



# Public TV Gets Mere Year

**After years of battling for the right to establish community-based television, public broadcasters in Sydney and Melbourne were last month awarded a licence by the ABA to use the last available high power free to air channel for this purpose - though only for one year.**

The two groups, Community Television Sydney and Melbourne Community Television are consortiums comprising a coalition of public television, community groups and educational interests.

They will broadcast over UHF channel 31 (adjoining channel 28, the one used by SBS). Although this channel is available nationally, Melbourne and Sydney were the obvious choices for the initial licences since these cities have the most experience and have established structures to operate the services. Announcing the move, ABA chairman Brian Johns said that in the next six months, the Authority 'expects to make the sixth channel more widely available in other parts of Australia as demand arises'.

The battle to establish public television (as it has generally been known) dates back to the era of video access centres in the 1960s and 70s. In recent years, viewers in several cities have been given a taste of how it might work when public TV groups held test broadcasts for periods of a few weeks at a time. The concept has also been the subject of numerous feasibility studies and reports, the latest being the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Transport, Communications and Infrastructure inquiry into the use of the sixth channel, which reported in November last year.

Unlike radio, which can operate on a relative shoestring, television - even of a no-frills kind - is an expensive medium to operate, and successive governments have continued to resist the efforts of the public television lobby out of a fear that once established, it would become another drain on the public purse.

## Limited Period

The community television licences are in force only until 28 February 1994. The ABA is not in a position to grant permanent licences on the sixth channel before the ministerial review of the television industry, scheduled for 1997 - though it is difficult to see why this inhibited the granting of a longer period interim licence. A year does not give the licensees much time to begin operations, show that they can sustain regular programming and, most important, attract sufficient funding.

The PBAA has communicated its 'disappointment' at the one year period to the ABA, saying that the limited duration 'could jeopardise the viability of CTV during this crucial period'. The ABA responded that after the election,

when the new Government developed a timetable for the review, they would be in a better position to extend the drop-through period. The PBAA sees hope in the ABA's decision, in mid-February, to extend from one to two years the period during which a number of tourist radio services are permitted to use vacant frequencies.

The ABA has already received applications from groups in other states wanting to use the channel, and is handling these on a confidential basis.

A fundamental difference between community and mainstream television is that the former is essentially localised in nature. While it is permitted to carry sponsorship, sponsorship announcements - as with community radio - are likely to feature small business ads and other local advertising. Other planned sources of funding are subscribers and members. The ABA has made it a condition of the licences that they are used for non-profit purposes, and revenue will be directed to running costs.

Kate Ingham, Vice President (TV) of the PBAA said that community TV would complement existing TV by focusing on local news, information and entertainment, presenting innovative and quality programming including the work of Australian and overseas film and video makers.

The sector is working collaboratively with universities, TAFE, libraries, schools, adult and community education authorities, and with government information services, all of which see 'great benefits in gaining access to affordable airtime and low cost production' to meet demonstrable unmet needs for their services, Ingham said.

## ABA Insists on Access

In its statement announcing the award of the licences, the ABA placed considerable emphasis on the need for 'open access' on the part of the licensees, and issued an access statement setting out its requirements in this regard. In this statement, the ABA says that it will consider the extent to which the constituting documents of applicants for community/ educational non-profit services safeguard:

- the level of openness or non-exclusivity in membership and membership policy;
- the existence and fairness of any grievance mechanisms relating to membership exclusions;
- the equity of access for members to programming airtime and the existence of a mechanism designed to allocate airtime fairly;
- enough flexibility of program policy and format to allow new sources to be incorporated;
- the right of the community to take part in the operation and management of the service. □