



Under the Big Top with the ABA

AFTER much recent criticism of its closed door approach to media ownership and control inquiries, the ABA is reported to have asked the Attorney-General's Department to prepare guidelines for a public inquiry process, should the need arise.

Meanwhile, the ABA's chairman, Peter Webb, has defended the organisation's lack of investigative transparency. Webb said that while the ABA considers the need for a public hearing in every investigation, it's not something it does 'just to create a circus for people to revel in'.

The ABA has wide-ranging information gathering powers, set out in Part 13 of the Broadcasting Services Act 1992. Its principal information gathering powers are: consultation, calling for public submissions; investigations and hearings, with the ABA

having the discretion to determine the most appropriate use of its resources and powers, having regard to economic and efficiency considerations (s.168(2)).

The Act also states that Parliament intends that broadcasting services be regulated so that public interest considerations are 'addressed in a way that does not impose unnecessary financial and administrative burdens on providers of broadcasting services'.

In relation to media ownership and control investigations, the ABA has to date failed to exercise its wide-ranging information gathering powers, to include parties other than those directly involved in an investigation. The ABA has defended itself on the basis of confidentiality of information and the need to ensure that parties have confidence in the ABA to

encourage the provision of information.

In this self-informed process, the public is to be assured that the ABA is inquiring thoroughly into all issues relevant to the matter and that the objects of the Act are being promoted.

The Act is serious about financial and administrative impacts on the industry and the ABA has shown itself to be quite considerate of these concerns.

But, at what point should other public interest issues be considered? While the risk of creating a 'circus' might be real to the ABA, to the public it is apparent that a more open and transparent process can still be controlled by an effective ringmaster, one who can both allow wider public input and also manage the degrees of relevance of public issues in an investigation. □

Communications Futures - a sneak preview

LINKING every Australian to a fully interactive cable based network will cost a cool \$40 billion, according to the Federal Government's yet-to-be-released Communications Futures Project.

Carried out by the Bureau of Transport and Communications Economics between August 1993 and December 1994, the Project is one of the most thorough studies of Australia's communications needs ever undertaken. The Broadband Services Expert Group drew heavily on the report's interim findings.

It provides a layperson's explanation to technologies, drawing attention to their significance for market development.

Another of its major conclusions is that microwave and satellite rather

than cable will be the platform for pay TV until at least 2003. The Project's manager, Chris Cheah told *CU* that even at best, Telstra would be reaching just 3 million homes with cable - and not until 1998. The obvious interim measure would be MDS/DBS but, according to the report, there won't be huge profits to be made from either technology. Similarly, the report shows that there is only room for one cable network in Australia, signalling a big shakeout in the industry before too long. Following the 1997 telecommunications review, it is likely that extra satellite capacity from Asia will squeeze the cable market in Australia even tighter.

CU also understands the report will offer views on how to assess potential future universal service ob-

ligations (USOs) such as for broadband, ISDN, Internet and pay TV, although it apparently does not think any of these warrant such attention yet. Rather, an evolutionary approach is justified.

As an aside, the BTCE estimated the cost of a cable-based USO at over \$1 billion per year, compared with the \$100 million to \$200 million currently for telephony. An obvious question: where does the money come from? Taxes? Telephony subscribers?

According to Cheah, the \$40 billion forecast is way beyond a 'real world' figure. The actual takeup of a full two-way cable network, is likely to be no more than 30 per cent which would be limited to metropolitan and some provincial areas which would come in at around at \$5 billion.