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## Needs of Older People

Kirsty Williamson from the University of Melbourne presented her research on telecommunications and the information and communications needs of older adults. This looked at the information needs of people 60 and over as revealed by their telephone use. Older people have less income to put towards telecommunications, and the effectiveness of basic services in meeting their needs is all important.

The 202 participants were asked to log their incoming and outgoing calls for two weeks. The numbers of incoming and outgoing calls were roughly equivalent: the great majority of calls were local. Most calls occurred between 8.00am and 6.00pm; the majority took five minutes or less.

The average number of calls involving men was 23.44, while for women the average was 36.86, and most calls involving men were of shorter duration. The majority of calls were to family; the next highest category were calls to friends and neighbours.

Dr John Urbano (RMIT) presented his research on Telelink and the blind elderly. This involved professionally facilitated telephone support groups of 5-8 persons over a period of 13 weeks. The participants were not known to one another and addressed each other only by their first names.

Dr Urbano looked at Telelink's effectiveness and group dynamics with newcomers. Most of the participants found the groups useful, and said that they had benefited from exchanging views and information about common problems. The perceived strengths of the groups were their anonymity, the degree of social support and general therapy they afforded, and their effectiveness in terms of both costs and time. □

*Bruce Shearer*



## Phone Access to be Extended

**People with hearing difficulties or speech impairments will have access to a 24 hour Telephone Typewriter Relay Service as a result of a four-year \$26m commitment in the Federal Budget.**

More than 21,000 people with these disabilities around Australia will have a national telephone network for the first time and will be assisted with the costs of specialised equipment. □

Seminar Report: 26 May 1994

## 'Sucking on a Firehose'

**The Superhighway is out, the Infobahn is in, according to Daniel Petre of Microsoft.**

For consumers, domestic broadband services could be like 'sucking on a firehose'. For Petre low bandwidth is the forgotten child and high bandwidth the chosen one. Petre said low bandwidth technology can still provide for a rich exchange of information. Two way delivery of e-mail, online information, home shopping, video programs and computer games can be delivered via ADSL over existing phone lines.

Petre was speaking at a seminar held by Sydney lawyers Freehill, Hollingdale and Page titled *Cyberspace: Logging on to the Superhighway*. Freehill's Partners Sheila McGregor and Mark Crean hosted the seminar on the legal implications of new media applications such as copyright, privacy and defamation.

Motorola was the other corporate player represented at the seminar. Jon Moss, Motorola's General Manager for the Wireless Data Group, demonstrated the latest in palmtop computers, complete with a wireless data modem. He tipped that computers, particularly portable ones, would be the primary consumer device for connecting to the so-called superhighway. Like Microsoft, Motorola seems to be putting its money on interactive low bandwidth services.

Roger Buckeridge of the consultancy firm Cutler and Company mapped out the current terrain of cyberspace, namely the Internet. In Australia access to 'the Net' is through AARNet, owned by the Vice Chancellors' Committee. Approximately 120,000 hosts are based in educational institutions with up to half a million users. To keep it functioning in Australia costs \$10m a year. Hosts and users invest just enough to keep it running. Buckeridge likened this to "the tragedy of the commons" where medieval farmers spent just enough to maintain shared pasture, but not enough to improve it.

E-mail and home shopping have hidden traps with respect to privacy and defamation. Mark Crean sketched out a home shopping hypothetical with a salutary message on privacy. He also cited a recent defamation case in Western Australia (*Rindos v Hardwick*) where an anthropologist was awarded damages from e-mail defamation. Sheila McGregor cited historians seeking access to President Bush's e-mail. E-mail messages become documents in permanent form. File servers back up to tape daily and users save and redistribute messages, propagating information not intended to be permanent and sent without the discretion exercised in writing a letter. □

*Barry Melville*