Stream Of Papers And Reports Continues

The year 1994 will surely go down as a record year for inquiries, task forces, papers and reports on communications and related matters (see *CU*'s table in our August issue).

Hard on the heels of the release of the Broadband Services Expert Group interim report in July (also reported in our August issue), come:

* *The Networked Nation*, the report of the Australian Science and Technology Council (ASTEC) of their examination of Australia's requirements for national research data networks.
* A commissioned report by Cutler and Company, *Commerce in Content*, on Australia's potential in interactive multimedia markets.
* A set of papers issued in connection with the BTCE's Communications Research Forum in late September, covering a great diversity of areas including emerging services, regulation, advertising, spectrum access and mobiles, broadband content, and social issues.
* A set of discussion papers on population groups and policy issues from Telecom Australia as part of its Planning for an Information Society Project.
* The final report of the Copyright Convergence Group.
* A third Work in Progress Paper from the Communications Futures Project (CFP), focussing on commercial and cultural policy implications in new media.

As *CU* went to press, the Government's long-awaited cultural policy statement was also imminent. This and the CFP papers will be considered in the next issue of *CU*, which will focus on cultural policy in a broadcasting and communications context.

Obviously, there is scope for significant overlap between many of these papers, and it is encouraging to ob-serve from internal references, citations and lists of submissions that there has been considerable cross-fertilisation. Some may wonder if a more coordinated approach might not have been preferable to having so many separate initiatives on the go at the same time. But perhaps the Telecommunications Review (which joined the publishing stampede in October with its own discussion paper - see p.6) with the advantage of being able to draw on all this material, will succeed in producing a comprehensive overview. Perhaps.....

Networked Nation

The Networked Nation is the result of a reference to ASTEC by the Minister Assisting the Prime Minister for Science to examine Australia's requirements for national research data networks and their use by universities, research organisations, education and industry, as well as their potential for use by the wider community.

Anyone whose eyes glaze over at the mention of Internet (let alone AARNet) should read this report, which offers a clear, accessible outline of the origins and operation of research data networks, their growing transformation into information networks, and where Australia fits into the international picture. The report makes clear that these networks are the intermediate step towards full integration into a national, and international, super highway. It chief recommendation is for a non-profit consortium of government, carriers, industry, research and education to provide a national information network, and to operate a high-speed 'backbone' for this network.

On the issue of benefits to the population in general rather than to specific user groups, the report concludes that we must harness our creative potential and ensure that Australians generally are equipped to exploit the increasingly important role of information networks. Broadening access to Internet-type services will encourage interactive communication and foster the development of Australian content. The report emphasises that, in addition to basic equipment and network connection, training is vital to the effective use of network services.

Commerce in Content

Commerce in Content, subtitled Building Australia's International Future in Interactive Multimedia Markets, is a report by Dr Terry Cutler's consultancy company for the Department of Industry, Science and Technology, the CSIRO and the Broadband Services Expert Group.

Unlike *The Networked Nation*, this report is heavy going and definitely not for the lay reader. Much of its information is presented in tabular or diagrammatic form, and in some cases these graphics are less than adequately explained in the text; on occasion, it seemed the point could have been more pithily made in a paragraph of prose - though the style adopted does not make for accessibility:

> *In this context the term 'creative infrastructure' embodies a focus on the 'bit creation' business and the linkages between creative producers and the creative usage and manipulation of symbolic reality. What this does is to draw a distinction between the substance of meaningful interaction - of content in its context - and the technological and market mechanisms for supporting the communication of content that we describe as telecommunications,*

broadcasting or publishing. These market, distribution and exchange mechanisms are the 'bit delivery' business.

The message that emerges is that, yes, Australia could become a significant player in the emerging interactive multimedia (IMM) industry, but that the major barrier is distribution (a conclusion which will be no news to anyone in the film and television production industries).

Both the private sector and government need to take certain steps if Australia is to succeed in this area, the report says. Suggested strategies for the private sector include establishment of a content development financing and publishing entity, operating as the Australian 'node' in a global publishing and distribution organisation such as Microsoft, and (for carriers) operating a network to gain revenue from 'bit delivery' (ie distribution) or to provide value-added services to service providers.

The Communications Futures Collection

The papers in this collection cover a wide range of topics related to elements in future communications systems. As in any such collection, the quality of the contributions varies, but there is much of value here. For example, there are useful position papers setting out the current state of play and possible future scenarios in areas like broadcasting policy (DOCA), advertising (CEASA), regulation (CLC), mobile services (consultants), interconnection in a multi-service delivery environment (Peter Gerrand, RMIT, for AUSTEL). Henry Ergas writes a critical review of the interaction of competition policy and telecommunications policy in Australia - an area in which he has played a not insignificant role in the past decade.

The collection also contains interesting contributions on developments in other countries: such as Papua New Guinea (Malcolm Philpott, USQ) where access to 'one of the most advanced telecommunications networks in the

Third World, with all centres linked by either terrestrial or satellite microwave radio links' is counterbalanced by limited media outlets; and where the Government has made significant efforts to involve the public in the communications process.

Brian Easton of the Economic and Social Trust on New Zealand provides an overview of broadcasting developments in that country over the last decade, concluding that despite improvements such as more flexibility to technological change and developments in Maori broadcasting, the weakness of the system is that 'it is too dependent on commercial decisions, so that there are insufficient mechanisms to ensure [that] true public demand and needs are properly incorporated into the system'. In a paper on radio in the new NZ policy environment, Helen Wilson also identifies some less than happy outcomes, notably 'the excessive sameness of the mainstream industry, its precarious finances and the limited career opportunities it offers'.

Patrick McCabe of the NZ Ministry of Commerce looks at telecommunications developments with a less critical eye, claiming substantial efficiency gains, consumer and user benefits and capacity to foster the intro-

duction of new technology, and conceding as 'less than satisfactory aspects' only that there have been costs and delays in resolving litigation, and - somewhat ominously - 'apparent reduction in household telephone penetration'.

Jonathan Levy of the US Federal Communications Commission contributes a sensible paper on the implications of content regulation for trade in television programs, finding that the transmission quota probably has a limited impact on the program menu of Australian television, and that the points system is most effective in generating high budget miniseries and films which account for a relatively small number of hours. He concludes that local restrictions have a limited impact on US program exports to Australia - a conclusion which could 'be used to support either abolition or retention of the domestic content regulations'.

Original papers by two independent analysts, David Court of *Entertainment Business Review* (Booting Up the Information Economy) and Paul Budde (A Vision of the Future) provide a useful and thought-provoking antidote to some of the duller papers based on complex economic models and/or relying heavily on secondary sources.☐