



Lee announces fourth channel inquiry

THE AUSTRALIAN Broadcasting Authority is to conduct a review into the viability of a fourth commercial television channel in the major markets.

The announcement came on Channel Seven's 'Face to Face' program on December 10 from Communications Minister Michael Lee. He was speaking to press gallery journalists Glenn Milne and Laura Tingle.

Mr Lee said the review would look at whether it would be 'better for the viewers to get an additional choice'. He said because a fourth channel would mean the level of advertising would be spread more thinly amongst commercial TV stations, a number of options for the new channel would need to be considered.

'Should we look at options such as having targeted programming, a family channel or an open learning channel, with or without ads, or should we continue on with the experiment with community TV? They're the issues that I'd like this review to examine,' Mr Lee said.

'We would certainly look at the option of having a free to air family channel with or without ads. As the Minister for Communications I'm approached by parents and grandparents - people who are quite concerned about some of the material that's on television these days. I get quite a few complaints about violence and some of the images that are shown on TV news reports. I think that is one issue that is driving the interest in a family channel.'

The Minister said the review would be open to public hearings: 'We'll let the ABA conduct public hearings, we'll let all the interest groups argue their case, whether it's for a vested interest or those who argue in favour of a broader community interest.' □

Net usage well down on estimates: study

In his 'innovations' statement, the Prime Minister claimed that the number of Australians using the Internet is doubling every three months but Rahmin Marzbani begs to differ.

Minutes after the PM had delivered the statement in Melbourne earlier this month, Mr Marzbani, the author of a report on Australian Internet access providers, said Mr Keating had received bad advice on the extent of Net usage.

The report - *Internet Access Providers in Australia*, conducted by consultants, Strategic Innovations Group - indicates that Internet usage in Australia is way below commonly-held estimates and is in fact slowing down because of infrastructure constraints.

The study found that Internet usage was growing by just 8 to 8.5 per cent each month, down from 12 per cent a month at the end of 1994. The total number of commercial users - those outside universities - reached just 208,000 in October this year. That figure was well down on the expected 500,000, Mr Marzbani said. There are an estimated 320,000 academic users who do not pay to access the Internet.

One of the major reasons for the drop in interest in the Net is the length of time it takes to extract information from the system. An Australian user would take between five and ten times longer to download the same information as a US user. Congested bandwidth and high pricing were regarded in the report as the major obstacles to Net usage in this country.

With such a small user marketplace and questions about security, businesses are baulking at making

the investment required to access the Internet. The report claims that businesses are receiving a poor return on their investment because of high Telstra prices for access and narrow bandwidth across the Pacific Ocean.

'Corporate and academic use of the Internet will continue to grow,' the report states, 'however, without infrastructure improvements, the growth rate may stay below 10 per cent per month (still a very large number).'

'The levels of uncertainty about the Internet by corporates and government and the uncertainties regarding security and the return on investments from Internet presence are high - this is impacting potential investments necessary on content development.'

The study equates Australia's current bandwidth situation to sucking an elephant down a straw

Telstra, which now manages the Internet backbone known as AARNet, is responding to criticisms of bandwidth shortage with an upgrade of international capacity from 6 Megabits per second (Mbps) to 10 Mbps. By December 31, capacity between Sydney and Melbourne will be increased more than four times from 4Mbps to 18Mbps. Capacities of the other capital cities will also be substantially increased.

But still this is too small, says Marzbani who equates the current situation to 'sucking an elephant down a straw'. The report estimates a bandwidth requirement to the US of more than 40Mbps. □