ABA Update recently took advantage of the visit by Richard Hooper, Chair of the Radio Authority [UK] to ask him about broadcasting in the UK and what effect the Communications White Paper might have.

Radio in the UK and the white paper

Radio services in the UK consist of the BBC, commercial and pirate.

The Radio Authority licences and regulates non-BBC radio—commercial radio, hospital radio and student radio. The main types of commercial radio are classic, chart hits, dance music, jazz and talk stations. Smaller stations operate under restricted service licences (RSL) which are the equivalent of special event licences in Australia. There are three national commercial radio stations, one on the FM band broadcasting classical music and two on the AM band broadcasting talk-sport and rock music.

The Radio Authority is allocated spectrum and advertises the licence, applicants propose format and the Radio Authority decides what format/ licensee is successful. The most important of the criteria is diversity of choice.

Licences for the national commercial services are awarded by auction and for the local services by what is called the 'beauty parade'. Applications for the licences are assessed against the criteria in the Broadcasting Act (similar to the merit-based process in Australia for community radio licences). The Radio Authority publishes assessments of winning applications on its web site as well as notes of all its meetings.

The Department for Culture, Media and Sport and the Department of Trade and Industry have recently released a Communications White Paper. What are its main features?

The main news item is the change in structure of regulation: it suggests that the government will replace the current five or six individual agencies with one body—the Office of Communications, (OfCom), which is somewhat similar to the Federal Communications Commission in the USA. The argument is that we have converging technology—radio stations can broadcast by terrestrial, cable and satellite means, and therefore we need a convergent regulator.

The White Paper looked at how to join the existing regulators: OfTel (Office of Telecommunications), the Spectrum Agency, and the three broadcasting regulators—the Radio Authority, the Independent Television Commission (the sister agency to the Radio Authority which regulates all non-BBC television) and Broadcasting Standards Commission, a complaints body for all radio and television.

The analagous model in Australia would be to merge the ABA and the Australian Communications Authority.

Richard Hooper,
Chair of the Radio
Authority, UK

Do you think the convergence model is applicable to other countries?

The Federal Communications Commission has been the regulator of telecommunications and broadcasting in the USA since 1934. Canada has the Canadian Radio-television and Communications Commission which looks after radio, television and telecommunications. Most other countries are like Australia and Britain in having separate telecommunications and broadcasting regulators. But I think with convergence and with digital technology taking over from analog technology there will be more convergence in regulation. It's like everything else—it is a matter of timing. In the UK, there must be five or six million digital television sets. The rapid uptake was encouraged by a mixture of market driven, in that it was attached to a strong drive from the pay TV companies, and technology.

We are in a digital age—analog is disappearing. The British Government is extremely keen on Britain being a leader in the new technologies.

What advances have been made with digital broadcasting?

Britain is the world leader in digital audio broadcasting, or digital radio as we call it in consumer terms: we have about one hundred and sixty commercial services running plus the BBC services. The Radio Authority licences and regulates analog and digital radio services. In the UK, digital services are licensed as multiplexes. A typical multiplex will broadcast eight services: we licence them and the digital multiplexes are then responsible for the day to day management of the services. We have one digital multiplex service operating nationally and two operating in London with a third to be licensed.

Is there regulation of radio on the Internet?

At the moment the Internet is entirely self-regulating—the ABA I think leads the world in Internet regulation. Our position is that we do not have any desire to licence or regulate Internet radio. We do however desire to see a sensible self or co-regulatory regime and can learn from the Australian experience (one of the purposes of my visit has been to learn from Australia's many years' experience of community radio, a new type of station that might be brought into being [in the UK] in any new legislation).

When are the recommendations in the White Paper likely to be implemented?

There were quite a few 'green bits' in the white paper. One issue that wasn't really addressed was media ownership. There is nothing there on whether it will be liberalised, which is what we recommend in our submission to the White Paper.[1] There is quite a lengthy process first, including a general election. It is quite a bi-partisan area, but it is likely to take a few years.

[1] *Radio Regulation for the 21st Century, Submission to DCMS/DTI, Radio Authority, June 2000.*