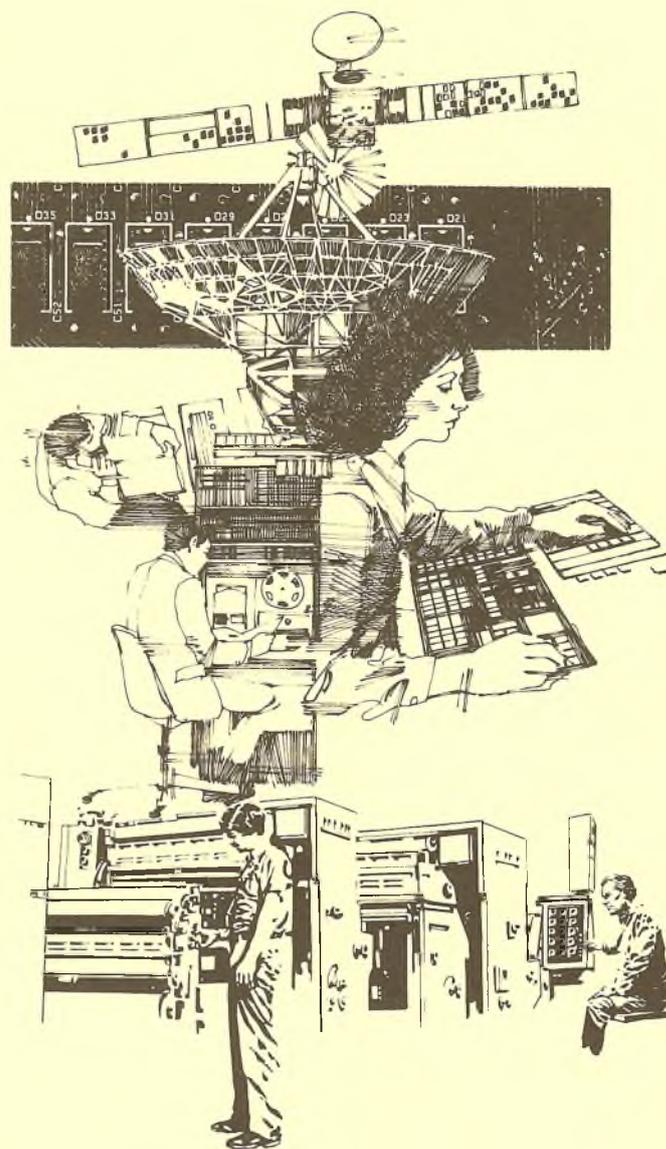


# AUSTRALIA IN THE INFORMATION AGE



by  
Christina Spurgeon and Paul Chadwick

Communications Law Centre



**Australia in the Information Age** by *Christina Spurgeon* and *Paul Chadwick* of the Communications Law Centre is another in the series of Occasional Papers published by the Council to promote discussion and reflection.

As the paper highlights, concentration of ownership in the print media is high; in part two the relationship of information to society is examined as is the role of government in the information society. These and other important aspects should lead to some interesting discussion not only in communications bodies but also in the wider community, in government and academic circles and wherever public policy is being developed. The Council would welcome feedback on the paper for possible use in our quarterly newsletter *Justice Trends*.

November 1992

+ Bishop William J Brennan  
Chairman, ACSJC  
Bishop of Wagga Wagga

### **About the Communications Law Centre**

The Communications Law Centre is a non-profit research and teaching organisation which specialises in communications law and policy issues. It advocates that Australia's media and communications services be developed and operated in ways which extend the diversity, quality and accountability of services to users.

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Introduction and Parts 1 and 2 of the text

# Introduction

What do we mean when we say we live in the 'Information Age'? Are the issues it raises for us to think about, and to act upon, really fresh? Or are they perennial questions to which rapidly developing technologies give new shape and greater urgency?

- Who shall have the power which control of information bestows?
- How will they be held accountable for their exercise of that power?
- Can the wealth which information represents be distributed in ways which diminish - or at least do not worsen - inequities between rich and poor?

These are some of the complex issues which this paper will try to illuminate in two ways:

**Part One**, by Paul Chadwick, considers the relationship between the media and the public, for this is the most obvious way information impinges on our day-to-day lives both as citizens and as consumers. **Part Two**, by Christina Spurgeon, puts the discussion in more spacious ground. It looks at precisely what constitutes information and reviews some broader problems, for government and for society in general, which are posed by our 'Information Age'.

That term 'Information Age' is convenient and grand, but still rather vague. In 1991 a parliamentary committee made an attempt to define aspects of it, two of which may be of help to the general reader:

*Information economy - economy marked by a shift away from employment producing raw materials, manufactured goods and tangible economic services towards employment directly related to the collection, processing and dissemination of data/information/knowledge and associated with an exponential increase in the volume and availability of information.*

*Information society - society in which time use, family life, employment, education and social interaction are increasingly influenced by access to information technology, e.g. television, telephones, radios, videos, computers; sometimes the term is used as a synonym for 'information economy' but others deny that economy and society are identical (Jones: vii-viii).*

## PART ONE

### The Media and the Public

#### Print Media

Newspapers and, to a lesser extent, magazines, have a dual personality in Australian society. They are all private businesses which purvey information and opinion in an attempt to attract an audience which advertisers will pay to reach.

Many offer mostly entertainment or information of a special type (for example, on fishing, food or cars) and we will leave them to one side.

Let us focus instead on the print media which offer news and information about, and comment upon, political, economic and social issues. They also provide a range of information useful to day-to-day life (for example, weather reports, TV guides and sports results). But it is their role as partial reflections of the society of which we are members that gives them the special power we ascribe to them. They help us construct our

sense of the society we live in and they are influences on the decisions we make.

Electronic media have challenged major newspapers for audiences, advertising and influence, but papers remain powerful. They can carry far more detail about a more diverse range of issues than can, say, TV news and current affairs. And papers tend to set the agenda which the electronic media, particularly talk radio, take up and expand on.

So the second aspect of the personality of newspapers is public service. They are more than mere businesses. As the practical means of spreading information about Governments and Oppositions, they give life to the theory of our democratic system - 'the consent of the governed' - by informing the electorate so it can pass judgement on those who rule. By seeking the opinions of the participants in various controversies, as well as providing a forum for others to voice their views (letters to the editor), they provide a substantial stall in the 'marketplace of ideas'. They should give dissenters a go, so that we may continually test our beliefs against the arguments of those who think differently, for by doing so we affirm for ourselves the correctness of our views or we reassess them.

But the press at its best is more than a platform. It is an active participant. It should try to hold the powerful accountable for the use of power and develop commentators with sufficient expertise to improve the level of debate and to subject 'experts' to scrutiny on our behalf. As one of journalism's aphorisms has it: comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable.

Such a role means the press itself is powerful. How will it be held accountable? In tackling this question it is worth trying to separate clearly two aspects of the press: structure and content.

Structure refers mainly to ownership and control of the vessels which carry journalism. Content means the actual information and opinion in these vessels.

Ownership and control of the Australian print media is highly concentrated (Norris 1981; Brown 1986; Chadwick 1989; Lee 1992). More than 60 percent of the metropolitan daily press (measured by circulation) is in the hands of one organisation, Mr Rupert Murdoch's News Limited. News controls the only daily papers in Adelaide, Brisbane, Darwin and Hobart and the highest-circulating dailies in Sydney (Telegraph-Mirror) and Melbourne (Herald-Sun) as well as the national daily The Australian. Its main competitor is the John Fairfax Group, controlled at time of writing by the Canadian Mr Conrad Black, which operates the Sydney Morning Herald, Melbourne Age and the national business paper the Financial Review. The only other capital-city publishers are West Australian Newspaper Holdings, which monopolises Perth, and Mr Kerry Stokes, who controls the Canberra Times.

News Limited is the second largest publisher of regional daily newspapers publishers (after the Irishman, Dr Tony O'Reilly) and the leading publisher of Sunday papers and the suburban press around the country. Mr Murdoch also controls the country's largest book publishing operation (Communications Update, Communications Law Centre, February 1992).

News Limited was the second largest publisher of major magazines (after Mr Kerry Packer's Consolidated Press Holdings Ltd) until it sold its major magazines to a

newly-listed company, Pacific Magazines and Printing Ltd., in October 1991.

News Limited holds 45 per cent of the Pacific Magazines and Printing capital. It has a right to a maximum of 25 per cent of positions on the Pacific Magazines board. The articles of association provide for 37 per cent of independent directors, apart from News Limited directors and staff directors.

The chairman of News Limited, Mr Ken Cowley, became the first Pacific Magazines chairman.

Along with increasing concentration of ownership and control, Australia is experiencing the greatest loss of major papers since at least 1920.

Fourteen major metropolitan papers have closed since the upheaval in media ownership began in 1987 with the takeover of the Herald and Weekly Times Ltd by Rupert Murdoch's News Limited.

## NEWSPAPER CLOSURES SINCE 1987

*Business Daily*

6 July 1987 - 18 August 1987

*The Western Mail*, Perth

8 November 1980 - 31 December 1987

*Telegraph*, Brisbane

1 October 1872 - 5 February 1988

*Times on Sunday*

(formerly National Times)

7 February 1971 - 13 March 1988

*The Sun*, Sydney

1910 - 14 March 1988

*Sunday Observer*, Melbourne

1969 - 11 June 1989

*Sunday Press*, Melbourne

9 September 1973 - 13 August 1989

*Daily News*, Perth

1840 - 11 September 1990

*Daily Mirror*, Sydney

1941 - 5 October 1990

*The Herald*, Melbourne

1840 - 5 October 1990

*Sunday Herald*, Melbourne

20 August 1989 - 31 March 1991

*Sun*, Brisbane

2 August 1982 - 10 December 1991

*The News*, Adelaide

24 July 1923 - 27 March 1992

*Sunday Sun*, Brisbane

21 January 1900 - 12 April 1992

(called Truth until 5 September 1971)

It is sometimes argued that concentration means resulting economies of scale which allow the big print media operators to subsidise (or launch) weaker publications of quality and therefore to sustain greater diversity. However, concentration seems to have developed recently at the cost of the weaker publications.

Why should the increasing concentration of control of print structure in fewer and fewer hands be of concern?

The Victorian Attorney-General's Working Party into Print Media Ownership (Mathews 1990) distilled from the considerable Australian and overseas literature the following potential adverse effects of concentration:

- (a) **concentration of power** unacceptable in a democracy, whether or not that power is used;
- (b) **insufficient channels** for the expression of opinion;
- (c) economic forces creating **barriers to entry** for others who might dilute that power and open new channels;
- (d) **diminished localism** of content and accountability caused by a group's size and pursuit of economies of scale;
- (e) **debilitated journalistic culture** caused by reduced competition, self-censorship, lack of alternative employment;
- (f) **conflicts of interest** for owners with non-media interests. Although not caused by concentration, such conflicts grow in their potential adverse effects in proportion to concentration.

Controversy surrounds the extent to which concentration actually produces these ill effects. The two inquiries in Victoria (Norris 1981; Mathews 1990) concluded that the potential alone was sufficient to justify action by Parliament to prevent concentration getting worse. The public interest was deemed to warrant preventive action. So far no action has been taken.

In March 1992, the House of Representatives select committee on the print media (Lee Committee) also recommended some measures to tighten the Trade Practices Act in a special way to deal with mergers by major newspapers. But the committee did not support action to wind back the concentration which has developed so far.

The majority's chief findings were:

*Concentration of ownership is high and this appears to be driven by economic forces (chiefly economies of scale) which inexorably favor monopoly newspapers in a particular market and group ownership of newspapers in different markets.*

*The level of competition between newspapers and other media for audiences and advertising is not high because advertisers use the various media for largely different functions.*

*The Australian print media is highly concentrated, with one or two groups dominating in almost every sector. The concentration would not be a problem if the threat of entry by new publishers constrained established proprietors.*

*But formidable barriers to entry militate against the successful establishment of new metropolitan or national dailies and that end of the market is not contestable (para 5.106). Entrants in magazine, suburban or regional publishing would be at a distinct disadvantage because of the predominance of the major publishing groups (para 5.116).*

*Competition and diversity of views are inextricably linked.*

*'Some members of the committee concluded that there was a connection between the unprecedentedly high concentration of media ownership and the lack of diver-*

sity of information and ideas in the Australia press, and that the former is likely to be a significant cause of the latter.

'However, a majority of the committee considered that there was insufficient evidence to conclude that the current high level of concentration in the Australian print media has resulted in biased reporting, news suppression or lack of diversity.

'All members agreed that concentration of ownership is potentially harmful to plurality of opinion and increases the potential risk that news may be distorted.' (Para 8.120)

Corporate cultures are 'natural sociological phenomenon in which the constituent parts of an organisation will have a perception that the corporate culture is there and has to be complied with; whether the corporate culture influences the newspaper product is a question which remains open.' (Para 8.44)

It was on the basis of potential risk that the committee recommended preventive legislative action. This is a matter of great controversy. Some will tolerate the existing concentration because they say the press needs to be big and financially strong in order to stand up to intimidatory tactics by big government, big business, big unions and big advertisers.

Opponents of intervention by Parliament also point to the historical struggle to free the press from the shackles placed on it by governments anxious to curb its role as watchdog scrutinising the powerful. If politicians are permitted to single out the print media structure for special legislative treatment, the argument goes, then they will soon attempt to use that power to influence content.

The debate about the proper limits of intervention can also be seen as part of the balancing of key power structures in society. Accountability of each is ensured by them continually checking and counter-checking one another. The media often host debates about whether there is a proper balance among the Legislature, Executive and Judiciary.

Has power within the Fourth Estate become so concentrated that it might have an excess of power relative to these other power centres? Has the press become so much contained within large corporate entities that it is losing its sense of how to 'afflict the comfortable and comfort the afflicted'?

If you think the answer is yes, you face a critical question: how to trim excess media power without damaging its ability to check other strong forces in society? If press holdings were restricted; would the new and more diverse group of owners have sufficient power to defend freedom of the press, which is every person's freedom to know?

Many say no, and they prefer to tolerate high concentration. When asked how society may guard against the potential abuse of concentrated media power by those who hold it, they say, in effect, that media owners and senior journalists can be trusted, and ought to be trusted in preference to politicians.

This response asks much of readers, especially when newspaper companies also control non-media businesses which may create conflicts of interest for them.

### Charters of editorial independence

One method by which the print media could boost readers' confidence is said to be through the adoption

of charters of editorial independence. These are written agreements between the editorial staff of a media outlet and the owner. They jointly define their relationship so that the proprietor is separated from power over the day-to-day preparation and presentation of news and opinion. They place emphasis on the autonomy of the editor, for so long as he or she holds the position. While the enforceability of charters is doubtful, they are at least a written statement of good intention; a document to back the assurances in which readers are asked to place trust (Chadwick 1991).

Among Australian publishers, only the Fairfax company has so far agreed to a charter as at October 1992.

An adjunct to the charters debate is the suggestion that editors be offered contracts which give them the protection and security necessary to encourage them to stand up to a proprietor who would wish to manipulate the news or stifle dissenting opinion.

### Enforcement of ethics

But what are charters or editors contracts supposed to be guarding? What are the standards which journalists and editors are supposed to uphold through self-regulation? Are they working?

It is at this point that we include content issues, as well as structure.

Sometimes the law extracts accountability for what is published. For instance, through defamation the law is supposed to balance freedom of expression against the right to reputation. The right to a fair trial is balanced against the right to know by the operation of the law of contempt of court. Few journalists quibble with the principles underlying such legal constraints, although many complain that in practice the laws are too restrictive (Pullan 1984).

But what of the right to privacy, questions of taste and decency, accuracy and fairness? Here we are in the territory of ethics, not law, and the print media self-regulate.

The Australian Journalists' Association Code of Ethics, adopted in 1944 and updated in 1984, has received wide acceptance. The Fairfax charter incorporated it whole and the print media inquiry recommended industry-wide adherence to it. The code reads:

*Respect for truth and the public's right to information are overriding principles for all journalists. In pursuance of these principles journalists commit themselves to ethical and professional standards. All members of the Australian Journalists' Association engaged in gathering, transmitting, disseminating and commenting on news and information shall observe the following code of ethics in their professional activities. They acknowledge the jurisdiction of their professional colleagues in AJA judiciary committees to adjudicate on issues connected with this code.*

- 1 They shall report and interpret the news with scrupulous honesty by striving to disclose all relevant facts and by not suppressing relevant, available facts or distorting by wrong or improper emphasis.
- 2 They shall not place unnecessary emphasis on gender, race, sexual preference, religious belief, marital status or physical or mental disability.

- 3 In all circumstances, they shall respect all confidences received in the course of their calling.
- 4 They shall not allow personal interests to influence them in their professional duties.
- 5 They shall not allow their professional duties to be influenced by any consideration, gift or advantage offered and, where appropriate, shall disclose any such offer.
- 6 They shall not allow advertising or commercial considerations to influence them in their professional duties.
- 7 They shall use fair and honest means to obtain news, pictures, films, tapes and documents.
- 8 They shall identify themselves and their employers before obtaining any interview for publication or broadcast.
- 9 They shall respect private grief and personal privacy and shall have the right to resist compulsion to intrude on them.
- 10 They shall do their utmost to correct any published or broadcast information found to be harmfully inaccurate.

The AJA system has its limitations. To begin with, the preamble's assertion that truth and the right to know are overriding principles rather upsets the balancing process which is implied by other principles such as respect for privacy. AJA judiciary committees can deal only with complaints against members, but many senior journalists and executives who make key decisions are not members. The system is poorly advertised to readers, who can only use a complaints process if they are aware of it. The results of judiciary committee hearings - members may be censured, fined, suspended or expelled - are not ordinarily disclosed. Yet publicity is the sanction journalists use against society's wrongdoers to great effect.

The Australian Press Council was created by the major publishers in 1976 partly to forestall a threatened statutory complaints body. It has the dual role of maintaining freedom of the press and adjudicating complaints against the press. Some argue that the two tasks are incompatible because the bent towards press freedom unbalances the process of assessing complaints.

Membership has changed over the years: the Fairfax group did not join until 1982; News Limited withdrew in 1980 and returned in 1987 when it acquired the Herald and Weekly Times. That takeover prompted the AJA to withdraw from membership, claiming the Press Council response to the resultant concentration of ownership was too weak.

The Press Council has received much criticism over the years, mainly because its sole sanction is that newspapers pledge to publish its adjudications, whether in their favor or not. Some publications have refused to do so. While the majority of decisions are published, there are criticisms that they often appear far less prominently than the article which prompted the original complaint.

The 1992 print media inquiry recommended changes to the Press Council, including the return of the AJA. The parliamentary committee stopped short of proposing a statutory complaints body, but threatened that one might be imposed if self-regulation did not improve (Para 8.116).

Whatever changes to self-regulation result, it seems crucial that the press - owners, managers and journalists - recognise the link between true accountability and credibility in the eyes of readers. For the print media, accountability is a means to an end, but it is an end which, if attained, benefits us all. The essence was beautifully caught by the Canadian Royal Commission:

'The basic issue here is legitimacy. The most fundamental characteristic of a successfully free, democratic society is that the people and institutions exercising power in its various forms are generally felt to do so legitimately. They earn some consensus of public confidence; their motives are trusted.' (Canadian Royal Commission 1981:221)

### Electronic media

Broadcasting-in Australia has historically been treated differently to the press on the basis that the scarcity of the radio frequency spectrum required that the Commonwealth Government should plan and oversee its use.

Commercial radio and TV were until recently regulated under the Broadcasting Act. The Department of Transport and Communications advised the Minister on how the radio frequency spectrum should be used for broadcasting and the Australian Broadcasting Tribunal issued licences to those who wished to provide programs to attract an audience which they hoped advertisers would pay to reach.

The ABT also formulated program standards which broadcasters had to meet and dealt with complaints from listeners and viewers.

The Australian Broadcasting Corporation and Special Broadcasting Service regulate themselves and complaints about ABC or SBS programs should be made direct to them.

All this is changing radically.

In late 1991, the Federal Government released a Draft Broadcasting Services Bill which, when enacted in mid-October 1992, recast the broadcasting model which had served Australia for 50 years (Armstrong 1991).

In a nutshell, the new Act aims to increase the number of services available, reduce the amount of regulation and invite greater self-regulation by broadcasters.

The Act treats broadcasting as an industry. The public are consumers and the broadcasters are competitors. The language of the Act emphasises the change. It transforms the notion underpinning the existing law: that broadcasting is a public trust, with licences to use a scarce public resource allocated on the basis of comparative merit to applicants who must conform to requirements intended to produce programming of a certain quality.

The 'public trust' rationale has not gone entirely, but it is clearly secondary.

The chief justification given for the change is that technological developments mean that a great number and variety of services would become available if only the legislative and regulatory structure were relaxed to permit them. That diversity should mean that market mechanisms can be allowed to replace regulation as the main protector of quality of content and the public interest.

The same rationale in broad terms underpinned changes to broadcasting law and policy in the United States and the United Kingdom in the 1980s. It is a controversial claim.

Under the Act, allocation of licences will be on the basis of price - some kind of auction or tender system; the details have yet to be formulated - not the present system of ABT inquiries to determine the comparative merit of applicants. In short, the Act moves away from the idea of licensees as tenants renting a public resource to bidders buying part of that resource.

The radio industry will be greatly de-regulated. Limits on cross ownership, foreign ownership and state and national limits on the number of stations one person may hold were reduced. The reasons given are the industry's maturity, its increasing niche or local nature; the declining power of individual services to influence; and the diminishing scarcity of delivery mechanisms.

The Australian Broadcasting Authority replaced the Australian Broadcasting Tribunal in October, 1992. The ABA has considerable investigatory powers, but the Act provides no 'start button' for third parties to activate the ABA.

Public processes mostly are excluded from: categorisation of services into licence types; licence renewals; ownership and control and potential breaches; development of program standards and codes of practice; and formulation of licence conditions.

The old Broadcasting Act allowed any person to ask the ABT to hold an inquiry into whether it should exercise one of its substantive powers. These powers included revoking a licence, determining program standards, imposing a condition on a licence and approving a share transaction. The ABT was obliged to hold an inquiry unless the request was vexatious or frivolous. Public interest and industry groups had used this power to make the ABT responsive to their needs. Initial fears by the ABT that it would lose control of its workload because of this provision proved unfounded.

Program standards applied to issues such as program classification and Australian content. A standard regulating amounts of advertising time on TV was recently reintroduced following a failed experiment in self-regulation by the networks.

The new Act changes significantly the present system, but the exact effect of the changes remains obscure.

The ABA must determine program standards for levels of Australian content and children's programs on commercial free-to-air TV. The old standards have been renewed for the time being.

In other areas, service providers will self-regulate in the first instance by means of codes of practice. If these fail, the ABA has an uncertain discretionary power to then impose a program standard.

The explanatory paper which accompanied the bill acknowledges that there is a natural conflict between the public interest in program regulation and the interests of service providers in maximising profits.

The paper continues:

*'The rationale underpinning adoption of codes of practice is that inappropriate regulation can bring with it significant costs through loss of efficiency and productivity. There can also be social costs as formal regulation can deprive industry of the opportunity to devise a flexible and responsive approach to meeting the demands of the community. However, given the important role*

*broadcasting plays in sustaining and developing Australian cultural life and its democratic, pluralist society, the Government also has a responsibility to the community to intervene to correct perceived market failures. This would include the industry's inability to reflect community standards.'* (p.32-33)

Existing program standards developed by the ABT will continue until the ABA has developed, in consultation with the service providers, 'codes of practice'. These may relate to:

- a preventing the broadcasting of programs not in accordance with community standards;
- b program classifications which reflect community standards;
- c accuracy and fairness in news and current affairs;
- d preventing programs which simulate news or events in a way that misleads or alarms, or which are designed to hypnotise or depict hypnosis, or use subliminal perception or like techniques;
- e methods to handle complaints about program content or compliance with the codes;
- f (for community broadcasters) sponsorship announcements;
- g (for commercial broadcasters) time devoted to advertising;
- h captioning for the hearing impaired;
- i other program content matters of community concern.

In developing codes of practice, the industry and presumably the ABA are to take into account community 'attitudes' to the portrayal of:

- violence, both physical and psychological;
- sexual conduct and nudity;
- offensive language;
- use of drugs, including alcohol and tobacco;
- matter likely to incite hatred against, or vilify, any person or group on the basis of ethnicity, nationality, race, gender, sexual preference, age, religion or physical or mental disability.

Code writers must also take into account 'such matters relating to program content as are of concern to the community'.

The ABA must register these codes if they 'deal adequately with the matters covered by the code' and are endorsed by a majority of the providers of services in the particular section of the industry concerned, and the public has been given an "adequate opportunity to comment".

Late in 1992 the effect of these far-reaching broadcasting reforms was still unclear. Those with concerns which they wish the politicians or the networks to consider should make representations as soon as possible. It is clear that both the structure of electronic media, and the ways in which those who control it are held accountable, will soon be greatly changed.

At time of writing, the Federal Government was determining how pay TV would be introduced in Australia. Pay TV requires people to subscribe to TV services - (usually news, sport, movies or light entertainment) which are received by satellite or cable.

This new medium has the potential to diversify or to concentrate further media control depending on the rules set.

## PART TWO

### Some challenges in the Information Age

#### *What is information?*

Many different people - from philosophers to telecommunications engineers - have grappled with the question; What is information?, for a very long time. Thus there exist many definitions and explanations of information. Some, however, are more helpful than others for developing an understanding of the problems of information in contemporary Australian society.

Information is generally regarded by scientists to be "a measure of the nonuniform, orderly properties of physical systems" (Campbell: 85). One of the more popular definitions of information was termed by American anthropologist, Gregory Bateson, in the late 1970s as "any difference which makes a difference" (quoted in Brand: 78).

Don Lamberton, a Senior Research Fellow at the Melbourne-based Centre for International Research on Communication and Information Technologies (CIRCIT) considers that information is not one, but four things. It is a resource which can be converted to knowledge. It can also be turned into a commodity which can be packaged and traded for commercial gain, such as stock and market information. Information can also be the perception of pattern, for example as may occur in a sequence of numbers, shapes or sounds. Information is also a constitutive force in society because it can empower (Lamberton:3).

The new technologies of information are astounding and have succeeded in turning our world on its head in the space of one generation. Information technologies are no longer restricted to the printed or spoken word, or radio or television. Today they include satellites, mobile telephones, facsimile machines, and most important of all, computers. An understanding of the contexts in which many of these technologies have developed, as well as the global frictions they have provoked, can also be very useful for developing an understanding of the problems with information in contemporary Australian society.

Control over information and communication is also frequently equated with power. Indeed, it is no accident that economic power corresponds with control over communication technologies and information sources. "To trace the development and application of communication technologies is to follow the well worn paths of imperial and economic conquests of previous centuries" (Spurgeon: 27). Many modern advances in communications technology are in fact the products of military research and development efforts.

For example, British domination of international cable-based communication was widely acknowledged as giving British interests significant economic advantages. Similarly, it has been argued that development and control of satellite communications technology following WWII laid the ground for a US-dominated, international communications order. At the same time the US aggressively pursued a foreign policy strategy to promote the free flow of information between nations and people. This was an ambition which appeared admirable on the surface but one which was strongly resisted by less developed nations, resulting in significant diplomatic rifts between industrial and less-developed nations.

Free flow of information "was experienced by many emerging nations of the 1950s and 1960s as the transfer to them of inappropriate cultural values and technologies as well as the accumulation of foreign debt" (Spurgeon: 27). Less-developed nations of the world responded to the free flow doctrine by developing a strategy to address these issues, which came to be known as the New World Information and Communication Order (NWICO). "Developing countries were in a sense ahead of the developed world in understanding that the key to distribution of the world's resources lay within the international information system" (Braman: 361).

Calls for the establishment of NWICO were hotly contested by the US and Britain and both countries resigned from UNESCO, the major forum in which NWICO was being developed, in 1985 and 1986. Neither of these countries have yet rejoined UNESCO, and have indicated that they will not, until such time as the organisation's views on a number of matters such as NWICO, correspond more closely with their own.

It has been observed that the US now pursues its objectives for unrestricted trade in information in under the General Agreements on Tariffs and Trade (GATT), a set of international trade agreements which aim to liberalise international trade in goods and, more recently, services. This development has also met strong resistance from less-developed nations represented in the GATT negotiations (Braman: 361, 372).

### Information and Society

Information is essential to the maintenance and development of all societies. In democratic societies such as Australia, information is particularly important because an informed citizenry is vital to achieving good government. The principles of a free press and freedom of expression are also closely related to this notion of an informed citizenry. This is partly because governments are themselves major sources and custodians of information. The quality and reliability of decisions made by governments and their agencies - and the information upon which these decisions are based - is tested by processes of independent, informed comment and debate, such as those which take place through our mass media.

This describes an ideal model of the relationship of information to society and hence is not necessarily realised in practice for many complex reasons. One obvious problem with this model is that it presumes all people to be literate in the dominant forms of communication and to have access to the means by which information is communicated. For example, to participate effectively in this model of Australian society it is usually necessary to have, or to be, the following:

- a minimum level of English comprehension and literacy;
- access to a minimum of economic wealth;
- the physical abilities to see, hear and speak;
- to be 18 years of age and to otherwise be judged by society to be an adult;
- to have access to a minimum of transport and communications and information infrastructure and services including schools, telephones, a variety of mass media outlets such as television, radio, newspapers, and access to a car or public transport.

It is widely recognised that not all people have these things and there are many examples of services provided by governments and their agencies which seek to increase opportunities for participation. Similarly, society seeks to protect certain groups in the community who might otherwise be exploited, such as children. The aim here is not to comment on the merit, success or failures, of specific initiatives but simply to illustrate the complexity of the relationship that exists between information and society.

Indeed, we live in a world which is characterised by increasing complexity and increasing information, so much so that it is probably now necessary to add computer literacy and computer access to the list of things that a person needs to have or be, in order to participate effectively in Australian society. For example, reports, books, newspapers and magazines are increasingly being stored by libraries in digitally coded, electronic forms, not as printed matter.

Another major problem with the model described above is that it does not recognise the diversity and complexity of information which is generated in a given society, or how it moves about within that society. It presumes that information flows from the centre of a society to its periphery, or from the top down. This perception can be misleading. The value and importance of information which does not come from, or reach, the centre is not always appreciated by those people who occupy this hub. As a consequence its development as a resource may be hampered by policy decisions made in ignorance of it.

For example, Australian communications historian, Ann Moyal comments in her landmark study of how women use the telephone that, "historically men have not considered women's communication to be part of an important information network". Yet, she reveals a substantial body of evidence which suggests that women's use of the telephone is vital to maintaining the fabric of communities, to building and maintaining personal relationships, to care-giving in society, and to meeting the social and material needs of husbands, children, the elderly, the sick and the unhappy (Moyal: 92).

Ann Moyal's work provided very important and timely input to recent debates about Australian telecommunications policy, and in particular, decisions about whether all telephone usage should be charged for on a timed basis. She concluded that if the costs of women's telephone usage increased as a result of charging local calls on a timed basis, then women's usage would probably decline. As a consequence women, particularly those which who are members of 'telephone communities' of the elderly, non-English speaking, and isolated, would suffer. Furthermore, society at large would also suffer considerably more than was probably realised by policy makers, if there was any decline in these information flows.

In recent years information has assumed a new, economic significance to many societies. "Information and its use, along with the machines for its production, processing, storage and dissemination, are the basis of a growing sector of economic activity" (Lamberton: 3). Societies which have been experiencing significant growth in the information sector in the last two decades are often referred to as post-industrial or information societies. Australia can be described as an information society, as one Australian communications commentator and academic, Ian Reinecke, explains:

"In an obvious sense, it is difficult to dissent from the view that people in developed countries like America, Australia and Western Europe live in information societies. Using a very broad measure, about half the population of those countries make their living in occupations which primarily involve handling information. The world's stock of information is doubling every five years or so, largely as a result of economic activity in those countries" (Reinecke 1987:23).

Another academic and communications commentator, Trevor Barr, has also observed:

"While there are problems in compiling accurate data on the industries as a whole, or on individual industries, the trend is clear: information technology and the communications industry are now major components of the Australian economy, and both will become critical indicators in determining Australian wealth and economic stability in the future. Information industries as a whole have become the most significant investment area within the Australian economy" (Barr: 13).

Our daily lives are being rapidly transformed as a consequence. The range and diversity of goods and services has greatly increased in number and convenience. Employment practices and patterns are changing and are becoming more flexible for many. Leisure activities are increasing in importance and more information can be accessed in the home, thus increasing the amount of home-based economic activity. The changes even affect the geography of our environment.

"In the pre-industrial city, production was largely agricultural and occurred outside the city. The industrial revolution reversed this pattern. Production was largely manufacturing and was concentrated near the city centre. In the post-industrial city this pattern is again reversing and production is largely moving to the urban periphery and beyond" (Brotchie: 37).

Furthermore, the changes brought about by this so-called information revolution transcend borders and consequently the laws and regulations of nations. This phenomenon is particularly noticeable in places such as Canada and Western Europe where, for example, direct broadcast satellites beam television programs across national boundaries, which may not ordinarily be considered suitable for broadcast by stations operating within the borders of an individual country. Similarly, transnational corporations can decentralise activities on a global scale more easily, yet maintain a high degree of centralised control.

The transition to an information economy has coincided with massive economic structural readjustment and reorganisation of the basic infrastructure in society. Perhaps the clearest recent example of these changes in Australia was the government decision to open up telecommunications to competition. Telecommunications infrastructure, which has been exclusively financed, owned and operated by the Commonwealth Government agencies for 90 years will now be shared with a competitor. The primary purpose of this initiative is to facilitate greater economic efficiency in the allocation of telecommunications resources. This policy objective is also intended to contribute to an increase in economic activity in the communications and information sectors.

Two major concerns are frequently expressed about consequences of the information age for society. One is that society may be further divided along lines of those who have access to the skills and resources which

enable them to participate in our increasingly information-oriented society, and those who do not. Ian Reinecke, has commented:

"The 'information rich' in the Information Society will be the economically rich and vice versa. The price of admission to electronically stored information will be a computer and the ability to pay" (Reinecke: 228).

Former Science and Technology Minister Barry Jones, suggests that the information poor in our society are those who are already disadvantaged for reasons such as class, ethnicity and educational opportunities. "Postcodes", he has written, "determine life chances far more than technology" (Jones: 1990).

The other issue frequently raised concerns the role of government in making this transition and the emerging relationships between governments and their constituents in post-industrial Australian society.

### **The Role of Government in the Information Society**

Governments around the world are eager to take advantage of the new opportunities for economic growth which the development of information resources promise. Consequently consideration has been given to developing strategies for harnessing this growth in ways which will be of benefit to nations and their citizens. A number of aspects of Australian government involvement in these processes are briefly considered here.

One important historical role of government and its agencies is to produce and disseminate information. A 1986 Department of Science paper described the role of the Australian Commonwealth Government in the following terms:

"In the field of information provision the Government plays a crucial role. It collects, stores and disseminates information for its own administrative purposes, but it is also a major provider of information to the community at large. Thus it provides, for example, information

about Government programs, rights and obligations of citizens, and employment opportunities; it provides statistical information, meteorological and other technical information, and information to exporters and prospective tourists to Australia. The Government [also] plays the dominant role in the telecommunications infrastructure" (Department of Science: 1).

It is not enough that governments produce or facilitate the production of information. They also need to ensure that what is produced effectively meets identified needs and that the most effective methods of communication are used in distributing. Various assessments of the information needs of governments, individuals, various groups and economic sectors have been made both in Australia and overseas. Some reports of these assessments are listed in the references at the end of this report.

The most recent assessment of Australian government strategies in respect of information policy was completed in May 1991 by a Parliamentary Committee of inquiry. It found that growth in the amount and flow of information had been accompanied by "substantial changes to the structure of the Australian economy and society." This growth in information was "a transforming factor, with a unique capacity to change work, personal performance, leisure and quality of life". The Committee went on to conclude however, that Australia was not keeping up with other developed economies in devel-

oping information-based goods and services, which it considered to be vital to understanding within society, and for trade expansion (Jones 1991: xiii).

The Committee identified a "pressing need to increase the community's use of information" and access to information, both at the level of the individual and the home, and at the level of institutions and organisations. It also noted that increased use of, and access to, information also has accompanying risks to maintaining personal privacy, and national sovereignty. Inequities in distribution could also exacerbate divisions in society.

These problems are further aggravated by the fact that an information policy does not feature prominently in the national agenda. The Committee produced a set of over 20 objectives it recommended be developed as the basis of a broad National Information Policy. One of these objectives concerned the issue of social justice (Jones 1991: xiv -xv).

Recognising that access to information was essential to social justice in a democracy, the Committee indicated that special provision should be made for those groups which are disadvantaged in their access to information. It suggested that a strategy developed by the South Australian Government, could be adopted by other governments. The South Australian Government has developed special service strategies for eight such groups, being:

- the rural isolated;
- aboriginal people;
- women, particularly those in the home;
- the elderly;
- the disabled;
- the poor;
- people from non-English speaking backgrounds; and
- the illiterate.

The Committee recommended that government encourage the long term development and delivery of services to these groups, including financial incentives. Identification of the need for services should be an early task of a national advisory body on information policy, which it also recommended should be established.

The Committee also expressed concern that "existing education systems are not bridging the gap between the skills provided in secondary education and the expectation of society in the world of work" (para 4.63 - 4.66). Commenting on the relationship between information and education Don Lamberton has also expressed the view that information policy deserves to be called education policy (Lamberton: 3).

One of the most important roles of government is to facilitate an equitable and efficient distribution of resources amongst the communities it serves. As has already been demonstrated, information, and the infrastructure by which it is accessed and communicated, is an increasingly important economic resource. One Canadian government study commented that "information is a vital resource which is as important to productivity as land, labour, capital and management" (DOC:2). But like other resources there are many competing demands made upon communication and information resources controlled by governments.

## Information as a Commodity

The notion of information as a commodity is one which we are increasingly dealing with in this post-industrial era. Paradoxically it bears little relationship to meaning or understanding. In its increasingly common form, information is nothing more than sequences of computer-readable digits - plastic and malleable objects - which can be converted into audio, visual or text-based commodities for human consumption. One problem which arises from this treatment of information is that the emphasis shifts from quality to quantity. A good citizen may consume vast amounts of information but not necessarily be any wiser for it. Ian Reinecke observes:

"A flood of information delivered through books, newspapers, magazines, radio and television - whether broadcast from the ground, by satellite or sent along copper or fibre-optic cables - appears to have bred a certain kind of torpor. On moral and political questions people have more information about events around the globe than any human beings before them, but are unable or unwilling to take a public stance. That contradiction is one of the most important of the (information) age" (Reinecke 1987: 21).

"Is it plausible", Ian Reinecke goes on to ask, "to suggest that people may be less well informed than ever?" (Reinecke 1987: 24). "It seems possible that an artisan in the Midlands of England in the early nineteenth century armed with a copy of Thomas Paine's Rights of Man and a weekly dose of William Cobbett's Political Register, could be better informed in many respects than a modern television viewer" (Reinecke 1987: 25).

Reinecke addresses this dilemma in two parts. Firstly, the fact that the value of an informational commodity is measured by the extent to which it can make money explains why information distributors frequently prefer to repackage existing information, rather than generate new information. This in turn leads to the second part of Reinecke's explanation of this dilemma: citizens in information societies are flooded with information they don't need. Yet, "it is the information they must consume to promote their material advancement (for the elite particularly) and to participate in, but not to question, the social system in which they live ... It is not, in short, the information they need to challenge the contradictions which beset their daily lives" (Reinecke 1987: 36).

How can this dilemma be addressed? How can we ensure that people have access to truly meaningful and empowering information? A dollar value is one way of representing the value of an informational commodity. Actual value depends on a set of factors larger than money and which may not always be quantifiable in monetary terms. For example, "corporations may attribute value to the speed at which very particular types of information can be received or distributed. Remote area Aborigines may value information available in one or more of the fifty Aboriginal languages spoken in Australia today" (Spurgeon: 29).

Thus, for example, a corporation may consider its informational needs will be best served by the most advanced telecommunications network, including mobile telephones and the very latest in personal communications and data transmission technologies. A remote Aboriginal community may want a cheap, reliable telephone service, a community radio station and control over incoming satellite television signals. In other words, different groups and interests are quite

capable of identifying the services and technologies which are appropriate to their widely differing, and often conflicting, needs and interests. The difficulty lies in establishing priorities for meeting their needs and interests, especially where this process involves balancing the needs and interests of the economically poorer and less well-organised in Australian society, against wealthier, more powerful interests.

The commodification of information throws up other significant challenges to governments, particularly in their capacity as an information providers. For example, should governments seek to make money out of the information they produce? Or should they leave this to private enterprise? Indeed, if government is doing something which can generate profit, should it hand this activity over a private operator who may be able to do the same task more efficiently? How would this affect the type of information which is generated or collected by governments? For example, would information which might be of significant social value continue to be collected if it is not commercially valuable or viable to do so? These are some of the many, unresolved problems with information in contemporary Australian society.

## Responses to the Information Challenge

Of increasing concern to community and consumer organisations is the possibility that new arrangements may see the influence of government over the allocation of resources diminish considerably and be determined increasingly by market forces. For example a proposal that would see the radio frequency spectrum managed by government on a market basis rather than as a matter of public trust is being seriously contemplated. The radio frequency spectrum is a vital part of a society's information infrastructure. It facilitates a great array of communications services such as broadcasting, mobile telephony, as well as communication for air traffic control, emergency, law and order, defence and recreational purposes. Journalist and media analyst, Liz Fell comments:

"This market-based approach is seeping into almost every communications policy as evidenced by a plethora of inquiries into how to place a market 'value' on the radio frequency spectrum. In the case of the ABC and the SBS, use of the public spectrum is viewed as a "hidden subsidy", so the econocrats believe the full cost of this should be measured so that 'the community' can assess the benefits versus costs" (Fell: 1991). The implications of applying this approach are far-reaching. For example, it could result in the national broadcasters and community radio stations having to pay for spectrum rights, and compete for these rights alongside commercial interests. At best, opportunities for expansion in these non-profit sectors of broadcasting would be curtailed, if a market-based system for managing this important resource is adopted.

It is unlikely that a market-based approach will ensure that social informational priorities will be adequately met, or addressed at all in other areas either. For example, the Consumers' Telecommunications Network, an Australia-wide coalition of community-based organisations has pointed to the fact that laissez-faire policy towards on-line information systems has led to their being expensive, inappropriate and largely inaccessible to many people. As a consequence only a small number of people can avail themselves of the benefits of these services (CTN: 1991).

Furthermore these types of concerns are not peculiar to Australia, but are shared by groups and individuals in many countries. For example, one US Government report made the following observation:

"The advent of electronic dissemination raises new equity concerns since, to the extent electronic formats have distinct advantages (e.g., in terms of timeliness, searchability), those without electronic access are disadvantaged. In general, the library research, media, public interests, consumer and state/local government communities, among others, argue that the Federal Government has a responsibility to assure equity of access to Federal information in electronic formats as well as in paper. These groups contend that they are or will increasingly be disadvantaged to the extent that Federal information in electronic form is not available through normal channels" (OTA: 9).

Bill Melody, Director of the Melbourne-based Centre for International Research on Information Technology (CIRCIT) recently argued that "public interest" considerations must be reflected in government communications and information policies if all sectors of society are to prosper. He comments:

"It is not too soon to begin posting the information/communication 'commons' of the new information society, i.e. those specific services that must be made universal because they are a

basic necessity for participating in the society. We might start by considering such possibilities as:

- free access to the public telecommunications network and a specified number of public information services .... ;
- specifying selective individual controls over access by others to their personal information;
- specifying restrictions to prevent monopolisation of certain kinds of information;
- assessing the steps necessary to enhance opportunities for real diversity in the mass communication system and minimising barriers to entry; and
- examining whether it is possible to develop policies for managing information quality to ensure that a surplus of erroneous and misleading information does not debase the value of information, while still maintaining freedoms of expression" (Melody: 18).

The presence of technology alone is not a sufficient proof of the beneficial use of information. Information and education policies are also required which emphasise the importance of information in our lives, optimise information flows, try to design organisations that will mobilise these important invisible assets and use information to best effect, and take care of the 'information poor' (Lamberton:3). Ian Reinecke also suggests we seek to make information corporations more accountable in future (Reinecke 1987:39).

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# THE MEDIA AND YOUR RIGHT TO BE INFORMED

## Guidelines for reflection and communications action

*At the dawn of a new era, a vast expansion of human communications is profoundly influencing culture everywhere.....*

*Nowhere today are people untouched by the impact of Media on religious and moral attitudes, political and social systems and education.*

This is the appreciation of the 1992 Pastoral Instruction from the the Vatican Pastoral Council for Social Communications (*Aetatis Novae - Dawn of a New Age*). The communications revolution is unifying humanity and turning us into a ``global village''.

The Pastoral Instruction acknowledges the Church's duty ``to offer formation to communication professionals and to the public so that they will approach the media with a critical sense which is animated by a passion for the truth''.

It encourages action to:

- \* Plan and carry out programs in media education and media literacy with special emphasis on the relationship of media and values.
  
- \* Assist professional communicators in articulating and observing ethical standards, especially in regard to the issues of fairness, accuracy, justice, decency and respect for life.
  
- \* Be actively concerned with the secular media, and especially with the shaping of media policy ... ''Christians have in effect a responsibility to make their voice heard in all the media. ``

This comment is made about media service to people: ``For all the good which they do and are capable of doing, mass media which can be such effective instruments of unity and understanding, can also sometimes be the vehicles of a deformed outlook on life, on the family, on religion and on morality - an outlook that does not respect the true dignity and destiny of the human person''.

It is our responsibility to take an interest in media, the values that the arms of the media - TV/Radio/Press - project, and the service they provide to communities.

Copies of *Aetatis Novae* are available from St Paul Book and Media Centres in Sydney, Melbourne and Adelaide. \$ 1.50

## Questions for you the reader, the viewer, the listener

(Let us reflect, and act if possible, on these questions)

- Q. How much time do you spend reading newspapers? Is it too much or too little time? Do you read serious (broadsheet) or popular (tabloid) newspapers? How much time do you spend viewing TV? Listening to Radio?
- Q. Do you find any of the news, features or magazine material offensive? Do you find any particular journalists or commentator offensive in their attitudes? Have you found reports untrue, unbalanced or unfair? Do you think you should change your reading habits? Another newspaper? A news review magazine? A journal of religious or social commentary? Give details.
- Q. Have you ever written to a journalist about a report you thought inaccurate, unbalanced or unfair? Have you ever complained to an Editor, to the Australian Press Council, to the Australian Journalists Association? Did you get a response?
- Q. Have you written a letter for publication on these issues? Was any letter written published? If not, was there a response? Give examples.
- Q. Do you think you should try to write letters to newspapers, radio or television stations on social issues or media performance?
- Q. Are you worried about the concentration of press ownership and control in too few hands? What about the ownership of Radio and TV? Why or why not?
- Q. Are you worried about the effects of deregulation or easing in program content controls on Radio and TV? If you had worries about the effects of Radio-TV programming on groups in society would you write to your Federal member of Parliament? Would you write to the Broadcasting Authority? Why or why not?
- Q. What do you like about ... Newspapers? ... Radio? ... TV?
- Q. To which TV and Radio programs do you object? Why?
- Q. Would you like to see a Media education program organised for parents, teachers and students?

**ADDRESSES** If you have a complaint about a newspaper or magazine you first should write to the editor. If the complaint is not resolved, it may be sent to:

The Australian Press Council,  
Suite 303, 149 Castlereagh Street,  
SYDNEY 2000  
Phone (02) 281 1930 Toll-free (008) 025 712

For complaints that a journalist has acted unethically: Send to the Australian Journalist Association section of the Media, Entertainment and Arts Alliance in your capital city.

For Advertising complaints: The advertiser or advertising agency or to:

The Advertising Standards Council,  
10th Floor, 98 Arthur Street,  
NORTH SYDNEY 2060

For television standards complaints to the TV station or to:

The Federation of Australian Commercial  
Television Stations,  
44A Avenue Road,  
MOSMAN NSW 2088

For broadcasting stations standards complaints: To the station or to:

The Federation of Australian Radio  
Broadcasters,  
8 Glen Street,  
MILSONS POINT NSW 2061

If a complainant on a Radio/TV matter is not satisfied with the industry response, a complaint may be made to:

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