



The ABA will coordinate digital datacasting trials which will enable potential datacasters to test the technical feasibility of their services before the allocation of licences for permanent or long-term digital datacasting services.

Digital datacasting trial

The ABA is to make spectrum available for test transmissions of digital datacasting services. The transmissions will enable potential datacasters to test the technical feasibility of their services before the allocation of licences for permanent or long-term digital datacasting services.

'Digital datacasting promises to be an exciting addition to the range of media services available to the Australian community,' said Professor David Flint, ABA Chairman.

'While the limits on the type of services allowed as datacasting are still to be determined, various specialist information services providing news, weather, stock reports and sports results are anticipated. Once permanent or long-term digital datacasting commences, there are likely to be a range of services offered which can only be imagined at present. These services would be provided using the broadcasting spectrum and may be able to be accessed through television sets.'

The ABA is currently developing a draft policy frame-

work for the trial which will address issues such as the markets in which the test transmissions can be conducted, the length of time that test transmissions can be provided and the process by which aspirant datacasters will be licensed. The ABA hopes to release the draft policy framework for public comment in the next few months. It will form the basis of consultation with all interested parties.

'The ABA plans to hold the trial in the second half of this year,' said Professor Flint. 'While it is impossible to know at this stage how many candidates there may be and how many channels might be available, the ABA will endeavour to let everyone who is interested participate in the trial.'

Existing free-to-air broadcasters will not be eligible to participate in the datacasting trial. It will be directed to potential new players in the terrestrial transmission of media services.

Background to the trial

The Minister for Communications, Information and Tech-

nology and the Arts wrote to the ABA in August 1998 requesting advice on practical arrangements for making broadcasting services bands spectrum available for test transmissions of datacasting services. In December 1998, the ABA replied proposing the features of a datacasting trial.

The Minister recently gave the ABA a formal direction to carry out the datacasting trial. The direction was gazetted on 3 March (*Gazette* No. 9).

It is the ABA's intention that the trial be limited. This is to minimise diversion of resources away from the preparation of digital channel plans needed for the conversion of television services from analog to digital and completion of analog planning for metropolitan and regional radio services. For example, it is currently envisaged that a maximum of two broadcasting services bands channels will be made available in two capital cities and two regional centres for the purposes of the trial.

In these and other features, the proposed policy framework must conform to the

Minister's direction, which provides in part for:

- limited test transmissions of short term duration with clear commencement and completion dates; and
- provision of opportunities for all organisations with genuine proposals to have access to test transmissions, and minimise scope for individual organisations to gain an unfair commercial advantage.

Digital television conversion

The ABA has commenced detailed technical planning for the introduction of digital television on 1 January 2001. The ABA's objective in preparing its digital channel plan will be to enable a broadcaster's digital transmission coverage to match its analog coverage.

Spare capacity in the broadcast frequencies is likely in most areas of Australia after providing each existing television broadcaster with additional channels for digital broadcasting. The precise channels available will vary from area to area. The Minister is to conduct a review, by



1 January 2000, into how this spare capacity will be made available for allocation to other users for non-broadcast purposes. Spectrum availability will increase considerably at the end of the analog/digital simulcast period.

What is datacasting?

Datacasting services are defined in the *Television Broadcasting Services (Digital Conversion) Act 1998* :

... a service (other than a broadcasting service) that delivers information (whether in the form of data, text, speeches, images or in any other form) to persons having equipment appropriate for receiving that information, where the delivery of the service uses the broadcasting services bands.

Consequently, datacasting is not broadcasting, but it does use the broadcasting services bands. The term applies uniquely to services delivered via the broadcasting services bands, even though similar services may be available over other spectrum.

The Digital Conversion Act does not contain any further guidelines for determining what types of services are to be considered datacasting and for determining how these are to be distinguished from broadcasting. It does, however, require the Minister to cause a review to be conducted into:

whether any amendments of the laws of the Commonwealth should be made to deal with the scope of services that are categorised as datacasting services (paragraph 59 (1) (dd)).

The Department of Communications, Information Technology and the Arts is currently

conducting the Review into Scope of Datacasting Services.

Who will be able to provide datacasting services?

There are two groups of potential datacasting service providers—existing free-to-air broadcasters and new entrants.

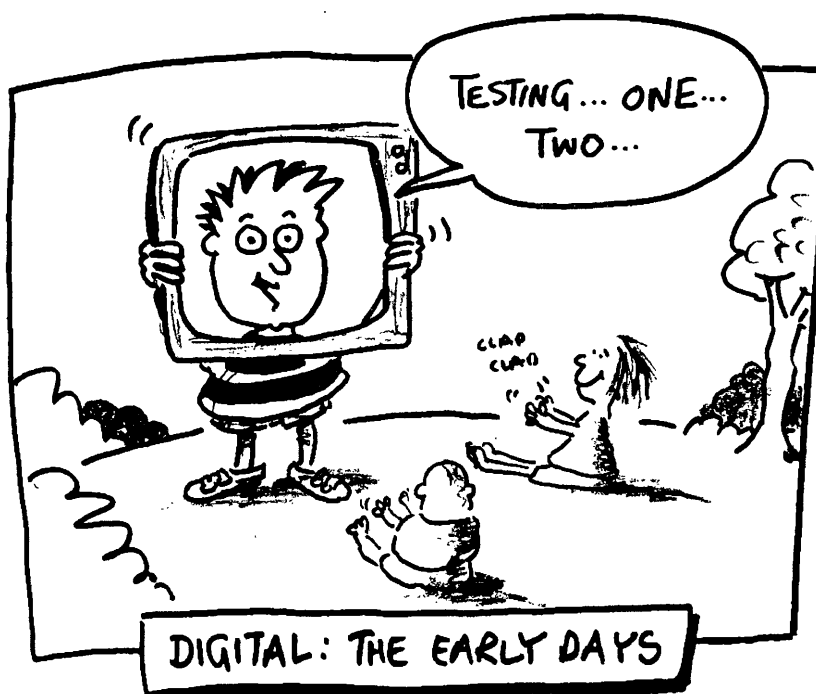
Taking the new entrants first, channels in the broadcasting services bands not needed for the digital television conversion process will be identified and made available for allocation, on a competitive basis,

services) using any residual capacity in their digital television channels, but will pay a charge for doing so, under the *Datacasting Charge (Imposition) Act 1998*.

The charge will be determined by the Australian Communications Authority and will be linked to the price paid for datacasting channels by other datacasters in a way that promotes competitive neutrality. The principle that will underlie the determination is that free-to-air broadcasters, who are allocated spectrum free of charge, should not have an unfair competitive advantage

liament. Such a resolution can't be passed until a report has been provided to Parliament by the Minister on the outcome of a number of reviews provided for in the Digital Conversion Act, including the review into the scope of datacasting services. In practice, the date for commencement of permanent digital datacasting is also dependent on the completion of digital channel planning by the ABA.

These restrictions on the commencement of permanent digital datacasting services do not prevent the ABA allocating channels in the broadcast-



for the provision of datacasting services. Free-to-air broadcasters will not be allowed to bid for these channels. In identifying such channels, the ABA will need to take account of the possible need for spectrum for future commercial broadcasting services.

Free-to-air broadcasters will be allowed to provide datacasting services (including subscription datacasting

over other datacasters, who have purchased spectrum on the open market.

When will permanent digital datacasting services commence?

Permanent digital datacasting services cannot be transmitted before a day to be fixed by Proclamation following a resolution by both Houses of Par-

liament. Such a resolution can't be passed until a report has been provided to Parliament by the Minister on the outcome of a number of reviews provided for in the Digital Conversion Act, including the review into the scope of datacasting services. In practice, the date for commencement of permanent digital datacasting is also dependent on the completion of digital channel planning by the ABA. These restrictions on the commencement of permanent digital datacasting services do not prevent the ABA allocating channels in the broadcast-