

CIRCIT Policy Forum 1999

This year's CIRCIT Policy Forum was held in country Victoria at Acheron near Lake Eildon from 9-12 November 1999 and was attended by almost 40 people with experience in communications from different backgrounds and perspectives including those from government, industry, union, consumer and academic arenas.

The forum topic was "Telecommunications in Australia: resolving tensions in the implementation of social, competition and commercial objectives". The task presented to forum participants was to develop views on the structure of the telecommunications model which would best serve Australia's national objectives over the next decade.

The forum started with CIRCIT presenting a schematic representation linking the objectives of the telecommunications regime to the means for achieving them and to the broader national objectives to which they contribute. It portrayed a number of tensions in the present structure. In general, participants agreed that these were key tensions.

A most interesting and challenging part of the forum was the approach of scenario planning which was used to explore key issues. Professor Ron Johnston from the Australian Centre for Innovation and International Competitiveness facilitated this approach. In this approach 'scenarios' are coherent pictures of the future which are recognisable from signals in the present albeit weak signals of change. The premise behind scenario planning is that anticipating the future in a volatile environment calls for more

than a systematic approach based on traditional analytical tools. In situations where there is high uncertainty and rapid change anticipating and planning for the future requires the use of creativity, intuition and imagination.

The development of scenarios formed a key part of the work of the forum. Participants were divided into three groups with the task of developing scenarios in three areas: a disaggregated future, the market delivers and connectivity to the people. The task over 2 days was to develop the scenarios and then analyse them in terms of implications for existing policy and future developments.

CIRCIT are satisfied that a number of productive lines of thought and action emerged from the forum. For those interested in the outcomes of the forum CIRCIT will be preparing a summary document.

Vic Marles

From The Archives

Pay TV Report: Telecom 1, Aussat 0

Telecom and community television interests will be the winners if the government picks up the major recommendations of the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Transport, Communication and Infrastructure (Saunderson Committee) report on pay television and other new broadcasting-related services.

Chairman John Saunderson said that he had "blazed a trail" for the successful implementation of pay television in Australia with the report *To Pay or Not To Pay*, released in November.

The report's five major recommendations are:

- a hybrid system comprising optic fibre cable and MDS (multi-point distribution systems), and later cable alone, as the primary delivery mechanism for pay television, with telecom as the common carrier;
- multi-channel systems operating in a large number of markets (up

to 40 throughout Australia, with Sydney and Melbourne divided into four areas), with exclusive franchises for each pay operator (up to a maximum of eight per operator around Australia);

- regulation to ensure each operator provides at least one channel for local and community programming, and contributes 2.5 per cent revenue for this programming;
- 10-year licences awarded to the highest bidder in an auction system with renewal of the licences virtually automatic (with a role for the Australian Broadcasting Tribunal in vetting providers of local and community programming);
- minimal regulation because of the direct relationship between subscriber and operator.

As in its earlier report *The Role and Functions of the Australian Broadcasting Tribunal*, the Committee has in its pay television inquiry once again emphasised the need for clearly stated objectives for broadcasting. It argues that the governing objectives for pay television should be:

- increasing diversity of programming;
- promoting diversity of ownership;
- ensuring the commercial viability of pay television.

To Pay or Not To Pay is a document framed within the current crisis in broadcasting. The networks argued strongly against a decision to introduce pay television next year when the existing moratorium runs out; but in restructuring their networking arrangements so rapidly as to eclipse localism, it seems that they have the reverse effect of strengthening the arguments in favour of pay. With networks likely to offer increasingly "more of the same" combined with the implementation of the policies of equalisation of commercial services in regional areas and aggregation of regional markets, it is not surprising that the Committee has fixed on a major new rationale for introducing pay television in this country: to enhance localism and diversity of programming.

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