

# The ABC's digital future

*At the centre of debate at RMIT's Media and Telecommunications Policy Group seminar, A Future for TV Networks?, was the ABC's Brian Johns*

**T**here was a divergence of views at the seminar on how free-to-air television's future should be managed, by government and the industry itself. With convergence comes the possibility that participants can become all things to audiences. But a theme reiterated at the seminar was that the commercial free-to-air networks believe that datacasters should be prevented from becoming de facto broadcasters through the use of video and audio data. Allowing them to do so would render ineffective the current protection period which does not allow new licences to be issued until 2007.

Brian Johns, managing director of the ABC, maintained that this kind of regulation was an artificial removal of choice. "Choice is the one constant", he said. He pointed to the average bookshop which stocks 32,000 titles, "not books, titles", and said that it was precisely because audiences could handle and in fact desired choice, that books, magazines and cinema had all survived the impact of new technologies and therefore new choices. Where the Internet and video were supposed to destroy books, magazines and the cinema industry, all are still in business. Johns insisted that the television networks would take new choices offered through new technologies in their stride as other industries had. Citing the loss of news and sport as examples, Johns commented that even the ABC had had to adapt, and had done so successfully.

From this background, Johns argued that the ABC should be allowed to develop services, unaffected by distinctions between broadcasting and datacasting. By drawing on its existing resources, he said the national broadcaster had a bright future in digital broadcasting - if it was allowed to. The main thrust of Johns' presentation was that the ABC should be treated separately from the commercial networks in any regulatory regime which restricts broadcasters' and/or datacasters' activities.

The ABC's Ingrid Spielman then gave a practical demonstration of what the ABC can offer now in digital broadcasting. The presentation gave an idea of the range of services available via digital broadcasting: news reports, updated throughout the day; educational tools for children; and local features across Australia. Johns emphasised the fact that all of this information was sourced from existing ABC operations, television, radio or online. This meant that the cost of provision was low - essentially putting the data in the appropriate format - but that the quality of product was high.

Johns pointed out that the provision of these services would be done within the ABC's charter, highlighting the fact that the ABC is in a position to become a digital broadcaster now, having reorganised itself in anticipation of convergence. Further, he said that

the digital broadcasting proposal would allow the ABC to maintain its priorities of Australian content and no advertising. The importance of these priorities was demonstrated by the fact that the ABC's audiences are now higher than ever, he said. "Genuine Australian audiences for Australian content". If the success of ABC On-Line is anything to go by - it has been valued by one banker at \$500 million despite an investment of only \$5 million - the ABC appears to know its audiences well.

Johns reminded the commercial networks of the benefits of letting the ABC chart the waters. By being first, the digital ABC will create the market for the kinds of services the commercial networks will develop for release in just over seven years' time, he said. This suggests that the networks will have good commercial reasons for going along with the ABC. Whether that entails sympathetic submissions to the federal government or merely silence on the issue, it is hard to imagine the government finding a good reason to restrict the ABC's activities where no objections to that course are raised.

The essence of Johns' message was that unless the ABC is "warranted into" new technology, a valuable social resource will be wasted. Ultimately, however, it is the government which needs to be convinced if the rest of Australia is also to be impressed.

**Sandy Dawson is a solicitor with Minter Ellison in Sydney, currently working on secondment to the Communications Law Centre**