matter, but people do too. Australian television would have been at least a little different if particular people had not been in particular places, at particular times, doing what they did ... When I ask, how do people cause TV? I answer it in three ways. They make it, they watch it, and they write and talk about it.”

Jock Given

Jock gave a small, “highly selective, personal” list of some people who have made, watched and written about television that connected to the other three change factors.

E.T. Fisk, the head of Australia’s main wireless company, was publicly sceptical about TV at

first, in the 1930s, but soon became an evangelist for it. “Different assets and interests, different position.”

Amanda Higgs – a speaker in a later session – co-created and co-produced the fabulous *The Secret Life of Us* for the 10 Network in the early 2000s.

“People talked of [Homicide] as the show that first enabled them to see Australia and Australians on their TV screens, the one that delivered the shock of recognition...[Decades later] ... *The Secret Life of Us* helped make Melbourne intensely contemporary and interesting to a new generation all over Australia. And because it was co-produced with Channel 4 in the UK it helped re-make Australia’s image in a market where historically it has been hard to do anything but re-inscribe old ideas about Australia.”

Jock Given

Anne Curthoys’ writing about Australian TV’s “crucial formative period from 1948 to 1956”, especially the way defence issues helped frame a debate about new media, makes fascinating re-reading in 2026. Ien Ang’s experience as a migrant shaped her relationship with the “quintessentially national medium” of broadcast television, writing *Watching Dallas* in the Netherlands in the early 1980s and co-writing *The SBS Story* a quarter of a century later in Australia. Marcia Langton’s 1990s essay ‘Well, I heard it on the radio and I saw it on the television’ ... “[tried] to move boundaries and undo the restrictions which make it so difficult for any of us to speak”.

The importance of individual people seems “blindingly obvious”, Jock said, but “in our

scholarly quest to understand the big picture and the big forces, we can sometimes discount their impact. ... Of course, we often do the opposite as well. We imagine the world to be a stage, micro-managed by a few potent puppeteers, especially with media where the idea of ‘moguls’ is so cherished.”

He suggested we should not fall wholly for either “the totalising explanations of impersonal, structural forces” nor for “the seductive narratives of all-powerful ‘Media Moguls’”.

Jock concluded by returning to Mt Coot-tha to speak of change, history and television’s uncertain future.

“The people who built the ‘TV towers’ on Brisbane’s Mt Coot-tha and the plaque at ABQ2 thought they were starting something big and solid. Television! How right they were. But the features that created and sustained the scale and durability of television were not the precise names and locations of the institutions, they were not the technical details of the transmission. Should they have been surprised?”

Jock Given

For decades now, people have looked up at the mountain and seen “TV towers”, Jock said. Before them, a Colonial Botanist noticed a hill with just one tree: “One Tree Hill” he called it. And before him, people who had lived there for millennia, people who called the place “Kuta”, “saw something they had not seen coming”.

PANEL 1

Australian Television History

Associate Professor Jessica Balanzategui
RMIT University

Amanda Higgs
Writer and producer, Matchbox Pictures

Mitch McTaggart
Writer, producer and performer, The Last Year of Television; The Back Side of Television

Moderator:
Dr Damien O'Meara
RMIT University



AUSTRALIAN TELEVISION HISTORY

Dr Damien O'Meara

Australia's television history has been dominated by tried-and-tested genres and formats, but its legacy is found in the moments the industry took risks, pushed boundaries, and gave audiences something new.

In 2015 – as streaming was entering the Australian market – one report led by our keynote speaker, Jock Given, asked TV industry stakeholders if by 2025, “would there still be something we call ‘television’”, and the responses ranged from optimistic to unsure (Given, Brealey and Gray, 2015). Television is still here in 2026, but streaming services now dominate audience figures in Australia (ACMA, 2026). As such, we want to understand the key lessons to carry forward from how Australian broadcast television has sought to make this medium our own. Interestingly, those lessons are often about the exceptions, rather than the rules of what makes great Australian television.

The first panel of the symposium brought together people who make, watch, and talk and write about TV: writer and producer Amanda Higgs; writer, producer and performer, Mitch McTaggart; and associate professor of media and cinema, Jessica Balanzategui.

Television brand

Our television industry is recognised as being influenced by dominant international players, but also for ways it has asserted a distinct Australian sensibility (O'Regan, 1993). Many will recognise soap operas, police procedurals, and sport – and in more recent decades, reality – as mainstays of our television brand (Sergi & Dodds, 2003; Turnbull, 2014). While there are examples of groundbreaking and iconic cultural moments across these genres and formats, their prominence was – and is – a symptom of an industry that is over-reliant on proven concepts, and avoidant of testing appetites for something new.

“I think when a concept works on Australian TV, we tend to run it into the absolute ground ... Maybe that's our brand not going hard enough and doing stuff that is a little bit too derivative when we should be taking much more risk.”

Mitch McTaggart

Writer, Producer and Performer

Soap operas, such as *A Country Practice*, *Neighbours*, and *Home and Away* have been part of the international popularity of Australian scripted content. Procedural formats have also performed well, with their ability to include a diversity of stories through the case-of-the-week format. But the bold ideas that put new concepts in front of Australian audiences have faced barriers due to their status as an unknown quantity. Yet, when one succeeds, it often enters the cycle of being adapted and repeated.

Risk-averse approaches vs industrial affordances

Australia has a small national audience compared to the dominant international players that also distribute into our market, the UK and US. Since the 1960s, legislation has enshrined a cultural role for Australian television. Regulatory quotas have long required 55% Australian content between 6am and midnight and, until recently, included protected genre and children's sub-quotas.

"What we're missing now, for me, is the gaps in the market. And risk-taking ... I thought the streamers were going to create gaps for us to fill, and actually now they're just going, 'Oh, we need the broadest possible audience,' so we're back to that commercial network sensibility."

Amanda Higgs
Writer and Producer

Industrial affordances, such as regulation and quotas, have created conditions where new ideas can be pushed. Yes, there has continued to be an abundance of those common genres for which our television brand is known. However, our comparatively small market, which until the mid-2000s was limited to five broadcasters and one multichannel PayTV provider, meant that requirement to fill these content hours also provided space to fill gaps in these demographics.

While these opportunities were rare, that regulation created spaces where risks could be advocated.



■ Taking risks that pay off

Some of Australia's biggest cultural and commercial successes in television came from taking a risk on a new concept. The key is having an industry where people are ready to contribute new, innovative ideas when that appetite for risk emerges.

"I see risk-taking in multiple different ways as central to the Australian TV brand, even if the industry structure doesn't always support risk."

Jessica Balanzategui

Associate Professor Media and Cinema at RMIT

Major success stories include early pioneers such as *Prisoner: Cell Block H* (1979–1986), which was picked up by markets in Europe and the Americas, and brand redefining properties like *The Secret Life of Us* (2001–2005) and *Bluey* (2018–present). These examples came out of creatives taking hold of an opportunity, digging into the specificity of our culture, and pushing Australia's television brand in a new direction. Yet the concern now is about the people who will take these opportunities in the future.

"I'm just gonna say it has to come back to people. It must come back to the people and across every form ... I think what's happening now, and I'm going to be very curious with the content quotas, is, where's the next wave of TV makers?"

Amanda Higgs

Writer and Producer

With fewer content hours being produced, even under the prospect of content quotas committed for streaming services, there are fewer opportunities for new and emerging voices in the industry. This call by Higgs is not the first to raise talent pathways as a major concern for Australia's screen industries, and it won't be the last.

It all comes back to risk. Risk on new voices, new ideas, and challenges to the long-held assumptions that have been a feature of what limited our approach to broadcast television. Whether the regulation and governance of the industry makes space for those opportunities is something to watch in the coming years.



PANEL 2

Australian Television News

Hugh Nailon

National TV News Director, Nine

Justin Stevens

News Director, ABC

Moderator:

Professor Alexandra Wake, RMIT University



AUSTRALIAN TELEVISION NEWS

Professor Alexandra Wake

Adaptation, the key to news survival on tv

Anyone with even a passing interest in traditional broadcast news knows the predictions: the nightly bulletin, watched at a fixed time, is supposedly on its last legs. Yet two of Australia's most influential news leaders — Channel Nine's national news director Hugh Nailon and the ABC's news director Justin Stevens — argue that the medium still has a meaningful future. Nailon is unequivocal: "I think news underpins the future of broadcast television." Their optimism underpins a tension central to our symposium panel: while traditional news remains valued, the industry built around it is undeniably shifting.

The Reuters Digital News Report 2025 confirms that TV remains Australia's most-used source of news, with 57% of respondents saying they had watched TV news in the past week (Park, et al., 2025). These figures alone suggest TV news is far from dead. However, free-to-air TV — the ecosystem that funds, promotes, and supports news — is undergoing rapid decline, with collapsing viewership, shrinking revenue, and diminishing influence. This contrast between audience reliance and industry fragility was a recurring theme across our discussion.

TV news' enduring strengths

TV news continues to play a central civic role, particularly during major events and emergencies. In some markets, linear audiences have even stabilised or grown. Older demographics remain loyal to scheduled bulletins, while younger audiences increasingly consume news via vertical video, YouTube, and social platforms. This reality requires newsrooms to deliver both curated bulletins and platform-native content.

As Nailon puts it: "The desire for news content... is just growing all the time. Our future is strong and robust."

His assertion reflects the paradox of modern news: demand is rising, yet the formats that once captured that demand no longer hold the same power.

Young Australians are far from disengaged. Instead, as Stevens argues, they are overwhelmed by the volume of content available: "Young people aren't disengaged — that assumption is so patronising. They're seeking out news; they're just finding what's given to them overwhelming or irrelevant."

Here Stevens reframes the challenge: the issue is not apathy but relevance, tone, and delivery.

He adds that young audiences trust content that feels personal and authentic: “Young people trust and gravitate to more personality, creator-driven mode of consumption... in stark contrast to how traditional broadcasters continue to go about it.”

This raises difficult questions for legacy broadcasters about whether they can adapt their voice without eroding the authority they rely on.

Trust in television journalism

The panel acknowledged an ongoing decline in trust in news media, worsened by COVID-19 and social media. Yet the image of the television journalist — microphone in hand, challenging power — still resonates strongly with both audiences and newsrooms.

Nailon says he urges his journalists to ask the hard questions: “Often you get a better response by the way a person tries to evade a question by reverting to their speaking points.”

This highlights a core journalistic strength that platforms cannot replicate: the live, accountable exchange.

At the same time, growing hostility toward journalists, particularly women, is affecting newsrooms. Stevens warns: “The disproportionate anger directed at journalists is massively wrong and it is insidious... We have to be able to ask uncomfortable questions.” This comment underscores the fragile balance

between public trust and public hostility — a dynamic that shapes both newsroom culture and democratic accountability.

Local and regional news

Local and regional TV news remains financially fragile, yet its civic value is unmatched. Nailon reminds us: “What differentiates us from the torrent of information online is Australian journalism and Australian storytellers who know and live where the audiences are.” His insight captures the irreplaceable role of proximity — something global platforms cannot replicate.

But regional newsrooms are shrinking, leaving many communities without scrutiny of councils or state bodies. Digital solutions such as geolocation and personalised feeds are being explored, but none offer a fully developed replacement.

Stevens says the ABC is working hard to improve localised services. “You should be able to log in with your postcode and get really good, accurate information for what’s happening in the actual area.” This reflects a broader challenge: how to translate the intimacy of local reporting into digital formats that people will actually use.

Journalism on TV still matters

All panelists agreed that journalism remains vital, especially given global instability. Stevens argues: “The world is unstable... journalism is going to be incredibly important in the coming years.”

This reinforces the idea that the medium may evolve, but the need for credible reporting will not.

Nailon and Stevens also emphasised opportunities for new journalists. Stevens captures the appeal: journalism is both demanding and rewarding, offering “an incredible privilege to represent the public’s concerns and communicate to them.”

This suggests that while platforms change, the core mission and skills endure.

Opportunities and threats from AI

AI already helps journalists manage information overload, but it also introduces new risks. Deepfakes and synthetic voices raise verification challenges. Nailon warns: “Verification will only get more important. Our reputations built over decades can suffer greatly if we get one thing wrong.”

This highlights a future where credibility becomes a newsroom’s most valuable asset.

Yet Stevens remains confident about journalism’s human advantage: “Journalism will gravitate to the things AI can’t do — bearing witness, challenging power, persuading sources to trust us.”

This points toward a future in which human judgment becomes more, not less, important.

So what? Connecting the themes

Across the panel, several tensions emerged which revealed a sector at a crossroads: valued by the public but constrained by outdated structures and new technological pressures. These could broadly be that: Audiences still rely on TV, yet the commercial model sustaining it is eroding; young people are engaged, but not on broadcasters’ terms; local journalism is essential, yet financially unsustainable; trust in journalism is critical, yet increasingly undermined; and AI offers efficiency, but threatens authenticity and accuracy.

The future of TV news depends on...

The future of TV news will not be secured by tradition or platform loyalty. It will depend on how effectively broadcasters can adapt — not just by moving content online, but by rethinking tone, storytelling, distribution, and community connection. Its survival rests on embracing authenticity, investing in local journalism, rebuilding trust, and doubling down on what humans do best: witnessing events, challenging power, and telling stories audiences can trust.

PANEL 3

Australian Television Advertising

Dr Jackie Dickenson
University of Melbourne

Simon Lawson
Managing Partner at Chilon Media Governance

Ricci Meldrum
Managing Director at TBWA\Melbourne

Moderator:
Professor Robert Crawford, RMIT University



AUSTRALIAN TELEVISION ADVERTISING

Professor Robert Crawford

Loved by some, loathed by many, and ignored by even more, advertisements have played an integral role in the life of Australian commercial television.

Commercials were broadcast on the first night of transmission and have maintained a constant presence on the medium ever since.

Television has equally played an important role in the history of Australian advertising. For the better part of fifty years, commercial television was the 'main game' for advertising agencies. In this hierarchy, newspapers, magazines, and radio were all deemed subordinate media outlets.

Commercial television's 'golden age'

The advertising industry's embrace of commercial television was premised on two key grounds. First, television was able to attract a mass audience in a way that no other medium had been able to do. At its peak in the early 1990s, ninety-nine percent of Australian homes had a television (Ironmonger, et al., 2000). Advertisers recognised the efficiencies of such reach and were willing to invest heavily in the medium.

The second reason was structural. In addition to the payment that they received from advertisers to create and produce commercials, Australian advertising agencies also received commissions from television stations for placing commercials with them. This dual income stream was extraordinarily profitable.

"Advertising agencies at this time had a licence to print money. They were getting money from the stations; they were getting money from the advertisers."

Jackie Dickenson
University of Melbourne

Advertising agencies thrived in these conditions. They not only had the time to generate creative ideas, they also had the budgets to bring them to life with high-level production. This combination of money, creativity, and public recognition imbued agencies with a sense of glamour.

"Everybody wanted to work on television, because that's where the kudos, the visibility, and the big budgets all lay."

Jackie Dickenson
University of Melbourne

Although commercial advertising's primary role was to stimulate consumption, the reach and exposure provided by television meant that commercials exerted a broader cultural influence on everyday life. Catchy jingles and quotable taglines both informed and reflected popular culture.

"Advertising was a bigger part of culture ... where everyone saw the same thing at the same time ... those 'water-cooler' conversations."

Simon Lawson

Managing Partner at Chilon Media Governance

Television commercials also made an important contribution – both directly and indirectly – to ideas of nationhood and national identity. Up until the 1990s, regulations prevented the broadcast of foreign commercials. Amidst a sea of American and British programs, commercial breaks stood out for their Australian imagery, accents, and outlook. Television commercials also provided employment and training for the local film-makers and actors.

Broadcast television and the digital revolution

Commercial television's star began to wane from the late 1990s. The introduction of pay television and the growing popularity of online entertainment meant that the media landscape was starting to fragment. The subsequent emergence of social media and the ongoing proliferation of digital platforms continued to erode broadcast television's primacy.

"Media agencies were pretty simple 20 years ago because it was quite a simple choice."

Simon Lawson

Managing Partner at Chilon Media Governance

The advertising industry's initial response to this changing media landscape was informed by its decades-long relationship with television. While the industry no longer received commissions from television stations, advertisers still allocated generous budgets to television campaigns. More junior staff were more attuned to the digital revolution.

"Advertising creative people, by their nature, are curious, innovative, young ... so they lean into these things early and they're quite experimental."

Ricci Meldrum

Managing Director at TBWA\Melbourne

It was the youth market's shift away from broadcast television that compelled the advertising industry to reassess its media strategies. As audiences moved to new digital platforms, advertisers wanted to follow. They pushed their creative and media agencies in a similar direction. Broadcast television was progressively sidelined.

"There's quite a lot of fashion in advertising, and things are often deprioritised before their value has been diminished."

"There was this sense that if you were in the room as a promoter of television as an effective channel, then you were perhaps old-fashioned... I remember thinking, I'm not sure I want that to be my brand, to be the guy whose defending the effectiveness of TV."

Simon Lawson

Managing Partner at Chilon Media Governance

Revisiting television's advertising capacities

History shows that the emergence of each new media outlet did not eliminate its predecessors. Video did not kill the radio star, but it certainly displaced it. Broadcast television's place in the digital age is no different. The challenge lies in identifying broadcast television's place in today's crowded media ecosystem.

"It has made media agencies far more complex... It is so difficult to work out what is contributing to what result."

"It is very hard to identify the contribution that each different media tactic is making to ROI [return on investment] ... you're trying to unpick the individual contribution of each component."

Ricci Meldrum

Managing Director at TBWA\Melbourne

The work of the creative and media agencies is further complicated by the advertisers and their marketing managers. Viewing advertising as a single tool within a broader suite of marketing operations, these marketing managers are wary of allocating large sums to advertising. Agencies are consequently required to adapt and develop their campaigns accordingly.

"The challenge is the budgets aren't there in the same way... you've got to spread it so much more thinly across so many different places, and you don't get the same bang for your buck."

"Now... everyone has to think in a more integrated fashion. An idea has to be able to transcend every channel if you really want bang for your buck."

Ricci Meldrum

Managing Director at TBWA\Melbourne

Although audiences are a fraction of their former size, broadcast television can still access large audiences. Sport and, to a lesser degree, event TV remain popular with audiences and are integral to the medium's future. Advertising during these programs continues to be a cost-effective way of reaching a large audience.

"It's event TV – MAFS, MasterChef, The Block – and then a long tail of general entertainment spots people are paying almost nothing for."

Simon Lawson

Managing Partner at Chilon Media Governance

"[The future of broadcast television] is so associated with sports ... Without sports, free-to-air is in trouble."

Ricci Meldrum

Managing Director at TBWA\Melbourne

From a creative agency's viewpoint, the audio-visual format remains an essential and persuasive advertising tool. The format continues to offer scope for creative exploration. Significantly, a creative audio-

visual commercial can still find its audience – whether it appears on broadcast television, on streaming platforms, or anywhere else.

“We know that things like storytelling, emotional storytelling through movement, sound – whether that be TV, cinema or screens – is still the most impactful, and it still makes the biggest difference.”

“It’s still about the art of persuasion, the art of storytelling, the art of selling – it’s just done in different media, in different ways.”

Ricci Meldrum

Managing Director at TBWA\Melbourne

It is unlikely that advertising will end its relationship with broadcast television any time soon. However, any hopes of a ‘golden age’ returning are flawed – the proliferation of channels and platforms cannot be turned back. Broadcast television nevertheless remains an important and viable advertising medium. The future, then, lies in cultivating the strengths that the medium currently offers and ensuring that advertising’s key stakeholders – advertisers, creative agencies, and media agencies – have a full understanding and appreciation of them.



PANEL 4

Australian Television Today and Beyond

Marco Angele

Media and Entertainment Lawyer, Marshalls + Dent + Wilmoth

Dr Djoyimi Baker

RMIT University

Jenny Buckland

CEO, Australian Children's Television Foundation

Dean Dezius

General Manager, Freeview Australia

Moderator

Dr Alexa Scarlata, RMIT University



AUSTRALIAN TELEVISION TODAY AND BEYOND

Dr Alexa Scarlata

It was both a relief and a daunting task to turn our attention in the final panel of the day to consider the current role and future of broadcast television in Australia.

The panel was predictably divided – TV remains at once incredibly important, but how we’re watching and what’s being made is changing so much that perhaps broadcast’s days are numbered.

Broadcast TV still holds enormous value

Broadcast TV provides important access for people in remote and rural regions with limited internet connectivity. It’s also imperative for those who can’t afford an internet service or the amount of data that online TV requires, or the costs associated with stacking multiple paid subscriptions to get all the content they want. Broadcast remains significant for those with limited digital skills or accessibility needs, who may be unable to use connected TV devices.

TV’s liveness continues to differentiate it from its non-linear disruptors, even as streamers increasingly tap into live-streaming event-focused programming.

Yet, liveness isn’t just about entertainment: live interruptions to broadcast programming continue to be a source of vital information in times of crisis around the country. This programming contributes to our sense of nationhood, culture, and community.

“That’s one of the real valuable points around free-to-air television: it can bring a lot of people together in the one place at the one time for this real sense of community... In times of crisis, we need access to information... Netflix is not going to break into a show to give you an update on a fire in Victoria or a flood somewhere”

Dean Dezius
General Manager Freeview Australia

While we’ve all gotten used to, and many prefer, on-demand viewing, broadcast TV also continues to play an important role in our home lives, bringing families together in the face of lacklustre streaming recommender systems and decision paralysis.

"I think we've all had those evenings where, depending on who's on the couch, they're trying to negotiate about what you watch. You end up sort of searching through different services depending on what you've got, and all of a sudden, you know, you've wasted all this time, and you fall back on something... for a lot of people, that fall back is broadcast because it completely takes away the choice fatigue, or at least, pulls it back to something manageable."

Dr Djoyimi Baker
RMIT University

How we're accessing free-to-air content and what the broadcasters are making is changing

Only 52% of Australian adults are turning on the TV to watch the scheduled broadcast (ACMA, 2026). While the big box in our lounge room is still a mainstay of most households, the aerial connection required to access the broadcast signal is less likely to be in use. As a result, Australians are accessing free-to-air content in different ways than in the past: via broadcast video-on-demand platforms, on different devices.

"Talk about 'TV is dead' is far from the truth. You often hear people say, 'I don't watch TV', and they're probably the same people that are watching TV content on their mobile or on a laptop..."

Dean Dezius
General Manager Freeview Australia

"In our research with parents, kids and families, there's still a lot of value in co-viewing and sharing cultural moments. It's just that it will take different forms, and

perhaps is segmented across different places in ways that we do have to wrestle with... We can't pretend that it's going back... [Younger viewers] don't always call it TV either... [for them] the word "TV" doesn't actually mean anything [apart from] the hardware."

Dr Djoyimi Baker
RMIT University

"TV still exists, but it's YouTube. YouTube is now TV, and so all of the [commercial] broadcasters, public broadcasters [and] streaming platforms are all trying to wrestle with [that]... The sad thing about that is not that people won't get the content, because they will, but it is that this is such a fragmented environment, and we'll need to work out ways to make sure those community building moments, like everybody watching something together, will happen."

Jenny Buckland
CEO ACTF

Changes in how Australians are watching are also impacting what is being made. The remit of broadcasters – the content they're focused on – has shifted.

"We want to watch free-to-air commercial television when we want to watch sports and reality events. I think it's really understandable why [the commercial broadcasters] don't commission as much drama as they [used to]... We are used to watching drama on streamers, and we also do expect our national public broadcasters to be the home of drama... Nobody wants an ad interrupting their drama anymore unless they're paying the lower tier Netflix subscription."

Jenny Buckland
CEO ACTF

Meanwhile, it's completely unsurprising that commercial broadcasters continue to favour significantly less expensive reality flagships.

"[With reality] you are able to integrate brands and obfuscate the union framework in most instances when it comes to casts and residual payments, because they fall outside of the structure that you would traditionally impose on drama, kids and sometimes documentaries. That format financially works. It's delicious, it's chips."

Marco Angele

Media and Entertainment Lawyer

The panel also discussed the recent collision of broadcaster and streamer interests. Here, the strengths of each distribution format can inform the economic approach of working within the regulations of Australia's television ecology. But it is ultimately the people within these systems, working to bring together diverse investors through complex rights negotiations, that ensure Australian content is made.

"More and more we're seeing that traditional broadcasters have a streaming arm [like Nine with Stan and Ten with Paramount] and so we're sort of dealing with them both at the same time... This makes sense from an economic perspective, but also from a structural and industrial perspective... The ecosystem in Australia is such that in order to get a project up, it requires government investment, broadcaster and streamer input and license fees, and largely private investment. And then it's going to take, you know, a little bit of luck and the producer investing their own fees in order to make it work... I think it is really a tapestry that has to be woven in order to get anything off the ground in this current climate."

Marco Angele

Media and Entertainment Lawyer

But even streaming platforms are erring on the side of tried and tested formats in a climate that is averse to taking chances – risks – on new or untested ideas.

"[Everyone's interested in] investing in intellectual property and underlying work that has at least a couple of runs on the board."

Marco Angele

Media and Entertainment Lawyer

Locating broadcast TV in the connected TV landscape

Of concern to the panel and the attendees was the fact that it is getting harder to find broadcast TV through our internet connected devices.

"When you open up the home screen, you are bombarded with a huge amount of options in front of you.. The home screen is the new battleground for our attention and discoverability is the new currency. The challenge now, more than ever, is that there is so much content out there. The struggle is, where do you find it?"

Dean Dezius

General Manager Freeview Australia

From the start of 2026, new connected TV devices sold in Australia are legally required to pre-install local broadcaster video-on-demand apps and ensure that they are visible on the home screen. But this still forces audiences to switch between apps and platforms to find live channels. Freeview Australia will commence trialling DVB-I technology this year that aims to provide internet-delivered, antenna-free

access to major free-to-air channels through a single channel guide.

“It’s a classic rising tide floats all boats” situation, according to Dezius, enabling Australia’s broadcasters to continue to compete on content but collaborate on technology through a “stronger together proposition”.

Another policy imperative for the panel was prominence and discoverability of local content on streaming services. New legislation will soon force streamers to invest in Australian production, but this does not include any requirements to ensure that content is proactively made visible to local audiences. And it doesn’t capture YouTube.

“I think that’s something [that] our broadcasters all have to grapple with: should we make our content available on YouTube, and how do we do it? We might have to look at: what is that algorithm and what’s YouTube’s role in supporting all of our local programming?”

Jenny Buckland
CEO ACTF

The panel also discussed how there has been a recent flurry of broadcast-SVOD deals taking place in Europe over the last twelve months, where the likes of Amazon Prime Video and Disney+ have integrated the live broadcast feeds of German and French broadcasters into their interfaces. This seems a way off in the Australian context, but, as Dezius noted, “Perhaps in the future we will all need to understand that we may need to work with third parties and tech providers that once, previously, we thought we didn’t need... that’s a two way street for the benefit of both.”

Contemplating “switching off” TV in Australia

The final question – the idea of switching off broadcast TV – is something that is happening in other nations, particularly in Europe. In some ways, it can seem like an inevitability.

“I think free to air television is very important... but the transmission model is on the way out. The BBC has said that it will be fully online by 2035 so that’s 10 years... I’m not sure that we’re taking all of that seriously enough at this stage”

Jenny Buckland
CEO ACTF

That said, right now there are a lot of unanswered questions about the future of broadcast TV in Australia. How can this valuable resource reach and serve all citizens if we stop relying on a free and far-reaching broadcast signal? And what will a broadcast switch-off mean for those for whom the location, financial, or technological barrier is too high a hurdle to leap?

Australian Children's Television

Associate Professor Jessica Balanzategui
RMIT University

Dr Djoyimi Baker
RMIT University



AUSTRALIAN CHILDREN'S TELEVISION

Associate Professor Jessica Balanzategui and Dr Djoyimi Baker

The Australian children's television sector currently finds itself at a profound crossroads, serving as a key test case for the ongoing viability of broadcast television's public value function

Because the crisis in youth programming represents the ultimate pressure point for the wider broadcast industry, this section departs from a panel-by-panel summary to synthesise insights from across the History, News, Advertising, and Futures discussions. For over 40 years, the children's TV sector was scaffolded by a finely calibrated policy settlement – anchored by the Children's Television Standards; local children's content quotas for commercial networks; the charters of the public service broadcasters; the strategic investment, international sales, and advocacy of the Australian Children's Television Foundation (ACTF); and, in the 2000s, the provision of dedicated public service channels such as ABC Kids and ABC ME.

Crucially, this policy framework was structurally tied to broadcast television's scheduled viewing format. It created dedicated spaces for children's television at times when children were most likely to be watching, such as before and after school.

This temporal synchronicity helped construct a shared civic public for young Australians, aligning with the historical purpose of broadcasting outlined by Professor Jock Given in the symposium's keynote:

"The idea that a society's media, communications and information enterprises should serve the public interest [underpins the sector] ... broadcast television has carried an unusually heavy policy load."

Adjunct Professor Jock Given
Swinburne University

However, this carefully balanced policy settlement has now unravelled. The critical turning point occurred in 2020 with the abolition of local children's content quotas for commercial free-to-air broadcasters, which triggered an immediate collapse in commercial investment. Concurrently, while SVOD services have entered the market, their investment in local youth content has proven highly volatile and unpredictable. This structural shift has left public service broadcaster the ABC shouldering the heavy lifting of commissioning and distribution at a time when live-action production costs have steeply escalated.

Platformisation and the Discoverability Crisis

The dismantling of traditional broadcast quotas has coincided with the tectonic audience shift toward platformised, on-demand viewing. Without the protected scheduling blocks of the broadcast era, children's engagement with television has moved away from communal, civic modes of viewing toward highly personalised consumption. In the History panel, Higgs, McTaggart and Balanzategui discussed the possible impacts of the long-awaited new local content legislation for SVODs which requires them to invest in local content, which came into effect in January 2026. While this legislation requires streamers with over a million Australian subscribers to invest 10% of their local revenue into Australian content, Balanzategui explained that it may not result in much of an increased investment in children's television because there is "no specific carve-out" – or subquota – for this genre.

Furthermore, the sheer volume of international content on streaming platforms combined with strategic algorithmic recommendation and personalisation has precipitated a crisis of discoverability. On the Futures panel, Dean Dezius detailed the challenges viewers face in navigating the algorithmic noise of contemporary smart TV interfaces, despite the implementation of new legislation around the prominence of local broadcasters in 2026:

"When you open up the home screen, you are bombarded with a huge amount of options in front of you. You know, in my opinion, the home screen is the new battleground for our attention and discoverability is the new currency."

Dean Dezius
General Manager Freeview Australia



This discoverability challenge is particularly acute for the liminal "tween" (8-12) and early teen demographic. While these young people are highly adept at navigating platform interfaces, on the Futures panel Dr Djoyimi Baker highlighted how this does not translate to engagement with local content. Dr Baker drew on her collaborative Swinburne/RMIT University research study in partnership with the ACTF examining if and how child audiences aged 7-9 find local contents on streaming platforms ([Balanzategui et al 2024](#)). She described how the findings evidence that despite their high technical fluency with a range of platforms, children lack the cultural literacy to locate and identify local content within this algorithmically curated, globalised content pool, despite a demonstrated appetite for such narratives.

"They do not know how to find local content. And yet once we ask them and ask them in different ways, they actually do want local stories that reflect their lives."

| **Dr Djoyimi Baker**
RMIT University

The Tween Audience, Social Media, and the Civic Void

The difficulty of engaging the tween demographic is further complicated by the recent Federal Government "ban" on social media for users under sixteen. By making it illegal for social media companies like YouTube, TikTok and Instagram to issue accounts to users under 16, the ban aims to restrict access to digital arenas where young people build and participate in shared culture. Yet, across the symposium, experts noted that

youth are actively circumventing traditional broadcast structures in favour of social media. On the News panel, ABC News Director Justin Stevens discussed his 10-year-old son's relationship with YouTube and other video-based social media entertainment platforms as an example of broader youth audience trends.

"He's circumventing the ban, because he just doesn't log in... they trust and gravitate to that more personality, creator driven mode of consumption. That style of communication, as you all know, is in stark contrast to how traditional broadcasters continue to go about it."

| **Justin Stevens**
News Director ABC

The reality is that despite the ban, social media platforms, particularly YouTube, have displaced broadcast networks as primary sources of youth entertainment ([Roy Morgan 2026](#)). ACTF CEO Jenny Buckland reiterated that this platform shift threatens the synchronised viewing habits that previously brought child audiences together.

"TV still exists, but it's YouTube. YouTube is now TV... this is such a fragmented environment, and we'll need to work out ways to make sure those community building moments, like everybody watching something together, will happen."

| **Jenny Buckland**
CEO ACTF

This shift from mass-market scheduling to individuated streaming ripples across the broader media ecosystem. On the Advertising panel, Simon Lawson reflected on the decline

of ambient broadcast moments that previously fostered a shared national discourse.

"There was a sort of a social cohesion associated with advertising. We were all, you know, we're all watching the same things, talking about the same shows."

Simon Lawson
Managing Partner at Chilon Media Governance

Without these widely shared and synchronised broadcast experiences, the communal discourse connecting young people around screen content is challenged. Baker echoed this concern when reflecting on if and how the next generation might forge shared cultural touchstones in a personalised, on-demand environment.

"This idea of these generational water cooler moments from the broadcast era... are they going to have that shared, same shared sense of having watched a show together?"

Dr Djoyimi Baker
RMIT University

Risk Aversion vs. Culturally Specific Storytelling

To capture fragmented youth audiences and reinstate this public value, experts argued for a return to bold storytelling that authentically reflects the current experiences of young Australians. Associate Professor Jessica Balanzategui outlined how her research as part of the ACTF-partnered Swinburne/RMIT project involved longitudinal national surveys and interviews with parents ([Burke et al 2024](#)) and other adults ([McIntyre et al 2023](#)) which

evidences that "edginess" and authenticity is seen as key to the unique cultural texture of local children's programming.

"This rough-edged quirkiness, that's key to the relatability of Australian children's TV, its humour and cultural specificity."

Associate Professor Jessica Balanzategui
RMIT University

However, the current economic climate is largely risk-averse. Discussing the complex financing structures required today, entertainment lawyer Marco Angele noted that global platforms overwhelmingly favour established intellectual properties.

"Commissioners will always err towards investing in intellectual property and underlying work that has at least a couple of runs on the board... It is really a tapestry that has to be woven in order to get really anything off the ground in this current climate."

Marco Angele
Media and Entertainment Lawyer

This reliance on known quantities stifles the innovation and "edginess" required to connect with contemporary youth. Buckland warned that this cautious commissioning environment makes it difficult for original local concepts to secure funding today.

"We're never going to see another Dance Academy... No one's going to take a risk on that type of show at the moment."

Jenny Buckland
CEO ACTF

The Socio-Cultural Stakes

The implications of these industrial shifts extend far beyond economics. If the sector struggles to reach younger demographics, long-term audience retention for Australian stories will be compromised, as was explained by all panellists on the History panel.

"Australians want to watch themselves. They want to watch their own stories... where is that market for our young [audiences]?"

Amanda Higgs
Writer and Producer

"We don't want to take enough of a risk and we just keep kind of recycling stuff, but fiddling with the edges ever so slightly. I will bet a million dollars that a fantastic TV series in Australia has already been written like a Breaking Bad or Sopranos, but no one wants to take a risk on it, and that, I think is the way to make Australian content be enduring, is just to be taking more risks"

Mitch McTaggart
Writer and Producer

"We need to ensure that our younger generations are growing up with the habit and appetite for Australian content, or we can't expect them to return to it when they're young adults."

Associate Professor Jessica Balanzategui
RMIT University

Navigating this transition successfully requires a recommitment to the public value function of local television. Just as broadcast television historically served as a vital training ground for new creators, the History panel discussed how the industry must proactively cultivate pathways for original voices to ensure the sustainability of Australian storytelling.

"I'm just going to say it has to come back to people... what I think it needs is a new wave of television makers... Young people, and I think we need it in our commissioners as well."

Amanda Higgs
Writer and Producer



Conclusion

This symposium – in taking a moment in history as one of the many key catalysts for television as we know it today – sought to understand the impact and future of broadcast TV in Australia.

Interestingly, we are left with more questions as we look to the future.

- What does free-to-air television look like in Australia's future?
- Do we still need a broadcast signal? And if not, how would we fill the gaps left behind? How will we access television going forward?
- What TV should we make and where will it appear?
- What will the cultural impact of television look like?
- How will television endure?

These questions matter because television is no longer a luxury. It is a cultural necessity because of the past century of investment in technological development, policy, regulation and industrial economies, and in people. Television – whether linear broadcast or non-linear internet distribution – is important to Australia for information as much as entertainment, and the cultural connection these bring.

Throughout the day, the answer often came to the fourth "cause" of television Jock explored in his opening keynote – people. People, as he said, "make, watch, write about and talk about television". They innovate television and they amplify its impact.



Looking back on the history of how television asserted itself as Australian, it was people who sought to identify and develop popular genres. Equally other people went against the grain of tried-and-tested (some might say 'done-to-death') genres to give Australian audiences something new – something resonant. People are the ones who make the call on taking risks, starting new enterprises and adapting to the changing technology. It's people who make the call on interrupting your broadcast with vital, breaking news, in times of emergency. They seek to be a trusted voice of factual information, one with authority, but increasingly with a relatable and authentic tone. It's people who lead on new creative campaigns that capture the spirit of a nation, even if it's less and less through a 30 second television commercial, and more often seeking new and creative approaches to meet audiences where they are choosing to watch.

It feels clear, even as so many questions remain, people endure. And through people, television endures. Even if it won't be through the broadcast signal, television endures.



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REPORT LEADS



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