

# From the Editor

Chris Berg

It's not often that the conservative federal government and the ABC's *Media Watch* work together. But the two find common cause on free speech and the internet.

The *Communications Legislation Amendment (Content Services) Bill 2007* is designed to extend the regulatory reach of the Australian Communications and Media Authority to material that is posted or broadcast on the internet.

It has grave implications for free expression online, imposing on online broadcasters and website managers a great deal more liability for their material, regardless of whether they generated the material or simply provided a platform for user-generated content. (On the origins of the legislation, see 'Big Brother vs. *Big Brother*', in this edition of the *IPA Review*.)

As the bill was winding its way through parliament in June, *Media Watch*'s Monica Attard came to the government's support. In a segment entitled 'Radio Without Rules', Attard attacked an online radio station, NetFM, for being offensive and controversial.

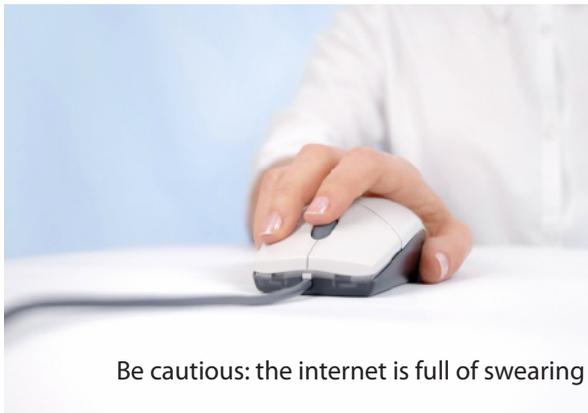
The station is, certainly, confronting. But it is no more confronting than an average act at the Melbourne Comedy Festival, if perhaps less creative. The DJ's—which are described on NetFM's website as rude, lazy, careless, patronising, questionable, but above all very cheap—tell predictable jokes about Catholic school paedophiles and Indian call centres.

*Media Watch* recorded then rebroadcast some of NetFM's material to Attard's horrified disapproval. Attard then noted how 'powerless' the regulator is to stop such a horrible abuse of free expression, and decried that 'unless the Federal Government changes the Broadcasting legislation, NetFM can and no doubt will continue to offend, deride and vilify anyone it chooses.'

It was a disingenuous statement—the federal government was doing just that. As *Media Watch* went to air, the *Content Services Bill* was passing through the appropriate Senate Committee.

But why the antipathy towards free expression online? By describing NetFM's DJs as broadcasters who 'offend, deride and vilify', *Media Watch* clumsily mixes defamatory speech with offensive speech. Attard would like the ACMA to censor expression that can offend.

Never a program to avoid ludicrously banal issues, the next week Attard discovered offensive material in blog comments. A tip for *Media Watch*'s producers—if you are looking for more material, the comments below YouTube videos are the most idiotic on the internet.



Be cautious: the internet is full of swearing

Supporters of free speech, left and right, should feel very uncomfortable when the taxpayer funded, national public broadcaster calls for censorship. *Media Watch* is, after all, a symbolic centre of the ABC. Its opposition to speech online reflects a deeply ingrained view in the network that only 'quality' material should be available for the public to watch, read or listen to.

Attard confronted Net FM's station director, Nicholas Baltinos, and demanded to

know why his station sets out to be rude and offensive.

Nothing illustrates the chasm between public broadcasting and the anarchic, demand-driven internet better than Baltinos's amusingly honest reply: 'It's the angle we chose, no-one else is doing it. Everyone out there is doing boring old radio.'

In this edition of the *IPA Review*, Jennifer Marohasy travels to Indonesia to discover how environmental activists are threatening the viability of much needed foreign investment in that country. Richard Allsop goes looking for the mythical amazing public sector expert who can fix all problems, and Brendan Moyle finds an economic solution to the decline of the world-wide tiger population.

Before we are burdened with a heavy carbon tax or trading system, Alan Moran asks the federal government to stop and count the climate taxes we already have. Sinclair Davidson asks the Labor Party to open their history books and remind themselves what 'industry policy' actually means, and Alex Robson asks commentators to open their economics texts and flip to the 'definitions' section.

Of course, there are many book reviews in this edition, as well as a review of Michael Moore's new documentary *SiCKO*.

Over the years the Institute of Public Affairs has come to *Media Watch*'s attention a number of times. Hopefully this edition of the *IPA Review* lives up to their high standards. The internet certainly doesn't.

IPA

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# From the Executive Director

John Roskam

This year the *IPA Review* celebrates its sixtieth anniversary. In all likelihood it is the world's oldest journal of free market and liberal ideas. The Institute of Public Affairs (IPA) itself founded in 1943, is the world's oldest free market think tank.

Since 1947 the *IPA Review* has been at the forefront of all of the key public policy debates in Australia. Even before the term was invented the *IPA Review* was involved in the country's 'culture wars'. The recent spate of commentary in the Australian media by those who have little in common with the IPA's philosophical perspective, has been extremely complimentary to the IPA and the *IPA Review*.

The only problem with such analysis about the role of the IPA in the 'culture wars' is that it is entirely wrong. The reality is that there is no such thing as the 'culture wars'. The 'culture wars' is not about culture and it is not a war.

To take the question of 'war' first. A war requires two sides. And those two sides must be of roughly equal strength, because if one side is vastly

better equipped than the other an annihilation is the result.

It is assumed that on one side of the 'culture wars' there is for example the Australian Broadcasting Commission, the Special Broadcasting Commission, the nation's broadsheet newspapers, universities and those that work in universities, and a host of taxpayer-funded government and semi-government bodies. Who is there on the other side? A handful of individuals and associated organisations. The resources available to them are miniscule compared to those of their opponents, but this small group represents a view shared by the majority of Australian consumers. The concept of 'war' is misleading because it implies some sort of equality between the two sides—when in fact no such equality exists.

Secondly, the 'culture wars' have nothing to do with culture—at least as the term is popularly understood. For most people culture is music, art, drama, and literature. In any case in this country it would be impossible to have a 'culture war' in any of these areas for the simple reason that opponents to the prevailing orthodoxy are nowhere to be found. In Australia there are only two varieties of opinion held by musicians who express a political viewpoint—left-wing and very left-wing. Musicians in this regard are not very different from those engaged in any other sort of artistic field.

If the term the 'culture wars' has any meaning at all, it describes a clash of ideals.

On one hand, there is a philosophical stance that is determinist and relativist and which ultimately interprets human endeavour from a Marxist-inspired position.

On the other hand there is the position expressed by the *IPA Review* over its sixty years.

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There's more to culture than opera and eyeglasses

