

CONFERENCE REPORT

A REPORT ON THE ANNUAL GENERAL CONFERENCE OF THE COMMUNITY BROADCASTING ASSOCIATION (CBA), HELD AT SYDNEY UNIVERSITY FROM 19 - 21 NOVEMBER 1993.

The conference was attended by many community broadcasters across Australia in the fields of both radio and television and focussed on, among other things, the future direction of the CBA.

Mr Bob Peters of ANZ Capel Court delivered the keynote address entitled 'Changes, Challenges and Community Broadcasting' and covered with three areas. They were: the major changes under the new regulatory framework introduced by the *Broadcasting Services Act 1992* and its relevance to community broadcasters; the impact of new technologies and delivery systems on broadcasting; and the development of strategies to meet the challenges posed by regulatory and technological changes.

Mr Peters warned that the traditional tripartite broadcasting system in Australia (namely the commercial, national and community broadcast sectors) will be endangered by the increased commercialisation of the industry. New technologies will provide both opportunities and threats (i.e. more choice, greater depth of service (interactivity), increased audience fragmentation, commercialisation of services) which will affect community broadcasters in three ways, he said.

Firstly, community broadcasters will need to lobby government for access to channels, and to ensure that the sector will not be relegated to the AM/FM band. Secondly, sources of funding should be secured. Mr Peters warned that narrowcasters will target the audience base of community broadcasters. This poses a threat for subscription income and sponsorship revenue. Thirdly, the community broadcasting sector will be competing for other resources: the commercial sector will be competing for formats to fill out their own programs, narrowcasters may take over the traditional specialist services such as ethnic and jazz programs, previously provided by community broadcasters. Community broadcasters should

be aware that audiences may no longer want such an eclectic format offered by a community station.

In looking to the future, Mr Peters encouraged community broadcasters to continue to lobby as a unified group to maintain the tripartite broadcasting system and free access to new delivery systems (particularly with the development of digital compression technology). Traditional strengths, such as its strong sense of localism and loyalty from staff and its subscriber base, should be built upon. Mr Peters urged community broadcasters to continue to seek out opportunities such as selling specialist play lists, establishing joint ventures with local music retailers and organising the syndication of programming among members.

Mr Peters saw a natural alliance developing between community and commercial broadcasting, against the arrival of narrowcasting in their area. For community stations, the threat of narrowcasters is to erode their listener base, and for commercial stations the threat is competition for advertising.

Mr Peter Webb, ABA Deputy Chairman, outlined the ABA's role in the planning for new services and in the new regulatory regime introduced in the *Broadcasting Services Act*. The ABA's planning process has identified a strong demand for community services, which is evidenced by the receipt of around 350 submissions in support of community radio. Mr Webb stated that the Minister had requested the ABA to provide advice on the reservation of a specified number of community broadcasting services in the broadcasting services bands. He encouraged the CBA to continue with the development of its industry code of practice, a process which has successfully been achieved by the commercial television and radio sectors. The importance of the process of consultation, with CBA members, the public and the ABA, was emphasised by Mr Webb.

In his address to the conference, Mr David Beddall, the Minister for Communications, discussed how the *Broadcasting Services Act* has provided new opportunities and a better basis for the planning of services. He said that community broadcasting should complement national and commercial services, and is expected to reflect and encourage community input into programming and management.

Speaking on the topic of industry self-regulation under the *Broadcasting Services Act*, Mr Beddall stressed the need for the community broadcasting sector to move quickly to finalise its code of practice. He suggested such a code could include such things as: access to airtime; dispute resolution procedures; staff work practices, including volunteer staff; and an equitable complaints system. He talked about government funding to the CBA and stressed the need for all member stations to demonstrate their commitment to the CBA by paying their subscription fees. In his closing remarks, Mr Beddall congratulated the CBA for the important role it has played in representing the community broadcasting sector's interests to government. He said that, in the current environment of rapid change, a united force is required.

Other speakers at the conference included Mr Ian Coe of the Spectrum Management Agency, who spoke about the SMA's role under the new *Radio-communications Act 1992* (Radcom Act) in the management of the radiofrequency spectrum, and Mr Kevin Payne of the National Transmission Agency, who spoke about the responsibilities and functions of his organisation.

Mr Tony Staley of the Community Broadcasting Foundation discussed issues to do with financing the CBA and the future funding of the sector.

The development of the codes of practice is a high priority for the com

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CBAA CONFERENCE

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munity broadcasters. Draft codes had been developed on behalf of the CBAA by the Western Australian Community Broadcasters Association and these were discussed on the second day of the conference. Suggestions made by the participants during this session are to be considered in the drafting of the final version of the codes. Once agreement is reached on this final draft version, the codes will be distributed to member stations who are responsible for public consultation with their communities.

Other conference sessions attended by ABA representatives included the Community Television (CTV) workshop, where discussion was held on the future direction of CTV as it fits within the CBAA.



PLANNING BROADCASTING SERVICES

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consultation on planning to meet the requirements of its charter. This has involved bringing together in public documents much planning detail about the existing state of play. At the same time it has established working arrangements with the Spectrum Management Agency with which it has joint but separate responsibilities for management of the broadcasting spectrum. This work on existing technology is being carried out with an eye to the future and without detracting from the urgent tasks at hand. The ABA is also moving to establish itself as a source of independent technology advice. To do this it is working closely with other expert groups and the industry.



SPECTRUM MANAGEMENT REFORM

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result in unacceptable interference to other licensees.

CORE CONDITIONS

The Act specified (s. 66) that a spectrum licence must include the following core conditions relating to: the part or parts of the spectrum in which operation of radiocommunications devices is authorised. The maximum permitted level of radio emission outside such part or parts of the spectrum used. The area within which operation is authorised. The maximum permitted level of radio emission outside that area. Payment of prescribed fees.

REGISTRATION OF LICENCES

The additional flexibility and choice available to licensees through spectrum licensing also requires that there be a comprehensive data base to which the SMA or licensees can refer. The SMA currently has a data base known as SMIS which is to be replaced by a more comprehensive system known as RADCOM for which a contract was recently let. The system will be available on-line for licensees and members of the public.

All changes which a spectrum licensee wishes to make to the basic features of their licence will need to be registered with the SMA (ss. 143-146). The SMA may refuse to register changes if it is satisfied that the resultant operation of a transmitter could cause unacceptable interference to other services. The SMA may determine for this purpose what it regards as 'unacceptable interference'. This determination will be an important element in the overall framework of spectrum licensing.

SUSPENSION OR CANCELLATION

The Act sets (ss. 74-77) circumstances and procedures for suspension or cancellation of spectrum licences. These provisions will be considered in cir-

cumstances where a licensee may have contravened a condition of the licence or a provision of the Act or operated a radiocommunications device in contravention of any other law of the Commonwealth, State or Territory.

RE-ISSUE OF SPECTRUM LICENCES

The Act sets out a comprehensive framework for considering re-issue of spectrum licences (ss. 78-84). Essentially the procedure involves:

The SMA publishes a notice containing details of spectrum licences which expire in the following two year period. Licensees and members of the public may make representations to the SMA. Having regard to the representations the SMA may decide to:

- a) re-issue to the existing licensee in the public interest; or
- b) re-offer for sale in different form or with different licence conditions.

The Minister may determine a class of service for which re-issuing spectrum licences to the same licensee would be in the public interest.

RESUMPTION OF SPECTRUM

There may be limited circumstances in which the SMA may consider it necessary to resume a spectrum licence or licences. Such circumstances may arise where a segment of spectrum may be required for government use or to facilitate implementation of a broad government policy. The Act provides for resumption either by agreement with the licensee or, if necessary, with the approval of the Minister, a compulsory resumption. Resumption of spectrum licences in either circumstance is subject to payment of compensation to the licensee.

The framework for spectrum licensing outlined above is still subject to consultation with members of the Radiocommunications Consultative Council and other interested users and industry representatives.

