

The kids' corner

Commercial free-to-air broadcasters are arguing that content quotas should be dropped in this country. What could it mean for children's TV? Sam Dallas takes a look.

CONTENT QUOTAS, as well as direct and indirect subsidies, have underpinned high-quality local children's content for decades.

However, the future of local children's content remains under a cloud as the government's convergence review considers the current regulations.

The Australian Children's Television Fund argues that if content quotas are dropped – which commercial broadcasters' lobby group Free TV Australia is suggesting – then commercial broadcasters would be less likely to invest in large amounts of children's television content.

"That is everyone's fear," children's TV producer Suzanne Ryan says. "And it's been implied but not stated."

The commercial broadcasters injected \$1.23 billion into the sector in 2010-11 – an all-time high.

However, Free TV Australia says children's television standards' restrictions are "highly complex and extremely prescriptive" and unequal compared to the requirements imposed on pay-TV or IPTV.

"The original logic behind the quotas and children's television standards' system was to ensure that appropriate programming was available during the times children watch television. This argument no longer exists in the digital environment," the lobby group suggested to government in mid-2011.

The ACTF – and children's content producers – remain unconvinced. The ACTF says the production of children's television content cannot be left to the public broadcasters alone and, while it makes economic sense for broadcasters to buy cheaper imported programming, cultural objectives need to be sustained.

"Yes they can make shitloads of money out of buying cheap American programming, but to serve the whole audience and to serve it well and to



develop brand loyalty, they are required to screen [local] children's programs," Burberry Entertainment's chief executive Ewan Burnett says.

Moody Street Kids' Gillian Carr says, worldwide, it's difficult to get broadcaster commitment because toy manufacturers pay broadcasters in certain overseas territories to screen their content.

"So you have this massive problem where producers are competing, trying to get the broadcasters to pay them money to make it, and you have another producer walking in who will say 'I will not only give you 10 per cent backend if you take my program, but I will pay you extra to put it on air', so you're competing with all of that as well."

SLR Productions' Ryan says FTA broadcasters could instead be given the flexibility to screen children's content on their multichannels, which would count as part of their content quotas.

"I think that that is what will end up happening and I don't think that that's a bad thing – we just want our content on air right?" she says.

ACTF's chief executive, Jenny Buckland, says commercial FTA broadcasters will ultimately see children's content as being more valuable than what it currently is.

She says, for example, the Nine Network – through their GO! offering – currently gets a younger audience by screening after-school sitcoms and classic animation programs, while Network Ten has also recently committed more to children's product.

"I'm sure they'd be keen to put an audience on Channel Eleven and I

actually think that over time if they're able to do that – they'll value that content more, whereas at the moment, children's content on the main channels compete with all the adult stuff," Buckland suggests, adding they could screen repeats on the multichannels to fill the hours up.

While still being a little on edge, the children's TV sector remains confident that content quotas for children's TV won't be dropped after the convergence review.

Another idea that has been tossed around includes creating a new

"One argument is that either one network should pick up all the quotas and be subsidised for the broadcasting of children's programs," suggests Burnett. "Another argument is that a separate free-to-air channel should be setup for commercial children's content – that content quotas be traded to that separate channel."

However producers would then only have two commercial channels to sell their programming to. This could hurt producers, because broadcasters could go with their 'favourites' rather than being more broad.

"My feeling and from what I've heard is that the community don't really agree with that, they oppose that idea," Ryan says.

"Then you're limiting the number of places you can sell your shows too if there becomes another channel – with the ABC you've [only] got two doors rather than right now you have numerous places to take your shows."

Carr says it wouldn't be a good idea although the industry would survive, while Buckland suggests another commercial FTA destination would result in children being able to find content aimed at them more easily.

"So I don't know if in practice that that is going to work. But I think it's something that should be kept on the table as a possibility."



children's TV channel, similar to ABC3. Australia's first FTA-dedicated channel for children, ABC3, has had huge success since launching in December, 2009. It has partly funded the \$14 million children's sci-fi series *Resistance*, which is currently shooting in South Australia.

However, a new FTA children's channel does raise the question of how it would be funded.

Buckland also suggests that networks interested in broadcasting more documentaries could potentially trade their children's hours to another network which wanted to increase its focus on kids programming. It makes for interesting debate.

The convergence review committee, led by Screen Australia's Glen Boreham, expects to submit its final report to government in March, 2012. 