

The Hon. Daryl Williams, Minister for Communications, Information Technology and the Arts, opened day two of the conference by talking across the range of the ABA's responsibilities, but also discussing the proposed ABA/ACA merger and expected benefits. Here is an edited extract from that speech.

THE MINISTER'S SPEECH

This is an exciting and challenging time for the media and broadcasting industry. The transition to digital technology, cross-media reform, content management and institutional reform are just some of the important issues that have been the subject of debate this year and which continue to be a focus of debate and discussion.

For Government, interaction with industry and regulatory bodies is essential to understanding and responding to the changing communications environment.

Reforms

One of the key responsibilities of Government is to ensure the effectiveness of the communications regulatory environment. Maintaining our high quality broadcasting sector requires us to keep a close eye on the effectiveness and relevance of that regulatory environment. This year, we have pursued major reforms to ensure that our regulatory arrangements reflect technological and market changes as well as evolving community expectations.

ABA/ACA merger

One key reform is the establishment of a new media and communications regulator, the Australian Communications and Media Authority. ACMA will be formed through a merger of the ABA and the ACA. And it will be responsible for regulating broadcasting, radio communications, online content and telecommunications.

The creation of ACMA recognises the changing nature of the communications environment. New digital technologies allow previously distinct sectors to compete across increasingly convergent markets, using a range of different delivery platforms. In this environment, maintaining two separate regulators, both dealing with similar issues but focusing on different sectors of the communications industry, is neither practical nor effective. It can create uncertainty and, more worryingly, it can create regulatory inconsistency.



The Hon. Daryl Williams, Minister for Communications, Information Technology and the Arts, addressing the conference

The establishment of ACMA will enable a coordinated regulatory response to converging technologies and services and to the long-term management of spectrum. Subject to the passage of enabling legislation, ACMA will be established by 1 July 2005.

It is important to note that, while it will deliver a more efficient and effective administrative structure, the merger of the ABA and ACA will not be accompanied by substantive regulatory changes. Our existing regulatory structures are robust and the current distinct broadcasting and telecommunications frameworks remain appropriate. The benefit of ACMA is that it will be better placed to address issues that arise where these distinct frameworks intersect and to respond to policy challenges that may arise in the future. It will allow better coordination between regulatory frameworks to minimise the prospect of inconsistency and opportunity for regulatory gaming.

The Government's planned merger involves no reduction in resources currently allocated to the ABA and the ACA to conduct their statutory functions.

We are of the view that the current functions need to be maintained and that the new body is properly supported and resourced.