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tion of public payphones determined, and how adequate are these locations to current users'. The report goes on to question whether, in the absence of needs data, public payphones provide the facilities the public require, or how adequate current payphone models or booths are.

AUSTEL commissioned its own research into payphone users in connection with this inquiry, and came up with some useful and interesting findings in field where there is a dearth of existing research. For example:

- seventy per cent of pay phone users were male;
- the age group 19-29 made the highest volume of calls (38 per cent);
- a majority of people with hearing disabilities and other physical disabilities thought that payphones did not cater adequately for their needs.

A key finding of the survey was that a high proportion of payphone users (20 per cent) did not have a private phone at home, and six out of ten of these people had a household income of less than \$25,000. Two thirds were not in paid employment, and more than half were on social security.

Asked why they had no phone at home, 27 per cent of this group said that it was too expensive to install and 21 per cent, that it was too expensive to run.

These findings have important implications in the context of the Universal Service Obligation requirement for payphones which are 'reasonably accessible'. Price controls for payphones apply only to **public** payphones, though presumably Telecom can count the provision of any kind of payphone (including blue phones which may charge as much as 80c a call) towards its USO.

But the research suggests that cost could be a major factor in accessibility. This could give AUSTEL a rationale for rejecting any price increase for payphones proposed by Telecom if accessibility by a significant group of users is to be maintained. □

AOTC Top in Telecoms Growth

In line with Government policy to open up telecommunications markets in Australia, the last five years have seen significant growth, with 117 companies currently offering around 400 information services, communications networks, wireless and video/broadcasting services.

While this is an impressive record in a time of recession, AOTC, the Government carrier comprising Telecom and OTC, still dominates when it comes to revenue. Although it has only 25 per cent of the services on offer, AOTC controls more than 70 per cent of the revenue of the \$2.7 billion telecommunications services market (excluding non-enhanced phone services).

AOTC operates 65 per cent of all networks services but generates 97 per cent of the revenue in this sector, and in wireless, where it operates only 17 per cent of all services, it generates a staggering 83 per cent of revenue.

The statistics are taken from the *Directory of Electronic Services and Communication Networks in Australia and New Zealand*, \$235 annually with three quarterly updates. To order: (049) 988 144 or fax (049) 988 247. □

Timed Local Calls Hysteria

Among all the scare tactics and furphies of the election campaign, possibly none was more spurious - or more cynical - than the resuscitation by the ALP of the Great Spectre of Timed Local Calls.

It was under the Hawke Government that this issue first entered the demonology of Australian voters. The tragedy is that the issue of timing telephone calls was so ineptly handled at the outset, and the extent of rational debate so negligible, that only an extremely brave (or unpopular) political party would dare express support for it.

John Hewson had the issue thrown at him on the campaign trail in outback South Australia and at first sidestepped it. When the inevitable storm broke, however, he was forced to back down and make a statement that there would be no timed local calls.

Australian domestic phone users are not given any information which would help them to consider the issue rationally. For instance, how many people understand that under the current system, businesses are able to send hundreds of faxes for the cost of one local call, an inequity for which the domestic subscriber ultimately must pay? Nor has it been made clear to the public that domestic users who make many short local calls could potentially make considerable savings on their phone bills if they opted for a timed system, with the cost of a local call currently at 30 cents. Alternatively, it is technically possible right now to offer a fixed price option to subscribers.

While the Consumer' Telecommunications Network welcomed Hewson's assurances about maintaining untimed local calls, CTN Co-ordinator Edwina Deakin said: 'Coalition guarantees of untimed local calls are all very well, but if they come at the cost of 40 or 50 cents a call, then consumers will feel betrayed.' She called on Dr Hewson to guarantee the current price cap for local calls of CPI minus 5.5 per cent.

Perhaps we can hope that, with the resounding mandate the Keating Government now has, the new Minister for Communications could at some future date attempt to initiate a more rational and less hysterical public debate on this issue? □