

News

Universal service

THE Minister for communications, Information Technology and the Arts, Senator Richard Alston, has invited telecommunications carriers to express interest in tendering for universal service obligations. The announcement and release of a public consultation paper start the process of putting the USO out to tender. They follow the government's introduction of legislation to cap the USO cost for 1997-98 at \$253.32 million. The *Telecommunications Laws Amendment (Universal Service Cap) Bill 1999* also fixes the net USO cost for 1998-99 and 1999-00 at \$253.32 million plus CPI.

The consultation paper and other documentation may be obtained from the What's New section of the Department of Communications, Information Technology and the Arts website (www.dcita.gov.au) or by contacting the Infrastructure Policy Section on (02) 6271 1839. The closing date for comments and expressions of interest is May 28, 1999.

Legal issues

THE Victorian Director of Public Prosecutions has announced that the charges against former student editors of *Rabelais* have been dropped. Following a failed attempt to appeal to the High Court last December, the editors were facing criminal penalties for breaching censorship laws with the July 1995 publication of the article "The Art of Shoplifting".

The editors had applied to the DPP to exercise discretion not to proceed with the prosecution. The DPP said

the decision was made on set criteria and would not comment further.

Telecommunications

THE Australian Communications Authority (ACA) has released its *Telecommunications Performance Monitoring Bulletin* for the December 1998 quarter. The bulletin also includes a report on the Y2K readiness of the telecommunications industry.

December 1998 results reveal a mixed performance by Telstra in providing new services against Customer Service Guarantee (CSG) standard timeframes. Its performance in the provision of new services to remote areas without readily accessible infrastructure improved seven per cent to 98 per cent of connections within the CSG timeframe. This was balanced by a decline of six per cent to 62 per cent for new services to major rural areas without readily accessible infrastructure within one month of customer request.

Telstra's national performance in repair times for urban customers (80 per cent) was an improvement over the 72 per cent figure for December 1997. Fault repair performance improved in urban areas in NSW/ACT, Queensland, South Australia and the Northern Territory but other urban areas declined in performance, with Victoria and Tasmania's performance worsening by 10 per cent.

All remote areas recorded an improvement in faults repaired within the accepted timeframe of between four

and 10 per cent.

Payphone serviceability declined to 89 per cent, five per cent lower than that achieved in the December 1997 quarter. The average time to clear a payphone fault nationally was 29 hours, one hour longer than that recorded for the previous quarter.

The bulletin discovered that a high level of awareness exists within the industry concerning the Y2K issue. All companies which reported to the ACA are either confident that their systems are Y2K compliant or have systems in place to achieve compliance.

Online/Internet

THE government is to establish a regime to regulate the carriage of content over the Internet, to be administered by the Australian Broadcasting Authority (ABA). The regime provides that:

- if in the opinion of the ABA the content is of a sufficiently serious nature (likely to be Refused Classification or X) to prevent access pending an investigation, the ABA must issue an interim notice to the service provider to prevent publication of, or access to, that content, and the ABA must seek a National Classification Board opinion or classification;

- if in the opinion of the ABA the content is likely to be classified R, the ABA must seek a National Classification Board opinion or classification;

- if the material is determined by the National Classification Board to be proscribed content, the ABA must issue a final notice to

the service provider to prevent publication of or access to the content; and

- the service or content provider may apply to the ABA to rescind an interim or final order relating to R-rated material that lacks adult verification mechanisms if appropriate adult verification procedures have subsequently been put in place.

Online content will be defined as: any material that has been or would be Refused Classification or classified X under the National Classification Code; and material that is or may be R-rated and lacks adult verification mechanisms to prevent access by minors.

The regime also provides for self-regulatory codes of practice for online service providers, to be overseen by the ABA. Legislation will be brought forward to establish the regime as soon as is practicable.

Australian content

THE government has announced that it will amend the Broadcasting Services Act 1992 to ensure that foreign access to local content quotas will be explicitly confined to New Zealand, so that there will be no flow on from other international treaties as a result of last year's Project Blue Sky High Court judgement.

Minister for communications, Information Technology and the Arts, Senator Richard Alston, said that the government will proceed to make the 10 per cent Australian content expenditure quota for pay TV enforceable.