

BOOK REVIEW*

The Death of Broadcasting? Media's Digital Future by JOCK GIVEN, COMMUNICATIONS LAW CENTRE (Australia: UNSW Press, 1998), pp 79. Recommended retail price \$9.95 (ISBN 0868 40449 7)

I. INTRODUCTION

This book is very *now* for anyone who has an interest in Australia's communications future. Australia has just passed legislation to enable the introduction of digital terrestrial television broadcasting by 1 January 2001. Significant reviews of policy for the introduction of digital television have to be completed by the Minister for Communications, Information Technology and the Arts by 1 January 2000. This book sets the scene wonderfully for the policy debates that will ensue as free to air television, pay television and on-line and datacasting services continue to converge and compete with each other, not only for audiences but also, importantly, for advertisers.

Initially I thought the title was sensationalist but once the essay really unfolds, which it does in the final two chapters, I came to understand that the title is just a way of provoking a response from the reader as to what he or she considers important about broadcasting (if anything). It is also a way of questioning what the concept of broadcasting means in a context where so many services are approaching the point where they will become indistinguishable in the home from traditional broadcast services.

The book asks the reader to think about broadcasting "not as a single creature, which is dying or living, but as many creatures: a set of technologies, social and cultural practices, cultural forms, industries, institutional forms, words and an idea." The idea is that a society's media, communications and information enterprises should serve the public interest. The challenge is to ensure that this continues to be the case.

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II. THE INFORMATION AGE

The book opens with a description of the global context in a chapter titled "The Information Age". It starts to explore the tension between the Internet and the possibility of high definition television (HDTV) with a quotable quote from President Clinton's senior policy adviser Ira Magaziner who told the e-commerce summit in Canberra this year, "there will be a billion people on the Internet by 2005. If the people of a particular country are not on it, it will be their problem, not the world's".

Broadcasting is metaphorically dying in some parts of the world because of the demise of the dominance of public broadcasters through restraints on funding or through privatisation, because of the liberalisation of access to broadcast markets, because of the competition from cable and pay TV, because of the rise of on-line services and the resultant increasingly competitive market for the advertising dollars.

The book brings Australia into sharp focus in the context of these global trends. The ABC has, under siege, had to deal with government funding cuts. Internet use is on a rapid rise in Australia. Through a variety of government policies, pay TV has so far been kept as a poor second cousin to free to air television. Through the digital television legislation, Australia's commercial television broadcasters have had their oligopoly protection extended to the year 2006 and have been loaned additional spectrum without charge. Digital terrestrial television holds out the hope that free to air broadcasters can use technology to maintain and enhance their competitive position.

The book's analysis of these issues is excellent. It is enhanced by Jock Given's detailed knowledge of trends in the film and television production industries and the rights markets where some of these battles are being fought out. Here is the content and here are the copyrights that all of these media are vying to exploit. Little gems like the fact that *Seinfeld* rejected \$5 million per half hour episode from a US network this season illustrate well the scramble for content that is presently going on between market players. Recent statistics highlight the importance of having an exclusive right to transmit good content.

III. TECHNOLOGY

The chapter titled "Technology" is devoted to explaining what digital media is and sets out its various applications in electronic communications and information technologies. This is clear and accessible. It is here that it is explained why the debate about digital broadcasting becomes a debate about media and communications more broadly.

IV. DECISIONS

In the chapter titled “Decisions” the age old relationship between the media owners and the politicians is laid bare. The steps leading up to the Australian Government decisions on the introduction of digital radio and television are clearly set out, together with the arguments for and against the so called “giveaway” of spectrum to the commercial television broadcasters. The public positions taken by the various media proprietors during this debate are also exposed for what they are: entirely self interested. The Australian Government’s decisions are compared with the decisions of the US and the UK governments to facilitate the introduction of digital television and radio.

The link into the final chapter titled “Public interest” is the statement “that whilst broadcasting is many things, the idea that it matters and that it should serve some notion of the public interest has been pervasive and durable”. The question is: will this continue to be the case?

V. PUBLIC INTEREST

The final chapter seeks to identify the important public interest elements in the Digital Information Age and suggests broad policy approaches that should be followed in the face of yet another phase of unprecedented change in communications. These include: keeping our regulatory options open, maintaining a conviction about the need for public decisions and public choices about the structures of our communications systems, minimising decisions about appropriate technologies, maintaining a commitment to indigenous cultural forms through institutions and funding arrangements and being rigorous and modest in evaluating achievements.

VI. CONCLUSION

The information and communication industries are likely to be the greatest growth industries on the planet in the next twenty years. This contribution to the debate about where the public interest really lies is a vital one. My advice is get a copy of this book soon and read it. In six to twelve months time, the ideas will still be current but the background facts will have significantly dated. Such is the rate of change in the Digital Information Age.