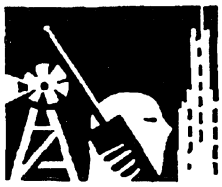

BSEG and BTCE Forums Report

Super Highway Pie In The Sky?

There is a growing view that, in Australia at least, the likelihood of a single 'information superhighway' is increasingly remote.

This common conclusion emerged from two meetings held in Sydney in late March dealing with the same broad issue: the future direction of communications technology and services in Australia.

The first meeting was a 'brainstorming' session hosted by the Broadband Services Expert Group (BSEG), the second, a seminar mounted by the Communications Futures Project of the Bureau of Transport and Communications Economics (BTCE). (The functions and composition of these two groups were outlined in *CU* Dec 93 & Sept 93.)

On the super highway issue, the feeling of both gatherings was that increased capacity for communications and service delivery is more likely to come through a variety of technologies as they develop, their costs drop and they become viable delivery mechanisms for specific conditions, or for specific service delivery needs.

In other respects, the two sessions were quite different in the concerns highlighted and topics covered.

The Broadband Services Group

The BSEG discussion was titled Social Impact of New Broadband Services. Participants included Group members, representatives of consumer organisations, privacy organisations, and the film and television industry.

The first task of the discussion was to develop a list of social goals for new services and delivery techniques. Using those goals as a basis, the group canvassed a range of issues raised by new communications technologies and services.

Privacy was an important theme, not only in the specific context of communications, but in terms of the extent to which new technologies increasingly allow users of data to exchange information about the public.

Another theme was the impact of new technologies on the way products are developed. As computers and accompanying technology change, the nature of entertainment services themselves changes; film producers, for example, may become producers of new computer products.

Interactivity was also a subject of discussion. Current examples include the growth of bulletin boards, and the participation of individuals in Internet whereby, through computers and modems, individuals now communicate with each other globally.

The forum considered people's ability to use the new technology; some participants admitted their young children were better able to use and understand computers than they were. The group recognised the need to address people's difficulties with new technologies, and to develop products and services which are user friendly, as well as providing people with training, skills and confidence to use the technologies.

Finally, the group summarised what the introduction of new technologies and services should aim for, and what negative impacts should be avoided.

It was agreed that the positive goal of enhancing social communities should be accompanied by the objective of preventing social fragmentation. The positive goal of enhanced access and better opportunities and choice of services was balanced by the goal of preventing barriers to access (including both technological and cost barriers). Another important aim was to enhance the control of individual people over information about themselves, which was restated as preventing any diminution of privacy rights. Another important objective concerned process: the need for broad public participation in the identification of people's needs for new technologies and services.

Goals related to **content** started with the aim of enhancing people's ability to participate in the democratic process and providing a stimulus to Australian creativity. There was also acceptance of the view that new services will drive for economic growth and business development. Realistically, the gathering saw opportunities for Australia not so much in the hardware (which will be developed overseas), but in new applications and content.

The BTCE Seminar

The BTCE Communications Futures Project seminar had a very different focus. The BTCE had just released two papers and were seeking discussion on their content. (Work in Progress Paper No 1: ***Emerging Communications Services: An Analytical Framework*** and Work in Progress Paper No. 2: ***Delivery Technologies in the New Telecommunications World.*** ; further details in Policy File, p.20.)

The discussion on the papers is a welcome move for the BTCE. Normally research and consultation leading up to a BTCE paper or report is done behind closed doors.

The first session, on emerging communications services, covered the first of what will be four papers on current and new communications services, their content and marketing. The paper compiles data on the use, users and value of a number of communications and information services. It also tries to forecast, based on data available, what services are likely to take off, and what factors will influence their success. The conclusions highlight such important issues as whether the community will be better off because of the new services. Simply providing capacity for new services is

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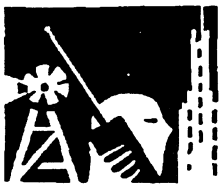

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not likely to be enough; what is on offer must offer real benefit, including greater ability to use the services and wider choices.

The key issue of this session from a public policy perspective however, was the paucity of available information. The BTCE simply could not obtain important data on telecommunications cost and use, because what used to be provided openly by a monopoly carrier is now held to be commercially confidential.

The second session, which largely reflected the paper on delivery technologies, offered a useful summary of the delivery technologies now in place and what can they deliver, and also looked at emerging technological developments and the likelihood of these being effective platforms for the delivery of communications and services.

The paper itself answers a lot of basic questions for those struggling with the technological jargon. Questions like what does ADSL really stand for, what does it do and what are its limitations? Will fibre actually reach the home, or will it stop at the pillar or kerb, and what are the cost and technological implications of each option? What is digital compression and what is its impact on new technologies? And finally, what are those satellites doing up there anyway? (For those who want to understand the jargon and know where the technology is headed, Working Paper No. 2, in easily understood words of few syllables, makes it all clear.)

At the second meeting, the obvious question was asked: just how do the two separate projects - the Expert Group and the Futures Project - fit together, especially since they seem to be covering much of the same ground? The BTCE is clear about the function of its own project, seeing it as providing research and analysis on which to base rational decision making; the Bureau does not see the project as being in the business of deciding policy.

During the BTCE discussion, the first project paper in particular was criticised for paying little attention to the social impact of new services. Participants felt that future papers should contain more analysis of how community sectors will benefit from, or be disadvantaged by, new communications technologies and services. In other words, the project should do the sort of thinking the Broadband Services session had done.

On the other hand, the Broadband Services group discussion would have benefited had the participants, especially the non-members of the Group, read the BTCE papers, if only to gain a common understanding of the services and technologies being discussed.

The two forums suggested that some convergence of the debate would be of significant benefit to both these current projects. ❑ *Holly Raiche*

Porn Drives US Interactive Services

Pornography has been the driving force behind interactivity in television in the United States, a visiting expert recently claimed.

Peter Hamilton, a New York-based Australian who set up a consulting firm which specialises in helping to develop new television networks, was speaking to Communications Studies students at RMIT on 28 March. Hamilton said that just as pornography was part of the early impetus for the development of home video, it is driving the development of on-line entertainment. The technology allows viewers to engage in a kind of 'interactive sex' with characters in pornographic programs.

Meanwhile, other interactive applications such as home shopping are already billion dollar industries in their own right.

Hamilton said that at the centre of convergence of film, computing and telephony was on-line interactive entertainment and information. This allows viewers to choose on demand, just as they can with their personal selections of books, magazines and newspapers, rather than having to rely on programmers' broadcast schedules. Viewing menus will offer specific sorts of programs to particular viewing groups.

Game networks have immense growth potential. Games can be sent to the home and stored for the amount of time paid for, self-destructing when that time has elapsed. A very important aspect in terms of its huge economic potential is the capacity for a group of players in different homes, suburbs or cities to compete in the same game simultaneously.

The Sega/Nintendo generation are demanding ever-increasing technical sophistication in games and as they grow older, they are moving the market towards a growing adult audience. The same network allows for students to study in groups, for professional training in the home, and for participation in a range of activities for the disabled.

On a more sombre note, however, the ramifications of these developments for information-poor and technologically disadvantaged people could be devastating. The new systems are being developed virtually without regulation, in a broadcasting and media environment geared to exclude those who cannot pay.

Hamilton said control of distribution through delivery systems is becoming less influential in the US, where content and program rights are increasingly determining who controls the services on offer. ❑

Bruce Shearer