

done.) There should be at least a 20-year delay before traditional radio services are abandoned, and this needs to be enshrined in legislation. Once commercial broadcasters commit themselves to digital transmitters they will want people to shift to the new receivers as quickly as possible to help recoup the investment.

Then there is the question of whether commercial radio will poach listeners from community broadcasters. This is a real threat. Having invested in digital transmitters, commercial radio stations will be able to broadcast many different channels at once, and they will be under pressure to pay for their expensive new equipment. One response is to move into niche broadcasting. Possibilities include stations devoted to business and finance news, minority and overseas sports, children's programming, and non-English language audiences.

In some ways this would be a good thing: new, well-resourced services with a slick, professional presentation for these communities. But it would also represent a threat to the viability of existing community broadcasters, and to the community-oriented grassroots approach to radio.

Finally, when should community broadcasters cross over? Assuming that all the right things happen for community broadcasters to take advantage of digital radio's strengths, the big question remains when to do it. It cannot be overstated how important this is: too late, and niche commercial stations may have stolen the traditional community audience. Too early, and expensive mistakes might be made: buying equipment which becomes much cheaper in a short time, for example, or investing in hardware and training conforming to standards which quickly become obsolete. There is

little reward for being first on the air in a new technical format: veterans of ethnic broadcasting still have nightmares involving evil UHF antennae.

Community broadcasters cannot take their future in new media for granted. Community radio stuttered into life in Australia only in the late 1970s. There was no valid reason why it could not have been introduced even 20 years earlier but industry pressure and specious arguments about the technical and economic impossibility of FM transmissions kept Australian radio stagnant for years.

Those who care about diverse, lively, community-based broadcasting must make sure this time round that politicians are not tempted to allow broadcasting to return to the 1950s. <<

Richard Evans

BTCE absorbed into ministry portfolio

The Bureau of Transport and Communications Economics is being absorbed into the Department of Communications, the Information Economy and the Arts (DCIEA).

The transport arm will become, again, the Bureau of Transport Economics, answering to the Department of Transport and Regional Development. The communications arm will become the Communications Research Unit in the Telecommunications Industry Division of DCIEA, currently headed by Fay Holthuysen.

Created in 1987 through the expansion of the Bureau of Transport Economics when the "super-department" of Transport and Communications was estab-

lished, the BTCE is perhaps best known in communications circles for its work on the cost of Telecom's Community Service Obligations (1989) and its Communications Futures Project (1994).

Even in 1987, the creation of an "infrastructure" department was seen by many as backward-looking, at a time when communications policy needed to look for its connections to information and arts policy, rather than to trains, trucks and planes. Those new links were put in place with the creation of the Department of Communications and the Arts in 1994 and the addition of the 'Information Economy' in 1997.

The new Unit will still be holding the now annual Communications Research Forum in Canberra on September 24-25, 1998. See information and Call for Papers at <http://www.dca.gov.au/crf> <<

CLC mobile phone research

THE Communications Law Centre in Melbourne has secured funding from the Victorian Consumer Credit Fund to carry out research into young people's use of mobile telephones and serious debt problems encountered by some 16-21 year olds.

The study will run for roughly 12 months and builds on some preliminary research undertaken by Andrew Funston, lecturer in communications at the Victorian University of Technology.

Up to 500 young mobile telephone users, educators, debt counsellors and other groups will take part in the study.

A report and an education kit will result from this project. The report will recommend any appropriate policy interventions. <<