



... Continued from page 8

that the British system marked the failure of a 'middle ground' approach between market-based and administrative systems, which makes entry into the sector easier, but seeks to continue to regulate ownership and content on quality and viability grounds. The result in Britain has been little new competition for ownership of ITV licences, vast differences in prices paid for licences, and vast differences in the financial situation of networks. The paper also discussed the growth in satellite pay TV (Murdoch's Sky service), and the review of the BBC currently taking place.

Allan Brown of Griffith University provided an interesting theoretical discussion of auction systems as a means of allocating broadcast licences. His paper noted that the price paid for licences is affected by factors such as the number of bidders, the type of auction, attitudes towards risk on the part of bidders, and whether the asset has 'private value' to a bidder (such as prestige or political influence associated with owning a broadcast network).

He pointed to problems with the auction of pay TV licences in Aus-

tralia, the main one being the allowance of multiple bids, while others include the changing of the rules during the bid process, the mandate to use satellite delivery, and the possibility of the successful bid suffering the 'winner's curse' of having paid too much for the licence.

## The Futures Project

Perhaps the most important presentation was the outlining of the BTCE's Communications Research Project by Chris Cheah (see p.10). The aim is to complete the Project by the end of 1994, to link it to the Optical Fibre Expert Group's work, and to provide a basis for policy review.

Research activity will proceed along four streams: services, content and marketing; delivery technologies; market behaviour; and policy and regulation. The last includes consideration of 'some social policy implications' (well down the list as point 14 of 16). It looks suspiciously like an afterthought. Clearly these implications are of considerably less significance to the BTCE

than looking at new marketing opportunities for the corporate sector.

The low priority accorded to social policy issues is an indication of the two main problems with the BTCE's methodology, as demonstrated at the forum: a fetishisation of orthodox economic market theory to the exclusion of virtually everything else, and an obsession with technological 'hardware' developments without consideration of 'software' or cultural content or use factors.

The forum organisers also received a big thumbs-down from participants for the failure to include any women speakers or chairs over the two days. One response to a question about this was that there are no women communications economists, an assertion which invites similar scepticism to another claim made by the BTCE that no-one else is doing important communications research.

This forum was well attended, but many who went must be questioning whether it is worth attending future BTCE events unless there is a broadening of issues discussed, and of the range of speakers. □

Terry Flew

## ABA Drops BIA

**The ABA will no longer publish *Broadcasting In Australia*, the glossy annual publication initiated by its predecessor.**

There were four editions of this valuable compendium of broadcasting information, which may become collector's items in time. It was predictable that *BIA* would fold once the ABA took over, since the Authority does not have the resources to gather the wide range of data, particularly program and financial data, collected by the ABT. There is also a shift of policy away from publishing information in compendium form to putting it out in more accessible small bites.

What are we getting instead? In August, the ABA released the first in a

series of occasional papers under the general heading *Trends and Issues* (see Policy File for details). Number 1 contains material on audiences and programs in 1992, including such data as average weekly viewing/listening time, most popular programs, highest rating stations.

*Trends and Issues* will draw on existing research material as well as containing new material. Two more issues will be out soon, on aspects of Australian content: attitudes to Australian programs, and compliance with the Oz content standard and children's standard over the last three years. These are intended to link into the CIRCIT seminars being held at the end of October. □

## Complainants Drop ABA

**In a media release last month, the ABA announced that there had been a staggering 40 per cent drop in the number of complaints made to it about programs in the six months to June this year.**

This is not altogether surprising, and certainly cannot be taken to mean that people have suddenly become much happier with the programs on offer. Perhaps it's just that they've got the message that under the new Act, complainants must first go to the offending broadcaster. Only in the last resort can they take their complaints to the ABA. □