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**B**ill Linklater has asked me to provide this Front Line as a follow up and update to his piece in the April 1994 *inCite* on public networking. Bill has raised some very important issues. In my view this is a critical time for the future of telecommunication services in Australia. It may not be too strong to suggest that the long-term health of Australian democracy will depend on how well we deal with the issues of public access to networks over the next decade. So many information sources and other services are going to be available only in electronic form in the future that any members of our community who do not have networked access to these services will form a severely disadvantaged group in our society.

Over many decades governments in Australia have followed a policy of ensuring that Australians located throughout the country have reasonable access to voice telephone, radio and television services. With a growth of electronic information services, this longstanding policy of 'universal access', which has been seen as a community service obligation to all Australians, needs now to be extended to access to digital data networks.

This is an important time because the two common carrier organisations, Telstra and Optus, are in the early stages of very large investments in the cabling and other equipment needed to provide commercial broadband services to homes and businesses. Typical of these services will be pay television and video on demand.

At the same time, other large consortia are investing in various forms of wireless technologies such as digital terrestrial broadcasting, satellite broadcasting and microwave (MDS). But these investments are building the same infrastructure that will be needed for a whole range of public purposes, such as open learning and library applications, not to mention electronic transactions between people

and the various levels of government. It is therefore very important that these investments be driven not simply by commercial interests, but with public purposes also in view.

There is at present no overall federal government policy in this area, and there are no mechanisms through which a comprehensive and coordinated policy may easily be achieved. This contrasts very much with the United States, where the Clinton government last year set up the United States Advisory Council on the National Information Infrastructure or in Canada where the Canadian Advisory Council on the Information Highway was recently established, both to give independent and public advice to the federal governments in those countries.

In Australia, there are however two major inquiries currently in train and it is important that librarians have their voices heard in these forums. The first is the inquiry being conducted by the Broadband Services Expert Group, under the chairmanship of Brian Johns. The first round of submissions to this inquiry has now closed, but the group is expected to issue a discussion paper in June or July, and there will be an opportunity for everyone to respond to that discussion paper before the Group submits its final report to the Commonwealth Government at the end of 1994. A second inquiry has recently been established by the Senate Standing Committee on Telecommunications who are investigating the impact of new communications developments on Australia. Submissions to the Standing Committee inquiry close on 3 June 1994.

The third inquiry which relates to this issue is that being conducted by the Copyright Convergence Group established by the Minister for Justice, which is investigating the implications for intellectual property and copyright legislation posed by the spread of electronic networking.

While these inquiries are going on, a detailed study of the likely envi-

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ronment for future communications in Australia is being conducted by the Communications Futures Project (Bureau of Transport and Communications Economics) which is due to provide broad advice to the Minister for Communications by the end of 1994, and is proceeding through the issue of a series of work in progress papers. The first two of these, on emerging communications services and on delivery technologies in the new communications world are excellent summaries and may be obtained free from the Bureau.

The National Library has been active in developing submissions to all these government inquiries, and its submission to the Broadband Services Expert Group may be obtained from me. The Library has been arguing that it will be essential for the federal government to facilitate the development of communications so that public services such as those of libraries and education can be made available widely at reasonable cost, and that the government needs to develop an overall strategy for access to networked information generally, and to government information in particular. The Library has been a strong supporter of the new National Scholarly Communications Forum, mentioned in the April Front Line, and will be the lead organiser for the first Round Table on Public Access to Networked Information, which has now been postponed to 13-14 October 1994 in Canberra.

But progress in relation to public access will not depend only on government policies. Experience in North America suggests that just as important, if not more important, will be action taken at the local community level. It is in this area that libraries can have a considerable impact by being leaders in their own communities in facilitating access. As Bill pointed out, the Internet is rapidly becoming a world wide network for communication and access to electronic services.

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The Australian arm of the Internet, AARNet, has been thought of as very much a network for the universities and other research organisations. But this is now no longer true—AARNet now allows any organisation to connect to it. Already the National Library and the majority of State and Territory libraries are connected to AARNet, the National Library will soon be connecting all ABN members to AARNet, and ILANET already provides Internet services to its members.

There is now a wide range of organisations providing Internet access at relatively low cost—these include the Australian Public Access Networks Association (APANA) and two commercial organisations, Pegasus and Connect.com, while many universities also allow local organisations to connect. In the ACT, as Bill Linklater mentioned, local schools are being connected up to AARNet through the ACT universities, and apart from the development in Newcastle there is also an initiative in the inner east area of Melbourne, around the Swinburne Institute.


In the United States and Canada the community networking movement is growing at a very rapid rate, and public libraries have been leaders in getting local organisations together to provide community network services. Community networks can be es-

tablished at relatively low cost. The National Public Telecomputing Network, which coordinates the Freenet movement in the United States, now offers software capable of running a community service on a Macintosh computer for the cost of only US\$2 000, and provides technical advice for those wanting to establish a local community network.

In my view, it is vital for public libraries and school libraries to work together at the community level to enable a similar development in Australia. Libraries have a tremendous opportunity to put themselves forward as community service centres in conjunction with the Open Learning Electronic Support Service (OLESS). A decision has recently been taken by the Minister for Employment, Education and Training to expand the OLESS beyond students involved in the Open Learning Agency of Australia (OLAA) as rapidly as possible, and to establish OLESS as a company jointly managed by OLAA and the Open Learning Technology Corporation (OLTC). Those involved in the development will be seeking community access points to enable all open learning students to have access to the networked open learning services. Other agencies are likely to bid for such services—telecentres, Skillshare centres, etc. TAFE public and school libraries need to be ready to develop

the skills that will be needed for them to act effectively in this area.

Librarians interested in the issues of public access to networked information should consider membership of the various community networking organisations such as Electronic Frontiers Australia and the Association for Community Telematics. A discussion group on these issues is also run on the Internet by Tony Barry of the ANU Centre for Scholarly Communications and myself, and we would welcome those interested in contributing material to that discussion group (Link@wombat.anu.edu.au). We are particularly interested to receive details of community networking developments around Australia, and would be happy to provide a summary to a future issue of *inCite*. ■



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