

# Reality of the ratings game

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To try to understand what is happening in Australian television, Green Guide decided to take the historical perspective. We asked the ratings collection agency OzTAM to dredge up some figures on viewing patterns and most-watched programs going back to 2001, the year the current ratings system was introduced.

We expected to see a significant drop in the number of programs attracting big audiences as viewers went off in search of entertainment elsewhere - laptops, desktop computers, mobile phones and the like. But what we found was that TV is still capable of attracting big audiences. It's just that what attracts them has changed markedly.

In 2001, 14 programs attracted 2 million or more viewers; in 2006 - the year of the Melbourne Commonwealth Games - 23 programs topped that mark (excluding Games events, 20 did). The figure dropped in 2008, when only eight programs topped 2 million and the biggest audience of the year was the 2.49 million who watched the Geelong v Hawthorn AFL grand final, but it soon rebounded.

This year, 16 programs were watched by 2 million or more people, 26 by 1.75 million or more and the top show of the year was the "winner announced" segment of The Block, watched by 3.37 million people (all figures are for the five capital cities only).

What has changed is the sort of TV that draws us in.

In 2001, five of the top 50 programs were movies. Remember the days when the whole family used to sit down to watch a movie on Sunday night, a movie billed as "first release" even though it had probably played at the cinema 18 months earlier and had been out on DVD or video for six months or more? Well, that was 2001, when Notting Hill (which opened in Australian cinemas in June 1999) was watched by 1.95 million people and Titanic - a film that hit the big screen in December 1997 - could draw 1.72 million.

It was also a year when a comedy (Friends) and four drama series (two of them Australian, Blue Heelers and Always Greener) also made the top 50.

By 2006, the year Ten started scheduling American crime series in the Sunday night slot, there was not one movie among the top-50 programs of the year. Tragic-event programming was hot, though: Nine's special on the Beaconsfield mine disaster, The Great Escape, attracted 2.79 million viewers to be the second most-watched non-Games program of the year. The same network's "exclusive" interview with Terri Irwin, whose husband, Steve, was killed by a stingray in September, finished in fifth spot with more than 2.5 million viewers. Two more Irwin tributes made it into the top 50, too.

Reality and talent quest programming was also big, the fourth season of Australian Idol holding nine of the top-50 spots and peaking at 2.19 million (14th) for the winner announced segment. Dancing with the Stars, The Biggest Loser and Big Brother also flew the flag for factual programming.

The Logies were still seen as relevant or glamorous enough to pull 2.26 million viewers but there was little room for the work of those up for gongs in the top 50: there was not one Australian drama among the top-50 programs and the most-watched drama of any sort was Desperate Housewives, with an average 1.67 million viewers (36th).

By 2008, things had improved enough that there were three Australian-made dramas in the top 20. Packed to the Rafters was watched by an average 1.94 million people an episode (ninth most-watched show of the year), the first season of Underbelly by 1.71 million (a remarkable result given that not one of the many people who watched it on the sly in Melbourne, where it could not be screened for legal reasons, was counted) and City Homicide by 1.63 million.

Last year, our love affair with MasterChef was in full bloom and the 15-minute winner announced segment of the finale drew a record 4.03 million viewers. A remarkable 19 programs were watched by more than 2 million people.

It wasn't the first year in which the networks had broken down a program into smaller components but 2010 was the year they fully embraced it in search of their moments of success, no matter how fleeting.

No fewer than seven of the top-20 shows were snippets or programs within programs, the most egregious being a sneak peek of Winner & Losers (which was the year's 11th most-watched "program", with 2.32 million viewers, coming after the cliffhanger finale of Packed to the Rafters) and another sneak peek, of the Ben Cousins documentary Such Is Life.

Cynical though the tactic might be, it caught on.

This year, seven of the top-50 programs had a "winner announced" component. Leading the way was The Block, which won the year with its 3.37 million.

Hot on its heels was Australia's Got Talent (second with 2.98 million) and MasterChef (fourth with 2.75 million).

Drama had a strong showing this year, holding seven of the top-50 spots.

What's more, only Downton Abbey (20th place, 1.91 million viewers) was not made locally.

But the real picture was of a nation tuning in to event TV rather than series.

The highest-rated regular program of the year (that is, one that screened at least three times) was Australia's Got Talent (with 1.94 million) but it was only the 18th show overall.

The second most-watched program, and the top-rated drama, was Downton Abbey. But with 1.91 million viewers, it was only the 20th most-watched program overall.

In fact, nine of the top-20 programs were reality shows; a further eight were sporting finals or related programming.

In other words, although Australians don't mind watching Winners & Losers (1.36 million viewers), we positively love watching victors and vanquished.

It's a Knockout, anyone?