The ABA is planning the introduction of digital terrestrial broadcasting. Following is a summary of progress to date.

Progress towards digital television conversion

The *Television Broadcasting Services (Digital Conversion) Act 1998* requires the ABA to develop legislative schemes, for the conversion of commercial and national television broadcasting services from analog to digital mode over time.

Among other things, these schemes will empower the ABA to determine general technical assumptions for digital planning, to make digital channel plans to allot the channels needed for conversion, and to determine a pro forma and criteria for approval of the implementation plans that broadcasters lodge.

On 30 October 1998, the ABA released for comment its draft Commercial Television Conversion Scheme, Part A (for areas other than remote areas), an explanatory paper and a draft regulation impact statement. The period for comment has closed and the ABA is currently considering the submissions received.

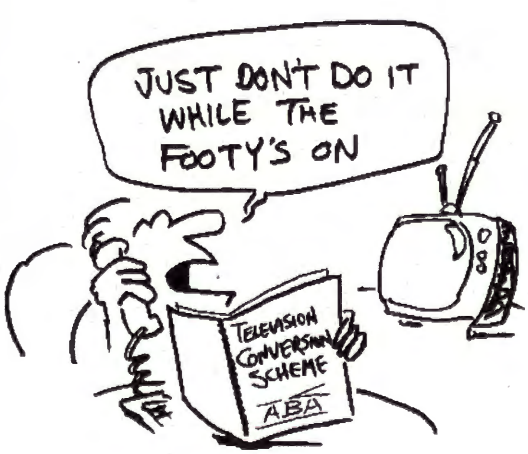
On 12 November 1998, the ABA released its draft *Australian Broadcasting Planning Handbook for Digital Terrestrial Television Broadcasting*. The handbook looks at the planning parameters, measurement methods and best practice that could be used for the detailed planning of transmission facilities for digital television.

The parameters detailed in the draft handbook were developed in close consultation with the Digital Television Channel Planning Consultative Group (DTCPCG), which was formerly known as the Federation of Australian Commercial Television Stations (FACTS) Specialist Group-Spectrum Planning. The DTCPCG now consists of representatives from the ABA, FACTS, commercial licensees, the Communications Laboratory, National Telecommunications Authority, Australian Communications Authority, ABC, SBS, Australian Subscription Television and Radio Association and potential datacasters.

The role of the DTCPCG is to provide advice to the ABA on:

- the development of the digital channel plans; and
- some of the general technical planning assumptions it may take into account in developing the digital channel plans.

On 24 December 1998, the ABA released for comment its National Television Conversion Scheme, Part A (for areas other than remote areas), an explanatory paper and an issues paper on Part B of both the commercial and national



The *Television Broadcasting Services (Digital Conversion) Act 1998* came into force on 27 July 1998. National (ABC and SBS) and commercial broadcasters in the five mainland metropolitan markets are required to commence transmissions in digital mode on 1 January 2001. Digital transmissions are to commence in all other markets by 1 January 2004. There will be a simulcast period of at least eight years.

schemes. The issues paper outlines some of the policy issues to be resolved when formulating Part B of the schemes and seeks public comment on those issues. The period for comment on the draft scheme and the issues paper closed on 5 February 1999.

The legislation requires broadcasters to achieve the same level of coverage and potential reception quality' for the digital service as is currently achieved by the analog service. The draft conversion schemes require the ABA to prepare a document explaining the technical assumptions to which it will have regard when considering whether the transmission of a broadcasting service in digital mode will achieve the same level of coverage and potential reception quality as is achieved by the transmission of that service in analog mode. The ABA is working closely with industry through the DTCPCG to prepare that document.

The DTCPCG has five sub-groups working on channel plans for the 15 television markets that are expected to commence digital transmissions on 1 January 2001.

These markets consist of the five mainland metropolitan markets and the following ten major regional markets: Newcastle, Canberra, Wollongong, NSW Central Coast, Sunshine Coast, Toowoomba, Gold Coast, Bunbury, Hobart and Darwin.

The sub-groups have identified a number of channel planning options for the ABA's consideration. Priority has been given to developing channel plans for areas where available spectrum is most limited, most notably in New South Wales and Victoria.

For the remaining stages of digital conversion, the ABA expects to:

- finalise Part A of the Commercial and National Television Conversion Schemes during the first half of 1999;
- release digital channel plans for the metropolitan markets and ten major regional markets by about mid 1999, and for all other markets by about mid 2000; and
- finalise the handbook and the application form for implementation plans by about mid 1999.

It is expected that 80 per cent of Australians will potentially have access to digital television transmissions on 1 January 2001.

Digital television standards

Standards for digital television have been under development in Australia since the announcement by broadcasters in mid 1998 that their preference is for the European Digital Video Broadcasting (DVB-T) standards for Australia. This work has been going on within arrangements in Standards Australia, under the Chairmanship of Bob Greeney of the ABA and the assistance of Alan Williams, formerly of Philips, who is working on receiver standards, and Dick Barton of the Federation of Australian Commercial Television Stations, who is looking after transmission standards.

The Standards Australia committee and its subcommittees have wide representation from the broadcasting industry, including metropolitan and regional commercial broadcasters, the ABC, SBS and pay TV operators. Major receiver manufacturers are also represented as is the Australian Electronic Equipment Manufacturers Association.

Essentially, the digital television standards adopt the DVB-T standards. However, there are some differences because of local conditions, for example UHF television channels in Australia use 7 MHz (Europe and other PAL countries use 8 MHz UHF channels) and there are different requirements for electronic program guides and service information.

There are two significant differences in the Australian decision to use DVB-T standards. One is the adoption of the Dolby AC-3 digital sound system, another is the adoption of DVB-T standards for high definition television pictures (HDTV).

While Australia was the first country to adopt ▷