



The challenge of digital broadcasting

The planned commencement of digital television and radio in 2001 represents an enormous challenge both for the ABA and the broadcasting industry, Professor David Flint, ABA Chairman said at the annual conference of the Federation of Australian Radio Broadcasters in Melbourne on 12 September.

'While the proposed introduction of digital television has received wide coverage, the accompanying announcement about digital radio services seems to have received little attention,' Professor Flint said.

'Commercial, community and national (ABC and SBS) radio broadcasters will be able to convert to digital radio, but will be required to transmit their programs in analog mode for a simulcasting period to ensure that listeners will not be disadvantaged.'

Digital radio in Australia will use the Eureka 147 system and generally operate on the L band of the spectrum (1452-1492 MHz), with the use of VHF spectrum being considered in regional areas, the Minister for Communications, the Information Economy and the Arts has announced. Existing broadcasters will share a multiplex facility which can provide five CD quality radio services per channel.

'In announcing the introduction of digital radio, the Minister said there will also be opportunities for new digital commercial radio services. The number and timing of new entrants will be determined as part of the planning process,' Professor Flint said.

The Minister has invited the ABA, the Australian Communications Authority and industry representatives to participate in a planning and steering committee to develop a comprehensive framework for the implementation of digital radio. The committee will be chaired by representatives of the Department of Communications, Information Economy and the Arts.

Despite the large task of planning for new digital television and radio services, the ABA is attempting to keep to its schedule for the planning of new analog radio services, including services for mainland metropolitan markets, Professor Flint said.

'Earlier this year, the ABA informed interested parties that draft licence area plans for metropolitan markets would be released by the end of this year, followed by final licence area plans next year. It is our wish to keep to this schedule. We are now examining how we can

achieve this while we undertake our new digital planning tasks," he said.

'We have had to rearrange our work so that we now have two planning teams, one analog and one digital. Some resources will be found for the analog planning task from the provision for cost recovery in the new digital legislation.'

In his address Professor Flint said the ABA wanted to work with the commercial radio industry to ensure to the satisfaction of the community and their elected representatives that the system of self regulation and co-regulation with regard to program content works and works well. He also said the ABA wants to see that broadcasters throughout Australia are encouraged to provide coverage of matters of local significance.

A copy of Professor Flint's speech is available on the ABA Web site, www.aba.gov.au.

1998 Carl Bertelsmann Prize

The Bertelsmann Foundations announced the winners of the 1998 Carl Bertelsmann Prize at the 'Communications 2000 – Innovation and Responsibility in the Information Society' conference held in Gütersloh, Germany. The ABA was shortlisted for the prize because of its general co-regulatory approach to broadcasting services, and in particular its use of this model in relation to online services. ABA Deputy Chairman Mr Gareth Grainger addressed the conference (see p.8 for extract of his speech).

The ABA was selected by the German based Bertelsmann Foundation, from more than a hundred possible prize candidates, as one of six organisations from around the world that stand for a balanced approach to regulatory issues in the digital era.

'The ABA serves as a model, especially in self-regulation,' the Bertelsmann Foundation said. 'The ABA's promotion of self regulation among commercial broadcasting companies demonstrates the practicability of this approach and is not achieved at this level of consistency by any of the other supervisory authorities examined. The ABA is the world leader in terms of extending this strategy to the online sector.'

The 1998 prize was awarded jointly to the Canadian Radiotelevision and Telecommunications Commission and the Recreational Software Advisory Council, a non-profit organisation founded by the US software industry. Apart from the ABA, the other



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nominees were: the U.S. Federal Communications Commission; Education Network Australia (EdNA) an Australian government initiative; and Bayern Online, a trend-setting project launched by the Bavarian State Government.

The award was presented live on the Bertelsmann Foundation Web site, <http://preis.stiftung.bertelsmann.de>

ABA Fairfax investigation

At its regular fortnightly meeting on 17 August, the ABA considered the resignation of Mr Bob Muscat as Chief Executive Officer of John Fairfax Holdings Limited and the setting up of a three person interim committee of management to run the newspaper publisher.

The ABA is investigating whether a breach of the cross media rules of the Broadcasting Services Act has occurred since the appointment of Mr Brian Powers to the board of directors of John Fairfax Holdings Limited.

The terms of reference of that investigation are: whether Mr Brian Powers, Mr Kerry Packer, Mr James Packer, Publishing and Broadcasting Limited, Consolidated Press Holdings Limited or any related or associated persons have since 17 May 1998 committed any breaches of a provision in Division 5, 6 or 7 of Part 5 of the *Broadcasting Services Act 1992*.

The ABA expects to be in a position to give a further indication of progress in its investigation next month. It should then be in a position to announce when a report of its investigation will be released.

The ABA's report will, so far as is possible, confine itself to looking at events during the period 17 May to 24 August 1998. It will consider the circumstances of Mr Muscat's resignation and his testimony to the ABA on 24 August.

Fairfax has informed the ABA that it is actively seeking a new Chief Executive Officer and that the three person committee of management is only an interim arrangement.

'The ABA will continue to scrutinise developments at Fairfax,' said Professor David Flint, ABA Chairman.

ABA allocates new non-broadcasting services bands commercial radio licence for Albany, WA

The ABA has allocated a new commercial radio broadcasting licence to serve Albany, WA. The licence is restricted in its operation to using

means of delivery which do not use the broadcasting services bands.

The licence has been allocated to Pirate Broadcasters Pty Ltd and is the first non-broadcasting services bands commercial radio licence to be allocated by the ABA.

Non-broadcasting services bands commercial radio licences can be allocated by the ABA on application under s.40 of the *Broadcasting Services Act 1992*. Applicants for a licence must pay an application fee, currently set at \$695.

The ABA understands the licensee proposes to provide its service on 1611 kHz, a frequency just outside the AM radio band. The MF-AM band referred to the ABA by the Minister for Communications, the Information Economy and the Arts for planning is 526.5 to 1606.5 kHz inclusive.

The licence area for the new service is the same as that applying to the existing commercial radio services in Albany, 6VA and 6AAY.

GWN acts on ABA television reception concerns in South West WA

Following concerns expressed by the ABA about reception of the SSW television service in South West WA, Golden West Network Pty Limited has agreed to install and maintain a television transmitter in the town of Pemberton.

Golden West Network's offer came in written submissions on the ABA's proposal to impose a licence condition on Golden West Network's SSW commercial television licence.

The ABA's action followed representations about television reception in the licence area by the Federal Member for Forrest, Mr Geoff Prosser and others.

Golden West Network has also provided the ABA with data on field strength measurements carried out by the National Transmission Agency (NTA) in relation to the signal quality in parts of the SSW licence area, including the five towns listed in the ABA's proposed condition (Pemberton, Margaret River, Bridgetown, Nannup and Manjimup).

Golden West Network believes the data shows that signal quality in the five towns is no worse than it was before the refurbishment of the Mt Lennard transmission facility in December 1996.

The ABA is presently considering Golden West Network's submissions and the NTA's technical data.