

Japanese communications

What band-rate for psi?

Tokyo

WHEN it comes to new methods of telecommunication, Japan's Ministry of Posts and Telecommunications believes in looking at even the long shots. The ministry's fanciful new "Research Committee on Future Telecommunications Media" is, among other things, to look into the prospects for telepathy as a communications medium.

The new eight-member committee has been established on the recommendation of a private advisory panel to the Minister of Posts and Telecommunications. It will be headed by Shigemichi Sonoyama, vice-president of the National Space Development Agency, and to add weight to the panel's discussions, another of its members is Tadahiro Sekimoto, president of the giant electronics company NEC.

Japan is not, of course, the only country in the world to think of the potential of telepathy; it has long been rumoured that the Soviet Union is taking the subject very seriously. But perhaps this is the first time that a posts and telecommunications ministry has taken up the idea. True to Japan's vigorous commercial spirit, the ministry has in mind practical application. An attractive feature of telepathy is that transmission is instantaneous, or so some claim. Dr Ootani, a psychologist at the Self-Defence Forces University, will be the principal scientist to investigate "superhuman abilities", although anyone with such abilities might be expected to avoid research panels and the possibility

of being turned into a kind of living telephone exchange.

Telepathy will not be the only new telecommunications medium to be investigated. One professor from Kanagawa University will take a look at the potential of neutrinos. And another professor from Tohoku University will assess gravity waves, even though ministry officials



agree that their existence is scarcely more certain than that of telepathic waves. Backing up their investigations are experts on brain physiology, electrical communication and computer intelligent management systems.

The committee is expected to hold four meetings by the spring for an initial exchange of views. Although the hopes of practical application of the new media might seem very far off, the ministry says it is not "too early to start study".

Alun Anderson

Red greens on Yellow River?

A BELIEF is growing in China that the proposed hydroengineering works on the Yangtze (Yellow) river will "spoil the scenery", the New China News Agency reports. But an unnamed official of the Yangtze river valley planning office maintains that construction of the proposed hydroelectric power station, which will substantially raise the water level in the Yangtze gorges, will not greatly harm the scenery. In fact the authorities are looking forward to improved amenities and, according to a planning office spokesman, "some new scenery will emerge".

The purpose of the project is threefold. The hydroelectric plant will have a capacity of 13 m kWh, said the spokesman, and will supply power to cities as far away as Beijing, Tianjin and Tangshan in the north, Shanghai in the east, Canton in the south, and Sichuan in the west. The new, higher water level will submerge more than 90 per cent of the dangerous shoals in the three gorges, thereby reducing hazards to navigation and increasing the number of

vessels that can safely be carried on the middle Yangtze and the Chuan river, with a substantial saving in the cost of transport.

At the same time, flood control measures in the three gorges will substantially reduce the risk of flooding to the Dongtin Hu, Poyang Hu and Jiangnan plains, densely populated areas which are China's commodity grain and cotton base. At present, more than 1 million people, the spokesman said, are needed to protect the existing dykes during the flood season each year, and according to archives going back to the end of the Han dynasty, some 2,000 years ago, there was major flooding until the beginning of this century in one year out of ten.

What form Chinese concern over the three gorges has taken is unclear. There is no suggestion of mass protests, but anxiety is clearly sufficiently acute and widespread for the planning office to find it necessary to issue a statement to reassure the public.

Vera Rich

Space science

British head for French lab

FRANCE is building a new £4-million laboratory for space sciences at the Université de Paris Sud (Orsay), and has attracted a leading British space scientist as its first director.

But Dr Alan Gabriel, now head of the space and astrophysics division of the Rutherford Appleton Laboratory near Oxford, who will direct the new Institut de Physique Spatiale d'Orsay (IPSO), says he does not feel part of a brain-drain. "I don't want to be negative about British space science", he said. "It's not true to say things are much better in France than they are here." The new British National Space Centre for the coordination of the UK space effort "offers most exciting possibilities" and it was "not at all" true to say British space science is not well-enough supported. Moreover space science is international, and Gabriel expects much cooperation between IPSO and his British colleagues.

However, Gabriel implies that he feels more cramped at the Rutherford Appleton Laboratory than he expects to be in Paris. Gabriel's present division of around 150 is merely one part of a 1,500-strong multidisciplinary laboratory; in Paris, IPSO will be no bigger than the space and astrophysics division but it will be independent, except for some support from the research councils and the university. "I shall be able to play a more creative role", Gabriel says.

At the new Paris laboratory, two-thirds of the staff will come from an existing French group housed in an overcrowded old laboratory in nearby Verrier-le-Buisson. The Laboratoire de Physique Stellaire et Planétaire has experiments on both the European and Soviet Halley probes (Giotto and Vega).

The new IPSO will also form a focus for a number of space science groups now scattered around the Paris area, and will take advantage of the proximity to LURE, the Orsay synchrotron radiation source, for calibration of optical instruments from the X-ray region to the visible.

IPSO's initial research programme will concentrate on solar physics, infrared studies of the interstellar medium to shed light on mechanisms of star formation and Solar System studies including dust, comets and asteroids. (France is planning for a mission to the asteroids either within the European Space Agency or bilaterally with the Soviet Union.) Gabriel is also interested in developing a capability at IPSO for X-ray astronomy. He expects IPSO to become one of the major centres for space sciences in France.

Robert Walgate