

Book Reviews

Telecottages: The Potential for Rural Australia. *Report prepared by David Horner and Ian Reeve.* The Rural Development Centre, University of New England, Armidale, 1991 (Australian Government Publishing Service, Canberra, 1991), pp. 126, \$14.95; ISSN 0 644 14585 4.

With accelerating pressure for competitive global telecommunications and Australia's international participation in the information age, it is particularly pleasing to find a work that addresses an important, but often underrated area: rural telecommunication in Australia. In this useful and informative study, the authors have responded to an invitation from the Commonwealth Department of Primary Industries and Energy to report on the telecottage development overseas and to assess the potential of the scheme for ameliorating the educational, employment and income disadvantages experienced in rural Australia.

The 'telecottage' or community teleservice centre, first begun in Sweden in 1985, offers a new and clearly flexible approach to linking rural development to modern information technology. The 'telecottage', as its name implies, is a telematic facility that varies from the simplest centre offering one or two computers, a printer, a telephone, a modem, a facsimile machine, and some computer software as a learning resource for a local community, to the more technically sophisticated establishment that provides these basic facilities plus information services, electronic mail, teleconferencing, training courses, consultancy services, distance education, and distance working. As such, the telecottage marks a new type of interface between rural communities and the national communication infrastructure. Begun in a room in a small rural village in Sweden seven years ago, there are now some fifty telecottage centres spanning different cultures and conditions in Sweden, Norway, Finland, Denmark, Sheffield and Totnes in England, in some of Scotland's outer islands, and in County Donegal, Eire. Two factors are essential to the ventures' success: (i) a high level of community involvement, and (ii) the presence of a co-ordinator, normally a local person, trained to help others to use the facilities.

The report overviews the growth and success of the telecottage experiment notably in Scandinavia, in Sweden where the telecottages are operated as small private enterprises, or organised as limited companies; in Norway where 25 have grown in strong association with the Norwegian Tele Commission; in Denmark where government grants have launched some 16 projects including computer training courses, consultancy services for isolated businesses, distance working experiments, electronic libraries and video conferencing and where two thirds of funding comes from central and local government; and in the more limited development in UK and Ireland. Current interest in telecottageing in continental Europe is also evidenced in the number of conferences given on the subject, the most recent in Warsaw, Poland.

How, then, can telecottages contribute to telecommunication and information upgrading and to economic and business development in rural Australia? Several educational sectors in various States are already performing or projecting collaborative telematic schemes focussed on distance and community education that would, the report indicates, lend themselves to links with community telecottages. The Queensland Open Learning Network and LIVENET, the video

conferencing project in Western Australia, are cases in point. The authors see potential both for broad educational training offered at secondary or tertiary level through telecottage centres, and for vocational training in the information sector. They also predict telecottage employment creation in such fields as data gathering for government departments or market survey work for distant firms. Further employment opportunities could exist for word processing, data entry, desk top publishing, secretarial services and applications programming. In addition, primary producers in remoter districts, it is suggested, could make use of a regional telecottage facility to participate in such computer assisted livestock marketing as CALM (the Computer Aided Livestock Marketing Scheme), an electronic saleyard auction for buying and selling cattle, sheep, lambs and pigs using 'objective descriptions' of weight, fat score, muscling and other factors, sight unseen. Essentially, they stress the regional flexibility of telecottages and their capacity to make innovative accommodations in mixing functions that reflect local opportunities and needs.

One strength of this publication is its 'hands-on' approach. Information has been culled from central telecottage contacts abroad; cost estimates of small, medium, and large telecottages are conveyed, and the whole is fortified by a substantial bibliography. The wider questions of the cost/benefit of the diffusion of telematics to rural regions and of equity of access are also discussed. In this context, the report's findings point a clear need for research concentration relating to rural telecommunication in Australia. While telematics, it avers, appear to have the potential to contribute to the achievement of time honoured policy goals of decentralisation and reducing rural disadvantage, "intellectual inquire in this area is still in its infancy".

The authors's conclusions, however, offer a considered appraisal of present rural telecommunication prospects in Australia. Market forces, they conclude, will be unlikely to achieve universality of access to telematics infrastructure; benefit/cost ratios for investment in telematics in rural areas are likely to be positive for many regions, but probably not for very sparsely populated ones; but "shared facilities such as telecottages and co-operative arrangements between local business and the telecommunications operator may be appropriate modes of introduction to telematics in rural areas".

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The World Television Industry: An Economic Analysis by *Peter J.S. Dunnett* (Routledge, Sydney, 1990), pp.246, ISBN 0-415-00162-5.

Peter Dunnett has provided a most informative and highly accessible overview of the world television industry. First commercially developed in the 1920s, the television industry was reaching well over a half a billion households world-wide by 1992. As a pervasive and potentially persuasive medium, the industry certainly is deserving of book-length attention.

This book provides a brief economic history of the industry and a succinct review of the basic economics which have underpinned this development, followed by an extensive survey of the global evolution of the industry and its present state in each major region of the world.