

# Communications *Update*

A MONTHLY ROUND-UP OF MEDIA AND COMMUNICATIONS

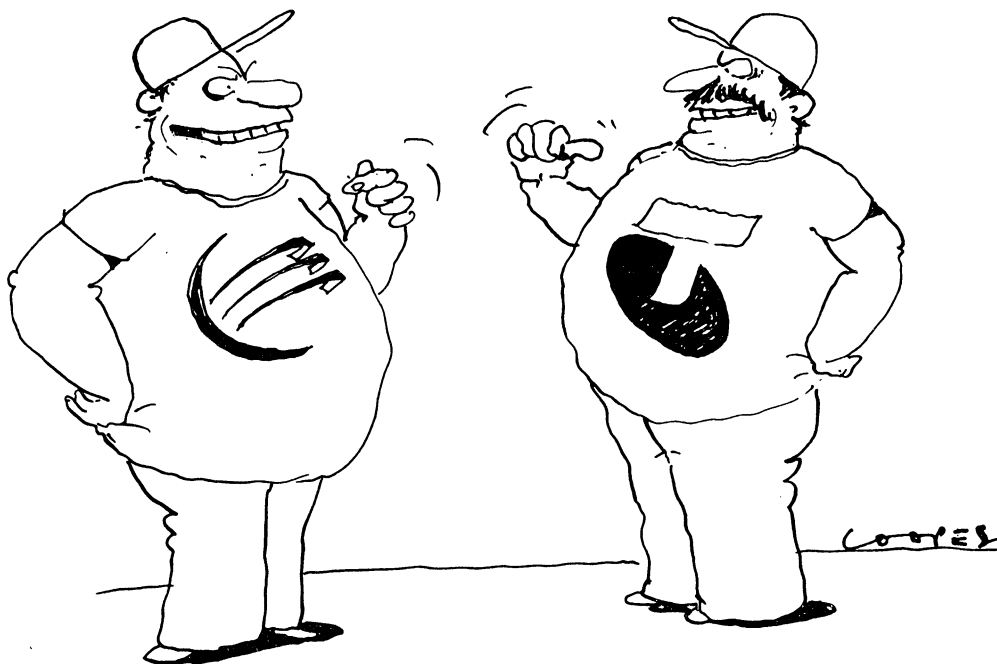
ISSUE 114 ♦ SEPTEMBER 1995



## Cable TV - Australia gets wired

Mine's longer!

Nope - Mine's longer!



CABLE ROLL-OUT

**C**able TV in Australia has rolled out.

Not far, but enough to say the Australian Broadcasting Tribunal's 1982 recommendation 'that Australia introduce cable television services and radiated subscription television services as soon as practicable' has finally been implemented.

For forty years, Australians have got their TV through the air. From September 20, people living in a few suburbs of Sydney and Melbourne have been getting it down a wire.

Optus Vision, which began transmissions on that day, won't say how many people it has signed up. The big numbers being tossed about, by it and its cable TV competitor, Foxtel, which commences transmissions on October 23, are all 'homes passed by cable', not homes connected to it.

But the occasion is more significant than the number of viewers who switched on the opening night movies, *Demolition Man* and *Dangerous Liaisons*.

It's significant because the technology being used by Optus Vision - a single coaxial cable carrying both telephony and video - its economics, and the

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policy debates which are going on around it - telecommunications regulatory reform, cable retransmission of free-to-air-TV signals, community access - demonstrate so clearly elements of the promised convergence of broadcasting, telecommunications and culture.

It's also significant because it indicates how wrong assumptions about technology can be. Just three years ago, a Broadcasting Services Act was passed which treated satellite distribution as *the* way pay TV was likely to be transmitted in the foreseeable future. Cross media rules which would have prevented the Foxtel partners joining to provide satellite pay TV, were not applied to other delivery systems, such as cable.

Today, the talk is all cable-rollouts, overbuilds, drops-to-the-home and head-ends.

Cable TV is significant because its introduction in 1995, amidst the fog of competing technologies, channels and prices, marks such a contrast to the phased, government-planned introduction of television in the 1950s and 1960s - two commercial stations and the ABC in the big cities, a single commercial and the ABC in the regions, a third commercial in the cities.

Cable is coming in the market place. Plans leapfrog plans in a forest of press releases. Executives - some feeling freedom after a lifetime in another kind of television; some feeling television for the first time; many with American accents - declare their excitement about the future while nervously signing vast cheques and being very nice to shareholders.

And cable is significant because, in the convergence of television and the telephone, it marks the point at which audiences become consumers.

Audiences watch shows. They laugh at them, love them, hate them, turn them off, stay in specially to catch them. Consumers like quality

of service - reliability, economy, itemised bills. Companies like Optus Vision, which propose to deliver television and telephony together, will test the limits of these quite distinct organisational cultures.

There is a lot of uncertainty around for these potential audiences and customers and good reason to sit back and watch the action before buying.

A year ago, pay TV was better entrenched in the public consciousness as a legislative and administrative foul-up than as a serious contender for viewing hours. Names like Australis, Galaxy, Optus Vision, Foxtel, PAN and AIM probably seem a little confusing to a public still coming to terms with a second telephone company and why Telecom became Telstra. In NSW and Queensland, Super League is arguably the defining image of pay TV to date. Its message too is one of uncertainty about the future conduct of a major sport and, in some circles, unease about lost traditions.

**“cable is significant because, in the convergence of television and the telephone, it marks the point at which audiences become consumers.”**

Australian take-up of VCRs, CD-players, personal computers and mobile phones may suggest enthusiasm for new technologies, but it may also hint at an experienced consumer market, alert to the likely limitations of the next new technology. Price wars in computers and mobile phones have also schooled that market to the prospect of a better deal for those who are patient.

This uncertainty is compounded by the complexity of the options being placed before the public. Like the person who bought a Pye black-and-white after being mesmerised by images of the Melbourne Olympics in a radio shop window, the person signing up to a cable TV service is being promised a ticket to a new way of

communicating and acquiring information. For the moment, the ticket is mainly promise, as advertising for the services, with its focus on images of the high-tech televisual future, seems to acknowledge.

Unlike those of the 1950s, today's customers are being asked to pay for the ticket not once, but every month. They're also being asked to choose amongst many different tickets - different sets of channels at different prices and eventually different combinations of charges for telephone calls and access to the Internet and other on-line services - although those who waded through the sales pitches for featurist TV sets in the fifties might feel they've been there before.

Television, in the 1950s and 60s, became a symbol of both the energy, and, to Cold War conservatives, of the moral decay, of post-war society. In the early 1960s, US Federal Communications Commission Chair, Newton Minnow, told the National Association of Broadcasters their television was a 'vast wasteland'. In Australia, the Vincent Committee found Australian television had insufficient Australian programs, particularly drama programs; a monotony of themes of crime, violence, horror and domestic comedy; inadequate news, particularly international news, programs for migrants, minority tastes and special interests, and religious programs; too many children's programs that were unsuitable for children; and dull education programs.

To different audiences, cable TV in the 1990s will have its elements of energy and decay too.

The Vincent Committee felt this mattered because 'television as a means of mass communication has the greatest sociological impact of any mass medium'.

Whether television, as we have come to understand it, will continue to have this impact, is a key social and cultural issue for Australians, as their TV begins its migration from the air to the wire. □

*Jock Given*