

how fragile our economy is following the "banana republic" statements of Treasurer Keating to John Laws. And if we do go over the economic edge, you couldn't say Max Walsh hadn't warned us.

Abe Saffron, Murray Farquhar, Roger Rogerson - and others - went behind bars because of the work of the Sydney press.

As I mentioned recently, a distinguished friend of mine, Peter Robinson, Editor-in-Chief of the Australian Financial Review, put it rather neatly thus:

"There is no blanket, all-embracing defence of the (Australian) media to be made... except to the extent that seen in their totality they provide what a free press should provide - a wide diversity of approaches to the concerns of the community, an alert interest in humbuggery, hypocrisy and demagoguery and a certain scepticism.

"We are not perfect - more than that: we are an industry that almost by definition is incapable of being perfect. At the simplest level that arises from the obvious fact that one person's truth is another person's distortion ...

"We turn out a product by the tens of thousands every night, yet every night it is inherently different.

"Our inputs other than paper and ink are completely unpredictable. Our ingredients are produced by staffs who are not assembly-line workers performing the same task every day, but are part artist, part lawyer, part intelligence agent, part writer and part detective. They work to inherently difficult deadlines imposed not merely by the production process and the distribution commitments, but also by the unfolding of events themselves."

How to improve

This leads us to what can be done about improving the community's faith in its media.

Clearly, training - and better media performance - are both obvious and crucial, but safety gauges such as the Press Council and, indeed, the AJA Ethics Committee should figure more prominently. Professor Flint, I feel, is now beginning to make genuine efforts to enhance the role of the Council and clearly, it is up to people like myself to aid that cause. The AJA also has a responsibility in the area of public perception. The Ethics Committee of the AJA has, I am told, about 10 cases before it at any one time and about 30 cases a year - but its deliberations are held in secret and we usually fail to find out its results publicly.

Finally, I believe that the public has a role. It is a free society and ultimately it is also up to the consumers of the media - our readers, listeners, viewers and advertisers - to use the market to encourage standards. I think it is self-evident that newspapers that

deceive or constantly exaggerate the truth will be boycotted. Looking at the market fall-off in the consumption of the more extreme afternoon newspapers around the world, that is happening already. The famous London Sun is now in steady decline and newspapers of that ilk will find it hard to prosper in the decades ahead. Radio hosts who manipulate, or TV shows that constantly mislead, will also eventually fail.

The Australian media has to face difficult times ahead; not least in rationalising its

daunting debts, improving its training standards and combating constraining laws. An enhancement of our performance and an honest appraisal and scrutiny of our failings, can only aid that.

Chris Anderson is the former Editorial Chief and Chairman of the Board of the Fairfax Group. This article is an edited text of an address given earlier this year at The Journalists Club, Sydney.

Holes in the net

Dr Perry Morrison examines issues surrounding the USENet

Recently, the education debate took an interesting twist with the blocking of access through Australian Academic Research Network (AARNet) to USENet. USENet has carried discussions on sex and drug related topics and has sometimes provided risqué or sexually explicit images. USENet has been sensationalised in the U.S. media as a porn ring.

What is USENet?

USENet began in 1979 when two U.S. computer gurus wrote software that allowed their sites to exchange data on a regular basis. Demand quickly grew to the stage where thousands of sites throughout the world are now interlinked by various forms of modem, landline, satellite and microwave connection. Users at these sites can send electronic mail to each other and can contribute items of interest to the USENet newsgroups that circulate around the world.

The variety and quality of information on USENet is enormous, ranging from newsgroups that discuss technical aspects of computer programming and software engineering, to conference notices, job advertisements, the impact of computers on society and a vast array of other topics. In addition, there are a huge variety of "unofficial" newsgroups that are carried on USENet, making it something of a global, anarchic bulletin board. In these newsgroups one can find something for every taste; such as how to repair your bicycle, prepare vegetarian meals, discussions on any political topic or ideology, on any style of music.

AARNet operates as the Australian branch of the Internet - a global collection of mainly government supported networks. AARNet provides a backbone through which many Australians can gain informal access to USENet.

Herein lies the problem. AARNet isn't

really free. The principal communications links are (indirectly) paid for by the Australian taxpayer through funding to universities and CSIRO. Some are asking why taxpayers' money should be wasted in transmitting sexually explicit images or in supporting discussions of the "is there really a G-spot" type.

On the other hand, the communications lines are leased and costs are constant regardless of how much you use them. Therefore, the unproductive traffic isn't really costing anything at all and, it is argued, suppressing it is merely a veiled suppression of academic freedom. However, a great deal of traffic in the more "respectable" newsgroups is widely considered to be garbage. Should these groups be censored too?

No net effect with censoring?

Shutting down offending USENet newsgroups will not stop the flow of sexually explicit material. This material is publicly accessible at sites all over the world, quite outside of the newsgroups, such as through privately owned bulletins or by subscribing to a mailing list which would use electronic mail (e-mail) as the medium of transmission. Even if every e-mail message into and out of Australia were inspected (ethically, legally and practically dubious) the contents could easily be encrypted to prevent it.

While AARNet itself could be shutdown by removing funding for its communications links, distribution of USENet newsgroups would be impossible to eliminate because sites store what they receive and feed the next one, thereby providing an enormous amount of redundancy. If one's feed machine is disabled, then all one has to do is to seek a feed "upstream" of the site. Indeed, even if the major arterial communications

continued on p31

"Telecommunications law, Australian perspectives"

Alan Robertson reviews the first Australian text on this area

The stated aim of this book is to provide public access to the widest range of experience, and insights from experts concerned with making and reforming the laws and applying them in practices.

The question to be answered, therefore, is whether it achieves that laudable aim.

Note that the target is 'public access', so that it is apparently not meant to be a specialised reference work only for lawyers. The texts I sampled - and that is most of them - are very readable. Potential readers who are not lawyers can be reassured that they will not suffer the mind-numbing that may have occurred when struggling with some other legal commentaries.

In all, the book follows the excellent example set by Justice Michael Kirby, whose Foreword is both interesting and informative, while, at the same time giving a brief survey of how some contributors' perspectives differ from one another.

I believe that the aim of appealing to a wider public interest has been achieved. By offering a range of different views, rather than having all contributors follow a common line, the work achieves balance.

The scope of the book

Some idea of the scope of the book can be gained from the subject matter of chapters. These begin with an outline of how the telecommunications regulatory environment has developed from colonial times, through federation, up to the 1989 Telecommunications Act, with expectations of more to follow as a result of the government's review of the role of and relationship between, the public telecommunications carriers. Different perspectives of the 1989 Act, and how it came about, are then discussed before we get to specifics. These cover private networks, resale and interconnect, value added services, cabling, Telecom's joint ventures, international regulations, electronic data interchange, regulatory approvals by Telecom before 1989 and by AUSTEL since then, the Trade Practices Act and the role of competition law.

The last six chapters are concerned with Telecom's community service obligations, social responsibilities of government-owned utilities, fair pricing of monopoly services, the alternative of competition, and the con-

sumer protection which the Ombudsman can provide for users.

Altogether the coverage is thorough and comprehensive. Many people in the industry may be reasonably familiar with a lot of the matters discussed but will still find this collection of topics and the manner they are dealt with most useful. Newcomers to the Australian regulatory environment, or those whose employment in the industry has not involved them in policy issues to any extent will find this an invaluable reference. The convenience of having one volume containing details of the more important events and decisions of the last ten years or so should appeal to a wide range of people.

Other aspects

The main index is detailed. Using it to check on the inclusion of a number of different matters of particular interest to me did not show up any deficiencies. The dreaded 'cadastral separation' requirement, which is going to plague many of us until the law is changed, gets a mention by three of the contributors, for instance.

As well as the main index there is a very useful legislation index, although I suspect that will be of more interest to lawyers than to general readers. Diagrams, tables and appendices are given a separate listing and are consequently easy to find. Brief biographical notes are provided for all contributors and there is a glossary of abbreviations.

As to the production of the book, the typeface is clear and big enough so that those of us over forty will have no trouble reading it. The binding looks durable; the artwork of the cover is distinctive without being pretentious. It should be easily spotted on the bookshelf.

In summary, "Telecommunications Law" should be a most welcome reference for a wide cross-section of people in the industry. We all need to be better informed on the issues it covers. It will be a comfort to have it handy, and be able to quote from it. At \$78 a copy - including postage - it won't break anyone's bank. Besides, it should be tax deductible.

The editor, Professor Armstrong, his sponsors at CIRCIT and the individual contributors are to be congratulated on a timely

and very useful book. Highly recommended.

Alan Robertson is Issues Manager with the Australian Telecommunications User Group. "Telecommunications Law" retails for \$78.00 and is published by Media Arm Pty Ltd of PO Box 56, Parkville, Victoria, 3052.

Holes in the net from p20

links were removed, then users with modems or radiolinks would take over. Admittedly costs would increase and volume decline, but USENet would survive, even over Australia's long-haul distances.

Net Value

The net is a living organism, an information bazaar of staggering variety and scope. Despite the pettiness and immaturity of the minority, some of the best minds in the world grace the net with their presence. Problems are solved, issues are clarified. The net has a culture and etiquette all of its own. For some months now, professional and amateur astronomers have been discussing and calculating the best way to deflect large asteroids that could be on a collision course with Earth. It is difficult to think of any other medium that could bring so many first-rate minds together so easily and for such an important technical problem.

What people do with the net will challenge legal minds, transborder agreements, and especially our social mores and cultural values. Until now it has been an unregulated combination of intellectual feast and interpersonal vomit. What happens to it now and what AARNet's contribution to it will be is anyone's guess. Hopefully, some combination of public debate and bean counting will determine what it becomes and what it is for.

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