



The ABA has welcomed the direction from the Minister of Communications and the Arts to investigate the content of emerging on-line information and entertainment services.

## Investigation into on-line services content

The ABA has been asked to explore strategies to encourage on-line service providers and users to meet community needs. These include the development of codes, options for complaints handling, educational programs, devices for blocking or filtering certain material and offence provisions.

The ABA has been directed by the Minister for Communications and the Arts, Mr Michael Lee, to conduct the investigation.

'Our first task is to consult with key industry and user groups about the nature and scope of the challenges posed by on-line services,' said ABA Chairman, Mr Peter Webb. 'We will also be seeking the views of the wider community, including initially parents, teachers and children.'

'Participation by all parties should ensure any problems are mapped in a comprehensive and realistic fashion, while effective involvement of Australia's on-line service community should aid the investigation in its program of community consultation,' said Mr Webb.

'We will also be looking closely at the public response to the recent Consultation Paper on On-line Information Services prepared by the Attorney-General's Department and the Department of Communications and

the Arts, and seeking to raise public awareness of those issues.'

The ABA's report is due in June 1996. It may serve as a contribution to the deliberations of the National Information Services Council, the consultative body established by the Prime Minister to ensure the implementation of broadband communications services benefits all Australians.

The investigation will be broadly based and will involve the expertise of relevant Government agencies, such as the Office of Film and Literature Classification (OFLC), and the Australian Telecommunications Authority (AUSTEL).

The ABA will also be using the Internet to provide comprehensive feedback to interested parties as the investigation progresses.

### The investigation

The investigation is into the regulation of the content of on-line information and entertainment broadcasting services. It is in response to community concern about offensive and possibly harmful material available currently on on-line services such as the Internet.

The nature of this material as it relates to community standards and the protection

of children from harmful material will be a main focus of the investigation, together with the appropriateness of any measures to encourage on-line service providers and users to meet community needs.

The Minister's direction recognises ongoing technological development will provide the capability to deliver content in a form which at present is only available through the broadcasting medium. Some of the issues that exist in the regulation of broadcast content will become more relevant as on-line information services develop. The ABA will be examining these technological advances and service trends, and the extent to which such services are accommodated by the Broadcasting Services Act.

The investigation will take a consultative approach with participation by service providers, network providers, business and consumer groups, academics, educationists, parents, children and the general community. The

ABA will also take account of reports of other relevant inquiries such as the Computer Bulletin Board Services Task Force and the recent consultation paper following on from that report.

The consultation paper was prepared jointly by the Department of Communications and the Arts and the Attorney-General's Department. It proposes a strategy that can be applied to all on-line computer-based information services, and goes beyond the original issue of computer bulletin boards which was addressed by the Computer Bulletin Board Task Force (established by the Minister for Communications and the Arts and the Attorney-General in 1994).

Key elements of the consultation paper's proposed strategy are self-regulatory codes of practice and complaints handling procedures supported by legislative sanctions, devices for blocking or filtering certain material, and educational programs aimed particularly at parents and children.

The paper was issued for public comment in July, with the completion of consultation scheduled for 1 September. Industry and community responses to proposals in that paper will be an important initial input to the ABA investigation.

For further information, e-mail: [online@aba.gov.au](mailto:online@aba.gov.au). ☐

