



Media Monitoring

31 July 2006

Sydney Morning Herald

<http://www.smh.com.au/articles/2006/07/31/1154198058963.html>

Plotting the future of broadband

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July 31, 2006 - 2:18PM

By the year 2010, most Australians should have access to high-speed broadband connections of 10 megabits per second or more, enabling them to download high-definition video content, said Australia's national internet industry body.

This performance target was one of several published on Monday by the Internet Industry Association (IIA), to indicate speeds the national broadband network needed to achieve by 2010 in order to remain internationally competitive.

It predicted that video-based activities associated with VoIP and blogging on platforms such as YouTube and MySpace would become more sophisticated and hungry for bandwidth, with the highest demand expected to come from HDTV.

"Some commentators consider that once HDTV services are available, the appetite from users will soon soak up what we would consider today to be massive amounts of bandwidth. Clearly, if the following assertion proves correct, then 2010 will see demand for ultra high capacities (in today's terms) becoming the norm," said IIA.

It suggests that, by 2010, 80 per cent of the population should have access to 10Mbit/s downstream broadband services, with 67 per cent having access to 24Mbit/s or faster.

This compares with the current average broadband speeds in Australia estimated by analysts to be less than 1.5Mbit/s.

For more regionally dispersed services, IIA said customers should still have access to sufficient performance to enable basic banking, VoIP and streaming applications.

It said mobile networks must also improve amid predictions of hi-res, full frame video becoming the norm supported by most devices for gaming, on-demand or live newscasts and webcam reception.

"By 2010, we also expect to see the advent of broadband-enabled cars streaming digital radio and video, and transmitting and receiving live directional, traffic and hazard information," the IIA said.

Pitched as a discussion piece rather than a roadmap, the targets are intended to take into account existing and developing technologies as well as the future high-speed, high-capacity internet now being planned by telecoms operators.

IIA chief executive, Peter Coroneos, said: "We have some objectivity and some knowledge and we also have a good idea of what is going on in other countries. We believe in broadband and the information economy so we are saying: let's sit down and see where we need to be."

The IIA said it anticipated that users will demand access to a whole range of services simultaneously, which may include VoIP, gaming, video-on-demand, music and internet browsing.

While Australia certainly lags behind some of the leading countries in broadband speeds, the report did acknowledge it was inherently different in terms of population distribution and density from countries such as Japan and Korea.

It said other factors besides geographic area also helped to determine broadband speeds. It cited the example of Canada, which enjoys strong government support and better existing infrastructure, and the US, where cable accounts for about 56% of broadband subscribers.

The report said private investment alone was unlikely to realise broadband goals in Australia, and the IIA warned that public expenditure would be necessary to future-proof the Australian economy in geographical areas that were considered uneconomic.