

# Fixing telly in regional Australia

**D**eciding which telly reception blackspots to fix and getting *Eat Carpet* and other SBS fare out to regional Australia are two of the issues being considered by the government as it tries to figure out how to spend the \$120 million pledged to a Television Fund from the sale of Telstra. Avid TV viewers had until August 20, 1999 to provide comments on the government's discussion paper on fixing blackspots and extending SBS to regional centres with population over 10,000.

In late August, the Department of Communications, Information Technology and the Arts (DCITA) established a unit to analyse submissions and develop a scoping study on television reception issues. According to a DCITA source, the scoping study was expected to address the approaches to be applied in selecting which of the 200-250 reception blackspots could be improved. The study would draw out community views and industry expertise to devise ways to improve service reception and the departmental unit would act as a secretariat for an expert group that would decide priorities and technical issues.

In addition to the extension of SBS and fixing major blackspots, the Fund also contains provision to subsidise the purchase of a transmitter and decoder to allow "self-help" communities in remote areas to receive a second terrestrial TV service and for SBS to spend \$2 million establishing a new media unit to assist its online presence.

While digital television is a few years off for most viewers in regional Australia, the blackspot program is aimed at improving reception of existing analogue transmissions in areas where

terrain, signal interference or distances from existing transmission sites create reception difficulties. But the discussion paper noted that the arrival of digital television in regional Australia from 2001 to 2004 will improve service quality in many areas that currently have problems with analogue transmissions.

The discussion paper noted that the Department would be considering how television services could be improved through linking the Television Fund to other funding and infrastructure programs, and the feasibility of extending SBS in areas where spectrum was scarce. For instance, National Transmission Ltd (purchaser of the National Transmission Network) is required to establish a \$5 million fund to extend or improve communications services in areas that were not previously considered to be commercially viable.

**Stephen McElhinney**

## The Productivity Commission's Broadcasting Inquiry: Debating the Draft Report

The Communications Law Centre seminar in association with Clayton Utz will be held from 9.00am - 5.00pm on Thursday November 4, 1999 at the offices of Clayton Utz, Level 34, 1 O'Connell St, Sydney.

The Productivity Commission is conducting a year-long inquiry into broadcasting regulation in Australia. Public hearings were held earlier in the year and a draft report is expected to be released in mid-October. This seminar is timed to provide an opportunity for public debate about the Commission's proposals well before the preparation of its final report.

Speakers will include Professor Richard Snape, the Commissioner in charge of the inquiry, and representatives from the media and communications industry, regulators and others. Sessions will cover competition and ownership, planning and licensing of new services and program regulation.

Cost: \$325; \$165 full-time students and community organisations. Contact the Communications Law Centre on telephone (02) 9663 0551.

## Digital protagonists

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- the effect on the independence of the national broadcasters of any government regulation in relation to the type of multi channelling provided.

For coverage in regional areas, the Regional Equalisation Plan has been announced and is designed to assist broadcasters in regional areas through subsidising the costs of transition to digital. The intention is to ensure that regional areas continue to receive under the new digital services a diversity of choice in TV services; a similar range of entertainment and information services as those available in metropolitan areas; continued financial viability; commercial TV services that are relevant and responsive to consumer needs; and diversity of media ownership.

**Karen Winton**