



Scant Time for Submissions

Beyond The Duopoly: Australian Telecommunications Policy and Regulation: Issues Paper
(dated - on the Internet version - as September 1994)

The Government's telecommunications policy review may be one of its most wide ranging policy reviews. But given the complexity of the issues at stake, it is very disappointing that it may also be pushed ahead at the expense of lengthy and detailed consideration of these issues.

On 17 October, the Department of Communications and the Arts Review Team was scheduled to mail out an Issues Paper for discussion and comment. Submissions for the review are due on 25 November.

Provided Australia Post does its job well, this will give submission writers just over five weeks to respond. Knock a week off that for people in the more remote areas of Australia. However you look at it, the maximum five weeks is a short time in which to revamp or redesign a policy framework and regulatory system for telecommunications.

The release of the review's Issues Paper itself highlights one of the issues any telecommunications structure must address: the possibility of creating or widening the gap between information rich and poor. For those with access to (and the skill to use) Internet, the Issues Paper has been available since the week of 3 October. Everyone else has to wait an additional two weeks, and must depend on the postal system.

One of the few issues in the paper which is not open to debate is, as the Minister has repeated, continuing government ownership of Telecom. Another is the obligation on carriers to provide untimed local calls in areas where they have been available since 1991.

After the introductory chapters backgrounding the current telecommunications policy and structures, each chapter focuses on one issue. The issues include: Regulatory Arrangements Relating to Industry Structure, Competition Policy, Powers and

Immunities, Universal Service, Consumer Protection and Privacy, National Interest Considerations, Technical Regulation, Electronic Addressing and Directories, Industry Policy and Institutional Arrangements (meaning current and future regulatory structures).

Too Narrow A Focus

Perhaps the paper's greatest shortcoming is that it spends too little time putting telecommunications policy and structure in the wider context of the changing communications environment in general. Given the convergence of technologies and services, new telecommunications structures and policy will necessarily impact on all other electronic communications areas. It could be said, in fact, that this telecommunications policy review is also the next broadcasting review, given the rapid development of alliances and cross-ownership between telecos and broadcasters, both free-to-air and pay.

If the one distinguishing feature of carriers is their ability to install and maintain infrastructure, what will a carrier look like when Paynet, Rowcom and other broadcast service licensees have installed their cable networks? What will a universal service obligation look like if broadcast licensees are providing the infrastructure? And will those providing and funding USO include broadcast service providers?

The recently announced Optus Vision venture clearly challenges what it means to be a carrier and meet carrier obligations (also see page 3). It also opens up trade practice issues. What happens to the government's competition policy with new combinations of broadcast service providers and infrastructure providers? Who

has what access rights, and how might they be enforced against a class licensee?

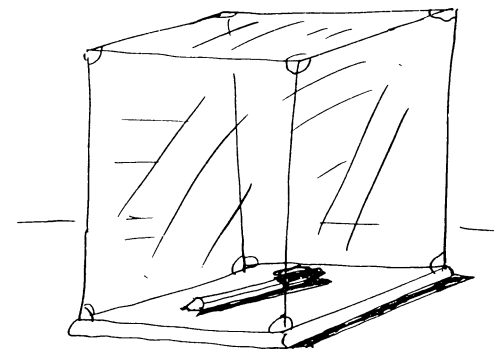
New telecommunications regulation and structures must be integrated into a larger electronic communications framework which will continue to meet the Government's policy goals for both telecommunications and broadcasting, yet be able to accommodate the rapidly changing technological realities of various delivery systems for communications.

Submitters face a formidable challenge in attempting to formulate policy proposals for a new communications structure to take Australia into the 21st century within a mere few weeks.

For a free copy of the paper, call the toll free number 1800 649 889. □

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