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Technology does not teach us how to think or how to write. What matters is what we do with it. Equitable access to networked information should be viewed as a fundamental right of all Australians in much the same way that we expect to be provided with water, public transport and electricity services. These were sentiments expressed by the Prime Minister, Paul Keating, when he launched *Networking Australia's future*, the final report of the Broadband Services Expert Group (BSEG), in Sydney on 1 March.

In its submission to the BSEG our Association made the point that the library sector had the infrastructure and expertise to ensure that issues of equity could be appropriately managed and this proposition has been identified in the recommendations of the report. Specifically, the report recommends that libraries should be linked into the broadband infrastructure by the year 2001. In the interim libraries should be connected to available narrowband digital links for access to information

services such as the Internet. It is significant that libraries have been identified in the report as playing a critical role in the provision of essential community information services. Sadly, the report does not identify how the library sector will be adequately resourced to provide access to networked information.

The report covers fields such as the development of industry plans for the telecommunications supply industry, local content and privacy and gives a high priority to government funded support for training facilities and personnel within libraries. The importance of training has been a feature of ALIA's lobbying activities in this area and, again, it is to be hoped that the recommended funding is forthcoming. We will be looking anxiously forward to such a provision being included in the May budget.

There are however some important initiatives proposed in the report which may assist in addressing the issue of resourcing. Ten million dollars is to be made available over three years

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to support innovative applications of communications services by the community sector. Given the profile of libraries and the role defined for them in the report, it is to be hoped that some of these funds, when they become available, will be channelled into library-based community projects.

One of the Group's recommendations is that, to support the development of a national strategy for new communications networks, a National Information Services Council be established. The Prime Minister, in launching the report, announced the establishment of the Council, which he will chair. It is to be composed of 'visionary and informed people drawn from industry, creators, carriers, users, consumers and researchers.' Given that libraries are identified as playing a critical role in the national strategy, it would be valuable if our sector could be represented on the Council.

The final report of the BSEG, chaired by Brian Johns, is remarkable in that it has dealt with complex technological issues and produced service-oriented, public policy recommendations. These recommendations go to the heart of social justice and business objectives which, if implemented, will position the Australian community to take full advantage of networked information. That this has been achieved is a tribute to Mr Johns and the members of the Group and to the Prime Minister who developed this initiative and judged that someone with Mr Johns' work experiences was required to achieve such outcomes. Had the Group been composed solely of technical experts it is likely that the resulting report would have focused on delivery structures only.

Overall the report advances the issues we have been pursuing. We will continue to work towards the goal of securing the public and private funding that will be required to ensure that libraries are adequately resourced to meet the information needs of the Australian community as technologies continue to evolve.

A national strategy for new communications networks

The Expert group believes that new communications services will be fundamental to Australia's future. Communications industries themselves — whether producing equipment, content, or carrying services — are among the fastest growing industries, and are making a vital contribution to our exports. Even more importantly they are crucial to the competitiveness of virtually all other industries. Australia's future depends on its success as an information society.

Success must be built on the talents and enthusiasm of Australians, particularly business and young people, and on widespread reach of new communications services. The Broadband services expert group proposes that a National strategy for new communications networks be implemented based on three key

elements: *education and community access, industry development, and the role of government.*

The strategy encompasses:

Links to school libraries and other community centres; a national strategy for broadband networking in education; to training; and a community applications fund.

The group proposes action to stimulate the development of Australian industries as the second leg of the strategy; focusing on industry development plans; extension of networks; services and applications; and local content.

The Government's role will be especially important in leading the development of services that have particular social benefits: government use of networks; open access to networks; privacy; and conditional access systems.