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February 2010

Feature: 20 Years of Screenrights. 20 Years of Australian TV

This year, Screenrights celebrates 20 years since it was established. In the first of a number of specially commissioned feature articles, Jock Given, a Screenrights founding director and Professor of Media and Communications at Swinburne University's Institute for Social Research, looks at the last 20 years in Australian television.

02

Screenrights Best Educational Documentary Award Finalists

New Zealand's Documentary Edge Festival has announced the finalists for this year's Screenrights Best Educational Documentary Award.

05

Meet Screenrights' team at AIDC

With educational copying an important source of returns for documentary makers, filmmakers attending this year's AIDC can meet Screenrights' representatives to discuss registrations, royalties and marketing their work to the education sector.

05

ISAN Update

Screen Queensland is now requiring all funded films to obtain an ISAN, the International Standard Audiovisual Number used to identify audiovisual works.

06

New Information Sheets

Want to find out how Screenrights calculates your royalties? When you will be paid? Or how we monitor what's been copied?

06

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Feature: 20 Years of Screenrights. 20 Years of Australian TV

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As Screenrights' founding directors convened for their inaugural board meeting in Redfern, Sydney, on 6 March 1990, representatives of Australia's television industry met elsewhere in Sydney to decide who would measure future TV audiences.

Broadcasters had already taken the big step to replace written diaries with electronic 'peplemeters', despite objections from Kerry Packer's top-rating Nine Network. As the diaries were written up retrospectively, they tended to favour the dominant network with its popular, regular programs, like nightly news, **A Current Affair** and **Sixty Minutes**. Even if viewers did watch Nine's rivals, they didn't always remember this when they wrote up their diaries.

But Packer lost.

The job now was to consider tenders from organisations hoping to administer the new scheme, the incumbent AGB-McNair and the rival A.C. Nielsen. It was a huge tussle for a multi-million-dollar contract, 'fought out in an explosive manner' according to one commentator.



Professor Jock Given

Two decades on, another company owned by the metropolitan TV networks, OzTAM, handles most TV audience measurement in Australia, and there is a lot more to measure: subscription TV as well as free-to-air, online viewing via streaming and downloads, and the use of mobile screens. Many more people buy DVDs of TV programs than used to buy VHS cassettes. They also watch parts of TV shows in bigger numbers than other parts of the same shows, something that matters a good deal to advertisers. Television, and the job of measuring its audiences, has become much more complicated.

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March 1990 was not a great moment to launch any sort of business, certainly not one based around television. Australia's commercial TV industry was making losses for the first time since its start-up. Alan Bond was trying to hold on to the Nine Network, Seven was in receivership and Ten's owners foreshadowed an annual loss of around \$100 million. Beyond the industry, standard variable home loan interest rates were 17% and the All Ordinaries Index was trading around 1580 points, where it had been stalled for a year-and-a-half.

February 2010

It was the year George Gilder published **Life After Television**, declaring television was about to give way to the 'telecomputer ... linked to the world with fibre-optic cables'. Television networks, he thought, were 'sitting ducks for the telecomputer'.

The following year, **The New Yorker's** media writer, Ken Auletta, published **Three Blind Mice: How the TV Networks Lost Their Way**. Over the previous decade, he said, the United States TV industry had been struck by 'an earthquake that would register a 10 on the Richter scale'. It had lost a third of its nightly audience to a vast array of new channels and VCRs, and much of its profits.

Auletta was troubled by the decline of a medium he thought had become 'a basic American utility'. Gilder was ecstatic. Television, he thought, was 'a tool of tyrants. Its overthrow will be a major force for freedom and individuality, culture and morality.'

Australian television may have been in crisis, but it was not yet this kind of crisis. Commercial and public service TV were expanding. Perth viewers had just got the third commercial television station those in the other four state capitals had watched since the mid-1960s. East coast regional centres as big as Newcastle, Canberra, Wollongong, Townsville, Cairns, Toowoomba, Ballarat and Bendigo, still receiving only a single commercial channel each, were finally getting the same choice as city-dwellers. SBS Television was only ten years old and still widening its coverage into the many centres where it was not yet available.

The new media that dominates discussion of the industry in 2010 hardly existed. Multichannel pay TV might have been killing the networks' audiences in the United States, but it would not even start in Australia for five more years. In 1990, it was still illegal to offer subscription TV to households. By 1999, there were a million subscribers; by 2007, 2 million. In 2009, Foxtel earned more revenue than any of the free-to-air networks.

Seven in ten Australian households had a video cassette recorder in 1990, but DVD was years away. VCR take-up peaked in 2002 at 89% and has been falling since. Recorded media did not die with the VCR as some expected. On the contrary, video distributors' wholesale revenue more than trebled in the decade to 2007, as DVD took over from VHS. Although revenue has declined since, the big producers, distributors and stores now hope BluRay and 3D will give physical recorded media yet another life.

Nor did video take down the cinema industry, as seemed possible in the 1980s. Exhibitors built new multiplexes in the suburbs and the average Australian, who went to two movies a year in the mid-80s, now goes to four.

In 1990, there were 185,000 customers for the one, analogue, mobile phone network. It was shut down a decade later. The six digital mobile networks now operating — three 3G and three GSM — have 24 million customers, more than the country's population.

Few people had even heard of the internet. George Gilder didn't mention it, although his interconnected teleputer understood the idea. In 1990, there were just 2.4 million personal computers in Australian households and businesses. By 2000, more than half of Australian households had at least one PC and around a third were connected to the internet, though almost entirely by dial-up. By 2008/09, nearly 80% of households had at least one PC and 72% were connected to the internet, mostly via broadband.

There was little talk of digital television. In 1989, CBS's senior vice president for technology told an industry conference 'We'll have digital television the same day we have an anti-gravity machine'. Australians got it in 2001. After 2013, they'll have nothing else.

February 2010

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Within a month of Screenrights' first board meeting, Bob Hawke won a fourth term, John Hewson became leader of the Liberal Party, **Neighbours** won five Logies and Paul Hogan and John Cornell demanded the withdrawal of their six-year-old 'shrimp-on-the-barbie' tourist advertisements. Seven Network owner Christopher Skase was unable to appear at a liquidator's examination hearing in Brisbane. He was in London suffering from chronic diarrhoea, high temperature and migraine but would return to Australia, said his lawyer, when he was well.

At work on his third TV show, **The Party Machine**, a 30 year-old 'enfant terrible', Andrew Denton, declared he 'would hate to be someone like Daryl Somers [1989 Gold Logie winner and **Hey Hey It's Saturday** host]. I can't imagine what sort of life he leads.' Denton expected to be 'one of those fads that people look back on in a few years' time and go "oh yeah, I wonder what happened to him?"'

Tom Burton wrote in the **Sydney Morning Herald** that 'three changes – optical fibre, fast packet switching and digitalisation – mean the rather primitive telephone network is about to be revolutionised'. Telecom, he said, aimed to start connecting businesses to optical fibre in 1992 and suburban homes in 1995. 'The significant point is that Australia is one of the leaders in changing over to an optical network.'

Nine months after tanks cleared Tiananmen Square, Channel 13 in New York began screening a documentary series made by Film Australia and Nova called **The Genius That Was China**. The series explored the question of why the 'celestial empire' had been left so far behind by the emerging nations of Europe and the Middle East.

Before 1990 was done, Germany was reunited, Prime Minister Hawke announced the end of Telecom's domestic telecommunications monopoly and Kerry Packer was back in charge of the top-rating Nine Network. The most-watched program of the year in Sydney was a State of Origin Rugby League match. In Melbourne it was the AFL Grand Final, when the Pies finally overcame their Colliwobbles. Who kicked five goals that day? At Victoria Park, they still roar the answer: Essendon.

Within a decade, Andrew Denton had hosted the Logies. Another decade on, he had been nominated twice for the Gold one.

Consensus is still hard to find in television. When the numbers were tallied for 2009, about the only thing the networks agreed on was that the biggest audience for the year, 3.7 million viewers, assembled at the moment the **MasterChef** winner was announced. Beyond that, you had to look at separate lists of Programs and Events to determine whether the first episode of **Underbelly Series 2** was a Program or an Event, and you had to weigh up the audiences for the football finals with their pre-match entertainment and their post-match analysis, and you had to consider how many people watched the Logie Arrivals not just the Logie Awards. Then you had to decide whether **Hey Hey It's Saturday** was a Reunion or a 20-year-old TV show.

*Jock Given is the author of **Turning off the Television: Broadcasting's Uncertain Future** and Professor of Media and Communications at Swinburne University's Institute for Social Research. He was a founding director of Screenrights and Deputy Chair from 1995-2000.*

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Screenrights Best Educational Documentary Award Finalists

New Zealand's Documentary Edge Festival has announced the finalists for this year's Screenrights Best Educational Documentary Award.

They are:

Dance of the Instant (Director/Producer: Shirley Horrocks). New Zealand's pioneering New Dance Group (1945-47) was years ahead of its time, but a forgotten chapter in New Zealand dance history.

Liquid Stone: Unlocking Gaudi's Secrets (Director: Polly Watkins. Producers: James Frankham, Beth Frey). New Zealand architect Mark Burry has spent years unlocking the complex geometrical codes necessary to complete Gaudi's Sagrada Familia Church in Barcelona.

The Unnatural History of the Kakapo (Director/Producer: Scott Mouat). Once thought extinct, the kakapo family are the world's rarest and strangest parrot, with the adults plagued by infertility and the young vulnerable to disease.

The winner of the award will be announced during the festival forum in Auckland from March 1-3. Screenrights Member Services Marketing and Development Coordinator Annabel Holt will be at the forum. If members are interested in meeting Annabel please email annabel@screenrights.org to arrange a time. For more information about the Festival visit www.documentaryedge.org.nz

Meet Screenrights' Team at AIDC

With educational copying an important source of returns for documentary makers, filmmakers attending this year's AIDC can meet Screenrights' representatives to discuss registrations, royalties and marketing their work to the education sector.

The Australian International Documentary Conference is sponsored by Screenrights and held in Adelaide from February 23 to 26. Screenrights Chief Executive Simon Lake will be attending as will Member Services Team members Annabel Holt and Kate Enright. If you would like to discuss your registrations or returns, email annabel@screenrights.org

EnhanceTV Web Editor Anna Yates will also be there and happy to talk to filmmakers about how EnhanceTV reaches educators using documentaries in teaching. To talk to Anna at the conference email anna@enhancetv.com.au

To find out more about the AIDC program visit www.aidc.com.au

February 2010

ISAN Update

Screen Queensland is now requiring all funded films to obtain an ISAN, the International Standard Audiovisual Number used to identify audiovisual works.

ISAN is also a mandatory item for any Screen Australia funded project and for all Blu-ray titles, making it even more important for producers to consider ISAN for all new projects and for any earlier titles that are still active in the marketplace.

Internationally, the European collection agency AGICOA announced in January that it will integrate ISAN into its works database in order to improve efficiencies in tracking use and paying rightsholders. The French and Spanish collecting societies have made ISAN a mandatory requirement.

If you would like to find out more about ISAN, you can contact Darryl Robinson ISAN Australasia Business Development Manager darryl@australasia-isan.org

New Information Sheets

Want to find out how Screenrights calculates your royalties? When you will be paid? Or how we monitor what's been copied?

Screenrights has updated its fact sheets, with a number of new In Briefs to answer questions commonly asked by members. These are available on our website at <http://www.screenrights.org/rightsholders/inbrief/index.php> Have a look and let us know what you think.