

Convergence: Culture and Policy in the Digital Age conference was organised by the Key Centre for Cultural and Media Policy and ran over three days in Brisbane, from 18 to 20 November 1998. The conference was a single strand event with keynote addresses and focus sessions—an approach which complemented conference themes. Tim Dwyer, ABA Standards section, reports.

Reporting convergence

Convergence: Culture and Policy in the Digital Age opened with an Indigenous welcome from Charlie Watson, who grew up in Gangala country in Central Queensland. Watson has an extensive history of involvement with Indigenous media organisations and, more recently has been active in cross-cultural seminars. Watson placed the conference on a strategic footing by arguing that the culture should embed technology, not the reverse.

Richard Collins, Head of Education at the British Film Institute pursued a central theme of the challenges ahead for governments in managing the transition from older regulatory regimes based on technological distinctions between wired and wireless delivery, to the prospect of a more integrated network environment with 'a single stream of digitised data'. For Collins a critical issue would be how to secure public policy goals in this environment of a 'protracted and uneven transition'.

This was followed by a case study on two online networks: the Australian Cultural Network (ACN) and the Australian Indigenous Cultural Network. The ACN was established by the New Media Section of the Department of Communications, Information Technology and the Arts (DoCITA) and the Australian Indigenous Cultural Network is an initiative coordinated by The Gallery of Aboriginal Australia, within the National Museum of Australia to be funded through both private and public monies. While the former is operating

in a near finalised format linking numerous cultural organisation and policy sites, the latter is very much an idea in the making, and has not yet progressed beyond the business planning stage.

In her keynote address Cathy Robinson, Chief Executive Officer of the Australian Film Commission (AFC), spelt out the AFC's mandate, which she argued must be to inform, enrich and empower audiovisual content producers. She observed that, regrettably this charter is occurring in context of declining government funding, reduced tax breaks under the Film Licensed Investment Companies scheme, and with the local content standard under increasing pressure.

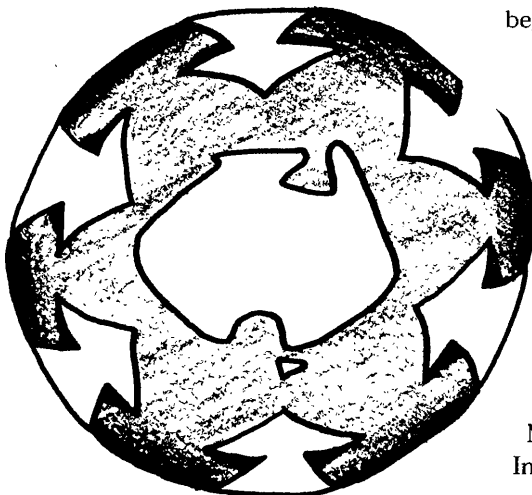
In the following focus session, Debra Richards, Executive Director of ASTRA and Bruce Berryman, 3RRR broadcaster and RMIT lecturer, offered their own distinctive views of digital futures.

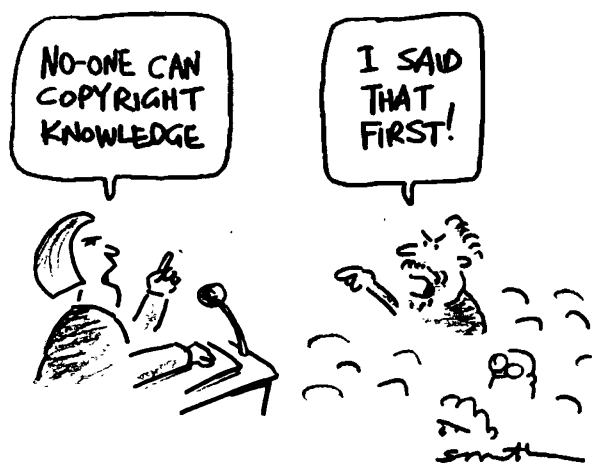
Richards was sceptical about much of the hype surrounding the introduction of new digital services and aware of the important role that lobbying plays in the shaping of laws. Berryman, however, as both media practitioner and theorist, was enthusiastic about the possibilities for extending radio as an interactive media for entertainment and information.

Janet Wasko, of the School of Journalism and Communication at the University of Oregon, offered a fascinating insight into the Disney Corporation, as a case study of a 'converged' and 'synergised' communications media organisation. Wasko tracked the activities of Disney as a vertically integrated corporation, from its origins in the 1920s to its current diversified structure in which no fewer than ten interlocking corporations control activities in broadcast television, film, cinema, video, conventional and new media publishing.

The second day of the conference began with a focus session on intellectual property in the digital environment. While Kylie Brown and Nick Smith of DoCITA's Intellectual Property Branch traversed rights and exemptions within the Government's proposed digital laws, Dr Kay Daniels, also of DoCITA, and Helen Simondson a project officer at Cinemedia, discussed legal policy and practical copyright difficulties, respectively, in their joint Performing Arts Multi-media Pilot Project.

In his keynote address John Rimmer,





ABA member, Chair of the Australia Council's New Media Arts Fund, and consultant, focused on 'digital tools for a convergent culture'. Rimmer considered the tool concept was more important as a metaphor than when used in its more conventional technical sense. His presentation reviewed a number of useful theoretical ways of understanding practical issues emerging with new communications and information technologies.

The focus session which followed contrasted a corporate view of the implications of convergence and digital broadcasting with a more personal one. Geoff Heriot, General Manager, Corporate Strategy, analysed the role and purpose of the ABC in a converging communications media future, where the ABC with a 'whole of output view on content' was beginning to look for 'cross-media synergies'. Jock Given, Director of the Communications Law Centre, sketched the nation building role of broadcasting in general and 'shared experiences of broadcasting' in particular, posing the question of whether existing broadcasters could survive in a digital broadcasting future.

The final day of the conference began with a focus session looking at strategies for developing audiences in new media environments, and the role of libraries in a digital age. Patricia Gillard, ACT Manager, Roy Morgan Research, argued for a more complex understanding of the variety of new media audiences, which can be used to inform the construction of new media products

and services. Eric Wainwright, Pro-Vice Chancellor, James Cook University, assessed the 'public good' characteristics in the future of libraries. He stressed the importance of conceiving libraries, 'as a mechanism rather than a place' whose principal goal is to link people to information.

The morning focus session considered global and national aspects of broadcasting regulation. Gareth Grainger, ABA Deputy Chairman, argued that while a great deal of media regulation for traditional and new services required an international approach,

media technologies for metropolitan Australians, for Indigenous Australians living in remote and regional areas, 'having a reliable and affordable telephone service is a luxury most people simply do not have'.


In the final focus session Ian Gray, General Manager, Production and Industry Development, Pacific Film and Television Commission and Tom O'Regan, Director, Centre for Research in Culture and Communication, Murdoch University, offered contrasting visions of the state of Australia's film and television industries. Gray argued for producers to address wider audiences in order to attract greater investment opportunities, and thus opportunities for those employed in the industry. O'Regan on the other hand, assessed Australian cinema through a close reading of some recent films and their increasingly internationalised production practices.

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national governments remained the only entity capable of representing single citizens. In a combined presentation, Christina Spurgeon, Lecturer, Southern Cross University and Sally Stockbridge, Senior Classification Officer, Network Ten, reported on research in progress which was mapping classification issues in the context of a new digital services media landscape.

In his keynote address, ATSIC Commissioner for Arts, Broadcasting and the Environment, Ian Delaney, provided a stark reality check. He argued that in the face of the availability of a plethora of new communications me-

In his conference wrap-up, Stuart Cunningham, Head of Media and Journalism, Queensland University of Technology, made a number of observations in relation to trends in convergence. These included that convergence can become a mythic force in its own right, rather than simply a presumed effect and, that there are significant knock-on effects which could not be predicted within a technological horizon of understanding. 

Many of the conference papers are available at the Key Centre's web site, <www.gu.edu.au/centre/cmp/Convergence_conf.html>.