



# KEEPING THE DIGITAL AIR FAIR

EARLY NEXT YEAR THE FACE OF AUSTRALIAN RADIO WILL CHANGE FOREVER AS NEW DIGITAL SERVICES HIT THE AIRWAVES.

**DIGITAL RADIO**, due to commence on 1 January 2009, promises to deliver not only clearer signals and a wider choice of stations, but also advanced new services such as the ability to pause and rewind live broadcasts, display music, weather and news information on a screen, and tap into electronic program guides. Traditional (or analogue) radio services will continue to be provided—so digital radio will complement rather than replace existing radio services.

Digital radio requires consumers to buy a new receiver, and industry is already working on new car, home and portable devices that can take advantage of the new features. Trials of digital services in Sydney are well advanced. According to peak industry body, Commercial Radio Australia, commercial stations are gearing up to invest \$300 to \$400 million in new infrastructure.

Because digital radio makes much more efficient use of available radio spectrum, many channels (or stations) can be broadcast through one transmitter, known as a multiplex.

Multiplex licences to operate the transmitters will initially be made available in each of the state capital cities.

It is expected that the national broadcasters, and joint ventures representing commercial and community radio stations, will apply for multiplex licences. Following the allocation of the licences by the Australian Communications and Media Authority, the ACCC will be responsible for assessing access undertakings submitted by the multiplex licensees who are providing transmission services to commercial and community stations.

The access undertakings will set out the terms and conditions under which digital radio transmission services will be provided by the multiplex licensee to individual radio broadcasters and will ensure that those licensees do not discriminate between the various radio stations using the spectrum.

The ACCC released a discussion paper late last year to seek stakeholders' views on a range of access issues that relate to

how the ACCC should administer the new access regime for digital radio. The ACCC also announced proposals to facilitate the speedy consideration of access undertakings to ensure that digital radio transmission can commence on time. These proposals include providing an advance indication of the factors the ACCC will take into account when assessing access undertakings.

Several major industry players responded positively to the ACCC's discussion paper last year. The ACCC expects parties to submit suitable access undertakings from May 2008 onwards.

Information about the access regime administered by the ACCC is available at [www.accc.gov.au](http://www.accc.gov.au) and more detail about digital radio services in Australia can also be found at the homepages of ACMA [www.acma.gov.au](http://www.acma.gov.au) or Digital Radio Australia [www.digitalradioaustralia.com.au](http://www.digitalradioaustralia.com.au). ●