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Dramas looming over big TV grants

By Neil Keene
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COMMERCIAL television networks should be banned from using government funds to boost the bottom line, and the money diverted to making local dramas, a media analyst said yesterday.

Economist Peter Cox said the Federal Government's \$250 million rebates were unlikely to go to quality programming.

Rather, our screens would be inundated with cheaper-to-make reality show pulp.

"This is outrageous . . . there is no requirement (for them to produce more local content) with the way they are handing this money out," Mr Cox said.

The Government should support local content by putting money into a specific fund for Aussie drama, or use it to fund Screen Australia.

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"Drama expenditure as a share of revenue has gone from 6.8 per cent in 1991 to 2.7 per cent in 2006-2007," he said.

"You don't need teams of writers to produce great dialogue in reality programs because the shows don't work like that.

"Nor do they rely on the skills of actors to play the roles, so these shows are of little benefit to the Australian film and TV industry."

The licensing fee rebates will be rolled out over the next two years, representing a 33 per cent cut in fees this year and 50 per cent in 2011.

Communications Minister Stephen Conroy said the networks needed financial help to maintain production of Australian programs.

But while networks had suffered a downturn, Mr Cox said they could easily ride out the storm.

At least 55 per cent of programs aired between 6am and midnight on commercial networks are required to be locally produced.

The year's first ratings period only began this week, but early signs suggest some Australian programs such as Ten's *7pm Project* and *The Circle* are struggling for viewers.

But another media analyst, Fusion Strategy's Steve Allen, supported the rebates, and said they could help get new projects off the ground and bring forward shows in the pipeline.

Shares in the networks have risen in the past few days as news of the cost breaks filtered to investors.

Free TV CEO Julie Flynn said Australia's licensing fees were way more than those in the UK, USA and other similar markets.

"The rebates will allow Free TV broadcasters to continue their level of commitment to Australian content as we make a successful transition to digital services," she said.

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