

The community sector - access to cable



1 Mike Thompson, President, Community Broadcasting Association of Australia, looks at the prospect for community access to cable services.

The CBAA hosted a meeting at its Alexandria office, on 1 August, aimed at clarifying the intentions of the cable program suppliers, Foxtel and Optus Vision, to provide community access channels on their cable networks.

The ABA was represented by Lesley Osborne, John Souter and Lyn Dunlevy, and Dr Beverley Hart and Ruth Ashe represented the Department of Communications and the Arts. Also at the meeting were the Communications Law Centre's Jock Given and Sue Ferguson, and the community broadcasting sector's Mandy Grubb, Marion Conrow, Reece Lamshed and Mike Thompson.

Due to commercial sensitivities the meetings with each of the providers were held separately – with Steve Holland from OptusVision and Helen O'Neil from Foxtel.

In November 1994, the Minister Hon. Michael Lee, said publicly that the cable operators would be encouraged 'to

make available some capacity on their networks for community access and education'. He has not elaborated on that statement so it was hoped that the meetings would clarify what could be expected from the cable companies.

It would appear from discussions at the meetings that the two companies are promoting quite different models for public access. Optus Vision will establish access facilities on a local or sub-metropolitan basis so that local communities can make their own programs for transmission. The company will provide the production facilities and staff local access studios but wishes to bundle and promote the service as part of their pay TV package, over which they will retain editorial control.

Foxtel, on the other hand, is happy to provide a cable channel for public access in each of the major metropolitan centres it serves, but (at least at this stage), is not prepared to make a financial contribution to program production or links to the Foxtel transmission centre. The company is, however, prepared to allow community access groups editorial control of the programs they make.

The attitude of the community broadcasters is that the sector, which has now been broadcasting free-to-air services for a quarter of a century, must have equitable access to the new cable technology, and to appropriate funding for new services. For this to be viable, community cable operators require a licensing or access regime which provides program makers with full editorial control.

We will be continuing on-going dialogue with the cable operators, and the ABA has agreed to prepare a discussion paper on licensing options for community cable operators.



2 Lesley Osborne, Director Program Services, ABA, attended the launch of Optus Vision local television on 7 September.

As part of her address at the launch, she said:

The ABA has been keen to see Optus Vision develop its plans for local community channels and to consult with the company about the way this initiative best fits into the regulatory framework applicable to such services.

In this the ABA is guided by a number of considerations.

Firstly, the Optus Vision community program channels will provide true diversity in the way they operate and in the programs they will provide. A local community channel is

fundamentally different from services provided by commercial or national outlets. It offers an opportunity for individual citizens and community organisations to use the medium of television to inform local audiences about matters of interest to them and provide entertainment on a closer dimension.

Secondly, the community channel represents a considerable investment by Optus Vision in the community by means of provision of studios, equipment and staff. The ABA has an obligation to provide regulatory certainty and to the extent that we can, to help enhance the chances of success of the endeavour

And thirdly, we recognise that the Optus Vision model for community access on local program channels is one of the possible options for providing community-based content on new broadband networks. In discussing licensing arrangements for the new channels with Optus Vision the ABA has been conscious of the desire of the wider community broadcasting sector to have its services available on the new technologies, with the possibility of similar structures for community representation and control as exists for community radio. ☐