



In a decision that may change what constitutes a community broadcaster, the Community Broadcasting Association of Australia has altered its membership rules to be technology-neutral and service-orientated.

Nigel Ryan, of the ABA's Allocations and Renewals Section, reports.

Conference wants expanded role for community broadcasting

This resolution to change the CBAA membership rules, passed at its December conference, has far reaching effects for the broadcasting industry and may impact upon how the ABA issues future community broadcasting licences.

Ms Christina Alvarez, CBAA Membership Services Manager, told *ABA Update* that, 'with the advent of multimedia and multimedia centres, the distinction between the media such as television, radio, print, computer generated material, etc., may no longer serve as a practical definition for community service providers.

'The delivery mode for the community service may be inconsequential in relation to the content that is being disseminated', Ms Alvarez said.

'The community sector has been defined in the past by the [Australian Broadcasting] Tribunal's allocation of community licences. However, with the advent of the narrowcasting sector and the ratification of the Codes of Practice, some inconsistencies and contradictions may surface. For example, due to the scarcity of community licences, narrowcasting licences may be obtained in order to offer a service under the community banner,' Ms Alvarez said.

'The CBAA National Committee has discussed the possibility that the Codes of Practice provide a clearer charter and

sector definition than that provided by licence categories.

'If the CBAA does adopt the "definition of service" approach rather than category of license, the situation may arise where CBAA membership does not reflect the licence categories as issued by the ABA,' explained Ms Alvarez.

A sixth channel

In other developments at the conference, the future of permanent licensing of community television services was hotly discussed. John Sedgewick, from the Department of Communications and the Arts (DoCA), outlined the background to the present trial of community television on the so-called 'sixth' national television channel (UHF 31 in capital cities), while ABA representatives explained how the licensing procedures for these temporary services operated.

If a ministerial review resolves to use the sixth channel for other purposes, opportunities exist for community television to use new delivery technologies such as optical fibre cable as well as the future of free-to-air community television.

The sixth channel has been made available for community access television by the Government on a continuing trial basis. This access is pending completion of a review of the television broadcasting industry under s.215 of the *Broadcasting Services Act 1992*. This review must take

place by 1 July 1997. The channel is presently available only until the end of February 1996, as the timing of the review has not yet been determined.

A number of current licensees expressed concerns about building and maintaining their services in a climate of uncertainty about the continuing availability of the channel after February 1996. They were keen to know what consultative processes would be available to them when the ABA reached their areas in its licence area planning timetable.

Conference participants quizzed the ABA as to why the ABA cannot allocate UHF 31 for all areas and what maximum power levels community television services might be allowed.

Licence allocation

ABA representatives answered questions on its new temporary transmissions policy and the development of the permanent community licence allocations process currently under way. The ABA will be consulting with the CBAA and other representative bodies on the development of these procedures in the coming months.

Aspirant and current licensees were concerned about competition for financial support in small communities if a second community radio service were to be allocated. They were concerned about how the ABA will test the merits of an applicant's claims and the increasing competition to com-

munity radio services from narrowcast services. Other matters discussed included how the community sector might fare in the introduction of digital audio broadcasting.

The CBAA

With 105 radio members of the possible 127 licensed community stations, as well as the five aspirant community television licensees presently operating trial broadcasts, the CBAA is the peak representative body for community broadcasting licensees and aspirants.

Over two hundred licensed and aspirant community broadcasters attended the conference as well as representatives from the ABA, DoCA, copyright agencies and industry affiliates.

The conference was opened by ABA Chairman, Brian Johns, who painted an optimistic picture of the possible future for community broadcasting in an environment which will be rich in channel capacity by comparison with the past. Mr Johns also announced the ABA's in principle ratification of the Codes of Practice for community radio which are to take effect from 1 January 1995.

The conference program included sessions on codes of practice, future directions and innovations, multimedia, digital technology, strategic marketing, networking and localism and a hypothetical on the topic of 'Economic rationalism and maintaining the philosophy'. □