

The Digital Radio Broadcasting Task Force has released its report to the ABA; the report looks at broadcaster views of digital radio broadcasting (DRB) and provides a foundation for more detailed engineering plan to implement this new technology.

Digital radio broadcasting

An industry task force convened by the ABA, the Digital Radio Broadcasting Task Force (DRBTF) has recently delivered its final report to the ABA. Digital radio broadcasting (DRB) is seen as the next significant development in sound broadcasting. It involves complex public interest and industry issues because it uses entirely new technology which will require consumers to buy new receivers.

The Task Force report, *Developing Digital Radio Broadcasting for Australia*, looks at broadcaster views of DRB and contains the results of substantial engineering analysis conducted by a working party of the Task Force. A number of broadcasters and other spectrum users assisted in the development of this report which will provide a foundation for more detailed engineering planning once the Government decides how DRB will be implemented in Australia.


DRB is able to deliver audio quality equivalent to the now common compact disk. In the same way as digital technology removed the click, pops, and other noises common to vinyl recordings, DRB can eliminate most of the signal impairments experienced in radio listening (particularly mobile listening) Like compact disks, which required a new player, digital radio needs a new receiver.

DRB also has potential to provide new features for radio. Its digital data stream can carry services other than sound, and these can make using the radio much easier. For example, travellers will be able to select their favourite program as one station gets out of range the radio will be able to find new stations broadcasting that program or type of program. In the case of nationally networked stations (like ABC Classic FM) the receiver could provide continuous service by selecting the appropriate transmitters along the way.

In addition to these features, DRB channels can be adapted to suit different types of program content. For example, several voice programs could be transmitted in the same space as a high quality music program. Music programmes might carry with them information about the artist, the recording title and number, and could eventually even provide discount or competition vouchers through an attached printer.

At present DRB technology is still in its infancy. A few pre-production consumer car radios are being used in extensive testing in Europe and several of these radios are being used for DRB trial broadcasts in Australia. Over the next few years, manufacturers will start producing DRB receivers for the retail market. Growth of services is likely to be slow initially because new transmitters must be installed and broadcasters will need to experiment with this new medium. By the turn of the century a wide range of relatively cheap consumer receivers should be on the market opening the way for a mass migration to digital broadcasting.

Consumer response to other digital audio developments suggest that consumers will move quickly to acquire digital radio once the price is acceptable and interesting programming is available. But it will take time for everyone to switch to digital so the transition period might be 15-20 years, during which a mix of both AM/FM and DRB services would be available. DRB receivers are expected to come fully equipped to receive both new and existing services.

The ABA has forwarded its report to the Digital Radio Advisory Committee, set up by the former Minister for Communications and the Arts the Hon. Michael Lee MP. The current Minister, Senator, the Hon. Richard Alston MP, has endorsed the continuing activities of this committee, which is expected to report to him in February 1997. 

Copies of the ABA Task Force report, *Developing Digital Radio Broadcasting for Australia*, are available at the ABA's web site <http://www.ica.gov.au/aba/bpcov.htm> and hard copies are available from the ABA, price \$10.