



Communications Strategy: Govt. Must Take a Lead

Is Australia missing the boat by failing to have an overall strategy for the development and exploitation of technologies in areas like computers, telecommunications, broadcasting and video?

Recent times have seen a proliferation of industry bodies, committees and working parties looking at aspects of all these technologies. While there is widespread consensus that technological convergence (or 'fusion' as some prefer to call it) is upon us, there is also concern that without some leadership from the Government, Australia will lag behind the rest of the world, including other countries in our region, and will miss out on valuable industry and trade opportunities.

As an example of what we may be losing by failing to act in this area, two years ago there were 18 Australian-owned, national information technology companies. Today there are two.

A Canberra seminar in May on *Multimedia Technology: Issues and Opportunities for Australia*, agreed that the transition from analog to digital technology and the convergence of telecommunications, broadcasting and computing, together with the imminence of digitally compressed video, will result in video joining voice, audio and data as basic service types carried by telecommunications networks.

The seminar, attended by over 350 people, was convened by the Department of Industry, Technology and Regional Development (DITARD, formerly DITAC). Last year, a detailed report, *Public Policy Issues and Service Industries Opportunities for Australia in Digital Video Communications*, prepared by the Communication Centre of the Queensland University of Technology (QUT) and released under the auspices of this department (see *CU* 83), raised many of the kind of issues which were central to this seminar and according to participant and media consultant Les Free, came to 'dominate the proceedings'.

The seminar acknowledged that the opportunity exists for Australia to become a leader in emerging technology, and passed a motion calling on the Government to estab-

lish urgently an 'expert group' as promised during the election.

The Government's election commitment was to a group comprising carriers, unions and industry which would develop 'a technological and commercial blueprint for extending the optical fibre network'. This appears to have a rather narrower focus, and the seminar backed the concept of a widely representative working group with a high level chair and adequate administrative support, to consider the whole range of social and economic issues arising from technological developments in communications.

Lukewarm Response

DITARD's response to the seminar's outcomes, like its response to the original QUT report, could not be described as enthusiastic. Les Free told *CU* that it was now up to the Department to put proposals forward to the Minister, but the reaction has been 'lukewarm'.

This is due in part to disarray in DITARD, which is under restructuring, but must also be attributable to a bureaucratic perception that no-one at Ministerial level is prepared to tackle the complex issues involved in the question of technological convergence. As one observer commented, what is needed is 'a Barry Jones with clout' in Cabinet.

On the same evening as the Canberra seminar, a group of 120 people (many of whom had been at the earlier gathering) met in Sydney and became the nucleus of Australian Interactive Multimedia Industry Association (AIMIA), involving representatives of such areas as information technology, publishing, libraries, telecommunications and corporate video.

This group is setting up an information bulletin board with assistance from Microsoft, and a directory of members is under preparation. They are working to involve the Department of Arts and Administrative Services in this issue as well as DITARD, believing that it offers an excellent opportunity to link industry aspects and cultural aspects of multimedia.

One of this group, Apple's David Strong, is convening a forum for the end of this month (July), a two-day 'brainstorming' exercise designed to pressure the Government to take decisive action. Those involved in this exercise will be from business, and Les Free says while they wield considerable commercial influence, what is required is an approach which productively involves all major interest



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groups, public and private, has the backing of politicians and takes a national view.

He believes that Australia - along with its Government - has developed a culture which resists technological developments. The rate of development overseas has left Australia behind, and the opportunities which existed when the QUT report was being prepared 18 months ago are fast disappearing. □

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ABA Getting In On The Act

The ABA has announced that it will co-ordinate a group of government and industry experts 'to examine options for a digital TV broadcasting system which will best suit Australia's consumer and broadcasting needs into the next century'.

In addition to the ABA itself, this group is expected to comprise representatives from the broadcasting and television manufacturing industries, Department of Transport and Communications (DOTAC) and its Communications Laboratory, FACTS, the ABC, the SBS and the Community Broadcasting Association of Australia.

The group's focus is on digital terrestrial television broadcasting (DTTB) and on objectives for the system. Colin Knowles, the ABA's Director of Planning, told *CU* that there had been 'a conscious decision' not to widen the scope of the group's consideration into the area of convergence.

It will however ensure that it remains in contact with wider developments by setting up working parties with direct links to such bodies as AIMIA, Standards Australia and DITARD, and by regular monitoring of related areas. He said that an earlier committee convened by DOTAC had become too big and tried to cover too many areas, and as a result had been ineffectual.

Knowles said that the computer market represents about 84 per cent of video screens, far more than television, and there are clearly potential economies of scale if the two could be built together, incorporating multimedia concepts, with integrated graphics and text.

The push by different interest groups for a co-ordinated strategy should however be viewed with caution, Knowles said. The computer industry's motivation may be that 'if there is a common piece of hardware they will be able to flog more hardware'. The carriers on the other hand are interested in selling more bandwidth with a view to attracting more television services which will 'contribute dramatically to paying the bill'.

Colin Knowles said that the emphasis of the ABA group will be firmly on *what the consumer wants*. He said that the push for High Density TV, for example, has failed to recognise that there are potential consumer problems, like the fact that the equipment is too big, too heavy, and requires a dark room for viewing.

The group will produce papers telling people 'in plain English' what the technology can do, and will call for comments. They expect to issue their first publication, an options paper on system objectives, within a couple of months. □

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Computer Buffs Weigh In

The Australian Computer Society (ACS) is another key organisation which has weighed into this debate with a strong call for Australia to widen its horizons and look to multiple uses of new communications technologies, saying that there are 'many more ways to use high-speed digital communications than watching re-runs of early 60s sitcoms'.

The ACS, a professional body for information technologists with 14,000 members nationally, says that the emergence of multimedia or 'hypermedia' will mean the same computer and telecommunications equipment can be used to carry both sound, and still and moving images.

Spokesperson Tom Worthington says that the proposed MDS and satellite pay TV systems could be modified for other delivery methods and services, and that the way the debate has focused on 'either-or' between these two has not been productive.

Worthington says that for many years, Australia's information technology researchers have been developing new applications for digital subscriber services, combining computers and telecommunications in innovative ways and with 'the best features of TV, radio, telephone and newspapers in the one product'.

Millions of dollars of Government and industry research funds have gone into this work and the results go far beyond pay TV as currently envisaged in Government policy.

'It is time our policy makers and corporate executives looked at the innovative ideas which the Australian community has already paid for' Worthington says. When subscribers buy or rent a digital pay TV decoder, they are investing in a powerful digital computer, programmed to decode pay TV signals, which could be programmed to receive other digital subscriber services for little extra cost.

Given that it will be some time before pay TV programs are delivered, the ACS believes there is still time to develop policies which will answer these questions satisfactorily.

The ACS strongly emphasises the importance of **universality of access** in the application of these services to both home and business.

The Society has recommended an action plan to government which includes consultation with the information technology industry on what is possible in the next few years with digital subscriber services; development of a range of policy options with costs and benefits, and consultation on these options with the community and the industry; and assistance for Australian industry to compete in design, manufacture and delivery of services. □