Australian pubcaster ABC’s flagship channel is boosting its spending on local content after rethinking its relationship with BBC Worldwide. Don Groves reports.

ABC already commits the vast majority of its programming budget to local content, and that proportion is set to grow this year, thanks in part to BBC Worldwide (BBCWW).

The decision by the UK public broadcaster’s commercial arm to launch BBC First, a premium drama and comedy channel on dominant pay platform Foxtel this August, signalled a dramatic shift in its decades-old relationship with ABC.

While the Aussie pubcaster retains life-of-series rights to Doctor Who, Grand Designs, QI and Doc Martin, new shows handled by BBCWW will migrate first to the new channel and will be available to air on ABC in 2015.

As a result, ABC is gradually removing BBCWW shows from its schedules and has struck a new deal that Brendan Dahill, head of programming at ABC1 and ABC2, says “is significantly cheaper and will allow us to invest more in Australian content.”

At the start of this year, Dahill took over responsibility for both channels in a restructuring by director of television Richard Finlayson that abolished the system of channel controllers.

In the three-and-a-half years under Dahill’s watch, ABC1’s share of total viewing has stabilised and grown from 10% in 2011 to 10.2% in 2012 and then 10.8% in 2013. But for Dahill, a far more meaningful measurement is the reach of each channel. Collectively, the total reach of ABC1, ABC2, ABC3 and News 24 has increased, although ABC1 is down marginally due to audience fragmentation.

One benefit of Dahill overseeing two channels is that there is now cross-promotion across the schedules. “The challenge and the joy of ABC1 is that it covers such a broad church of programming,” says Dahill. “In any week, the number of different shows in primetime runs to the high 30s, versus 20 or so on the free-to-air broadcasters’ main channels. So we have almost 50% more titles to promote and it can be hard to be heard among all that white noise.”

Helping to maintain and enhance ABC1’s strong brand of home-grown comedy are a number of new and returning shows. Dahill rates Gristmill Productions’ Upper Middle Bogan and Princess Pictures’ It’s a Date as the stand-out comedies of last year. A second season of Bogan, the tale of a middle-class woman who discovers she’s adopted and, even worse, her birth parents are a drag racing team in the boondocks, is in production. He’s talking to Princess about another helping of It’s a Date.

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Princess Pictures producer Laura Waters and comedian Chris Lilley are making Jonah from Tonga, a six-part series coproduced with HBO that follows the adventures of the bored Tongan teenage delinquent, played by Lilley, from Summer Heights High.

Jungleboys’ The Moodys is the sequel to A Moody Christmas. Working Dog Productions is producing Utopia, a satirical comedy about the absurdity of government-sponsored schemes and set in the offices of the fictional Nation Building Authority.

Meanwhile, music-themed quiz Spicks and Specks returned for its eighth season with a new host, Josh Earl, and with singer-songwriter Ella Hooper and comedian Adam Richard as team captains. The first few episodes drew 700,000 to 800,000 viewers, down on last year, but Dahill has made a long-term commitment to the show.

The anarchic Chaser comedy team will also be back with We’ll Have to Leave It There, which will remain under wraps until close to its launch.

February saw the appointment of TV writer and producer Jon Casimir as ABC TV’s head of entertainment, starting April 8. Currently an exec
Essential Media's *Afghanistan: The Australian War*, which tells the story of Australia's longest conflict from the viewpoints of those who fought it.

Electric Pictures' *The War That Changed Us* chronicles how the First World War affected Australia, its soldiers, their families, nurses and people who opposed the war, using dramatic re-enactments, interviews with historians and footage from the battlefronts.

Closer to home, *The Flying Miners*, from Screentime, follows an eclectic group of 'fly-in, fly-out' miners and Australian mining executives, while Wildfury's *Save Your Life Tonight!* is a new six-part series that examines the country's health system.

Also coming up is Mint Pictures and Serendipity's *Brilliant Creatures*, which retraces the footsteps of Germaine Greer, Barry Humphries, Clive James and Robert Hughes as they left Australia bound for the world stage. It is written and presented by Booker Prize winner Howard Jacobson.

ABC1 spends more money on Australian drama than any other genre. "Our drama budget has grown significantly over the past four years," says Dahill. "It costs more to make drama but audiences want to see Australian characters and stories."

Among the 12 new and returning dramas on its 2014 slate are Screentime's *Anzac Girls*, a First World War saga about five young military nurses from Australia and New Zealand during the Gallipoli and Western Front campaigns.

Political thriller *The Code*, from Playmaker Media, centres on two brothers who stumble across information that people in power will kill to keep secret. It stars Ashley Zukerman and Dan Spielman.

Another is *Old School*, from Matchbox Pictures, with Bryan Brown and Sam Neill as a retired criminal and ex-cop respectively who solve crimes and unravel scams while avoiding the cops and the underworld. Dahill says the tone is slightly more nuanced than ABC comedy drama *New Tricks*, one of ABC1's most popular shows.

ABC opted to air the third season of Essential Media's legal drama *Rake* - now being remade in the US for Fox - on Sunday nights, its biggest viewing night, but ratings have not matched last year, when the show aired on Thursdays. Meanwhile, new eight-part Screentime legal drama *Janet King*, a spin-off from the series *Crowies* and starring Marta Dusseldorp as a senior prosecutor, launched on Thursdays at 20.30 on February 27.

Other returning dramas include a second season of contemporary family-based drama *The Time of Our Lives*, from Jahm Pictures, and season two of *The Doctor Blake Mysteries*, from December Media and starring Craig McLachlan as a country town doctor and police surgeon.

Also launching later this year is a third TV movie adapted from the Jack Irish crime novels by Aussie writer Peter Temple. *Jack Irish: Dead Point*, made by Essential, sees Guy Pearce return as a former criminal lawyer turned private investigator and debt collector. Germany's ZDF Enterprises, which holds international distribution rights outside Australia, was also involved in the two first Jack Irish movies, *Bad Debts* and *Black Tide*, which pulled in an average 1.5 million viewers for ABC1 in 2012.

ABC1 doesn't have any US series airing in primetime - something Dahill would like to change. "We're always on the lookout for the right show but most are tied up in output deals or snapped up by Foxtel," he says, but he adds that he hopes to find something suitable at the LA Screenings in May.

UK acquisitions, however, are regular fixtures on ABC1, among them BBC drama *Death in Paradise*, a new series of *Jonathan Creek*, *Call the Midwife*, Silk season three and numerous David Attenborough-hosted factual specials.

In March, the network launched *Fleming: The Man Who Would Be Bond*, the BBC America miniseries detailing the military career of James Bond creator Ian Fleming, on Sundays at 21.30.

ABC's catch-up service iView has made rapid gains in popularity, with a record 20 million programme plays last December. Dahill says the broadcaster is now working to glean demographic data about the iView audience.

The on-demand platform has commissioned two series, sketch comedy *Fresh Blood* and *Wastelander Panda*, billed as an epic story of loyalty and betrayal in an environment where no-one can survive alone. Last year, ABC also announced it would launch a pay-per-view service on iView in 2014 for shows that have come out of the broadcast window or are available on DVD.