Networking whose future?

A distinguished panel of professionals, academics and technical experts led a forum on public access to the information superhighway which was jointly organised by the Victorian branches of ALIA and ACLIS on 24 May. Over 100 people attended the forum at the Walter and Eliza Hall Institute of Medical Research with Jo Marshall, ALIA Victorian Branch President in the Chair.

Eric Wainwright, Deputy Director-General of the National Library of Aus-

L-R: Eric Wainwright, Patricia Gillard, Derek Whitehead, Carol Scott, Peter Gerrand and Jo Marshall at the forum

tralia, spoke of the maze of government and bureaucratic committees which have been established to develop policies on, and to regulate, the rapidly developing government networking initiatives. Professor Patricia Gillard, who served on the Broadband

Services Expert Group, gave an insight into the dynamics of the groups as the members grappled with the technical and economic imperatives of developing a broadband service for Australia and the equity and access issues associated with information services, which were highlighted in the recommendations in its final report *Networking Australia's future*. Professor Peter Gerrand, CEO of CITRI, reminded the audience that while the report of the Broadband Services Expert Group was favourable towards public libraries as service points for government networks, the dollars to make the recommendations a reality were yet to be forthcoming, and highlighted the potential of libraries in this area. Telecom/Telstra was represented by Carol Scott, Platform Manager for Pay TV. Carol outlined Telstra's plans for the future, emphasising the incremental way in which it is envisaged that consumers will begin to use electronic entertainment and information services from the home. The final

speaker was Derek Whitehead, Director of VICNET, who showed that it was possible to turn the rhetoric into reality with services such as VICNET by enabling members of the public to access electronic information resources from public libraries and from the home.

While not all speakers focused on public access issues, the questions at the end of the seminar started to get to the nub of the issue. it is clear that there is not sufficient money allocated by governments to turn the electronic dream into reality. It was also clear the librarians have a very important role in lobbying governments and bureaucratic organisations to ensure that the decision makers are well informed and to keep the social issues of equity and access in the foreground of policy development. Background research needs to be undertaken by library professionals to identify user needs, barriers to use of electronic networks and actual usage patterns. Only then can our advice be accurate and, hopefully, influential. From the presentations and discussions, the role of the librarians in developing content for electronic network services, shaping the structure of WWWs and educating and training people in how to efficiently and effectively use them will be ongoing and vitally important. ∎