

Influence: Let him that would move the world, first move himself (Socrates).

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I really enjoyed being on the panel assessing the Top 40 Influencers in New Zealand Telecommunications, published by *TR* last month. Now one has to understand that this is not an empirically judged awards process, but rather an exercise in educated subjective assessment. But that said, it's reasonably well educated and representative of the balancing of views from four quite different perspectives – the Corporate User, the Equipment Vendor, the Telco Industry Lobby and the Independent Consultant (that'd be me...).

So whilst to an extent this should be considered a bit of fun, on reflection it afforded us the opportunity to stand back from what is truly a fascinating time in the evolution of the telecommunications industry in this country. Some might say, it's "coming of age". So I thought I'd wrap the exercise this year with my own reading of how we saw the cards falling.

The Top 5 probably sums up what looms as perhaps the defining face-off of this period of fundamental industry change.

Minister Stephen Joyce predictably topped the list. He is the guy making the moves and appears to have embraced the challenge of being the place where the buck stops. A measured operator accustomed to an action-result modus operandi, he shares much with fellow Top 5-er John Key. Between them, these two are key inner-circle players in a National government seemingly hell-bent on a transformational step change improvement in the country's telecommunications infrastructure. And they're looking to move fast.

Neither are career politicians and as such are perhaps inherently less inclined to play the political angles. This already looks to be resulting in a "strike hard and decisively" approach to the industry change process. Certainly the single-mindedness already on display tells us that Joyce and Key between them are looking to leave parliament with a legacy of fundamental change.

At number 2 the incumbent, Telecom, made its appearance. With the incumbent's critical mass they are so much of the industry that the decisions that will be made on the company's direction, including what it might morph into, will have a material impact on the shape of the telecommunications for some time to come.

There is little argument that "Telecom" (in its totality) will play a substantive role going forward. But what will it be? Will they accept government's implicit invitation to structurally separate infrastructure arm Chorus, or will they fight trench warfare, street by street, with government and its co-investors? The jury is out and despite the strong rhetorical stakes that have already been whacked in the ground, I think there's a deal of water to flow under a few bridges before the direction is clear.

We decided to rank dark horse Ralph Chivers at number 3. Whilst well-known to relatively few in the industry, he represents the hand of officialdom that wields an enormous amount of influence by dint of its role as advisors to government and the architects of the means to implement government policy. There's a raft of such advisors working largely in the background and they will look back on this period of change knowing that they have made a material contribution to the outcomes – for better or worse!

And rounding out the Top 5 is the user lobby, with media go-to guy Ernie Newman of TUANZ at number 4. Through the growing awareness of "broadband" (or for most, the lack of it!), the criticality

of technology to a strong future for our country in an increasingly digital global economy has finally begun to register on the psyche of mainstream New Zealand. This is evidenced by, if nothing else, the prominent position the broadband infrastructure issue now occupies in the policy priorities of parties across the political spectrum.

The business sector that has long looked at the market through the lens of the incumbents is now, driven by the need to improve productivity and competitiveness, beginning to actively challenge the status quo. This sector will increasingly influence direction at the services layer where value actually gets created, both through bolder, more assertive procurement and with active support of the lobby groups like TUANZ and its siblings.

The other interesting observation to drop out of this year's Top 40? For me it's that there's no sign of either of the other incumbents, Vodafone and TelstraClear even in the Top 10, surprisingly bucking the trend of past Top 40s. This reflects for me the rear-guard action that both are fighting to protect their historical market positions – a stance that is inherently reactive to the moves being made by other players in the mix.

In the case of Vodafone, this includes from new entrant 2degrees (ranked at 10 with CEO Eric Hertz). These guys won't likely materially frighten the market dominance of Vodafone and Telecom but their aggressive approach to what many consider a "lazy" competitive market will force the big boys to move.

So all-in-all a pretty interesting playing field and the "fun" angle notwithstanding, worth keeping the October issue of TR on the desk and reflecting from time to time on the fascinating dynamics of the hugely important industry change that we are all engaged in driving for NZ Inc.