One of the more contentious broadcasting issues to be debated this year has been networking. Although usually not discussed as an issue in itself, it has continually recurred as a secondary theme in the discussion of other media issues.

The question of networking was embedded in the controversy surrounding the recent amendment to the Broadcasting and Telegraphy Act. The legislation would have extended networking into regional areas through the device of supplementary licences. It was to have been introduced as a part of the Amendment. However, the regional TV stations lobbied intensely against the intrusion of metropolitan networks into their markets and as a result the proposal was abandoned.

Questions about networking have been examined frequently in News Limited’s hearings before the Australian Broadcasting Tribunal and the Administrative Appeals Tribunal. News Limited has been appealing against a decision by the ABT to block its takeover of Channel ATV 10 in Melbourne. Throughout the hearings it has been assumed that networking is a necessary feature of Australian TV, without which individual stations could not afford to fulfil Australian content requirements or buy films and series from overseas. News Limited has argued that TV stations linked by common ownership function in a similar fashion to TV stations linked by a networking agreement but achieve greater economies.

Clearly, an understanding of networking — how it functions, its economic basis, its effect on the programming of TV stations — is essential in following the debates on broadcasting issues in Australia. However, there is little material available on networking, and even less on Australian networking agreements.

To encourage informed public discussion on this topic, this issue of Media Information Australia contains several articles on networking. Kirsten Schou describes and analyses the economic structure of Australian networking; Nigel Dick, from the Victorian Broadcasting Networking Limited, explains why a little networking is a good thing, and Julie James Bailey discusses networking in the UK.