Digital news

Digital television—it's a wrap!

The start of digital television on 1 January 2001 has been a call to arms for the ABA over the last 12 months. The AIBA has faced a number of challenges this year including strict timetables and finding spare channels for digital television services in a crowded spectrum. However, the ABA has successfully risen to the challenge and now is able to review some of the major achievements for the year 2000.

National conversion scheme

In March 2000, the ABA released the National Television Conversion Scheme, which sets out the legal framework under which the ABC and the SBS are able to achieve conversion of their television transmissions from analog mode to digital mode. The ABA released the Commercial Television Conversion Scheme in March 1999, and provided a framework for commercial broadcasters to convert from analog to digital mode.

Both schemes have legislative status and empower the ABA to develop digital channel plans for the allotment of the additional spectrum broadcasters will need to achieve the conversion process. Broadcasters must broadcast in both analog and digital mode during what is to be known as the simulcast period.

For further information refer to ABA Update *No. 86, April 2000.*

Digital channel planning

The first round of digital channel planning was finalsied with the release of the digital channel plan for Perth in February 2000. Digital channel planning started in April 1999 for the main station channels for the metropolitan licence coverage areas of Adelaide, Brisbane, Melbourne, Perth and Sydney and those regional areas where broadcasters had indicated to the ABA that they wished to commence digital transmissions in the first half of 2001.

Digital channel plans determine which channels are to be allotted to each area, the assignment of channels to each broadcaster and the technical characteristics of those channels. The ABA's objective in preparing the digital channel plans is to enable a broadcaster to plan its digital transmission coverage to match its analog coverage.

The second stage of the digital channel planning process, planning for additional digital services and digital repeater sites by variations to existing digital channel plans, commenced in July 2000. The ABA completed variations for the markets of Sydney, Newcastle, Wollongong, Brisbane, Gold Coast, and the Sunshine Coast, and variations for Adelaide, Melbourne and Perth will be finalised in late December.

Over the next few years, the ABA will develop digital channel plans for regional areas of Australia (stage three) and remote areas (stage four).

Implementation plans

Implementation plans mark a key step in the digital conversion process. Each plan represents a binding commitment by broadcasters to provide a digital television service. It also requires licensees to provide information to the ABA on the important technical and administrative aspects of conversion to digital transmission in the area. Most importantly, implementation plans require broadcasters to specify commencement dates, transmission sites and coverage areas. *Further information can be obtained from* ABA Update *No. 86, April 2000.*

In June 2000, the Minister for Communications, Information Technology and the Arts approved implementation plans for the national broadcasters in the five metropolitan areas. The ABA will have approved implementation plans for all commercial metropolitan broadcasters by the end of 2000.

Changes to analog services

While digital technology allows the ABA to plan for the use of channels previously unavailable for analog broadcasting services due to adjacent or co-channel interference, some adjustments to the current assignment of analog television channels has been required.

In the second half of 2000, the areas of La Trobe, Foster and Bendigo (Victoria) and Mawson (Western Australia) experienced the first wave of analog channel changes to

accommodate digital television. Both Ten Victoria and GWN Prime, in consultation with the ABA, undertook extensive public relations campaigns to assist viewers with retuning their television sets and VCRs.

Over the next few years, changes to analog services will occur in Woden Weston Creek in the ACT; Merewether, Stanwell Park and Brokers Nose in New South Wales; Gympie Town and Tweed Heads in Queensland; Cowell or Port Neill in South Australia; Bicheno, King Island, Launceston and Taroona in Tasmania; and Ballarat, Victoria. The ABA is committed to working with industry to ensure that the public is provided with relevant and timely information on analog changes proposed in these areas. *Further information is in* ABA Update *No. 92, October 2000.*

SFN report

In June 2000, the ABA released the final single frequency network report, *Report to the ABA on the Outcomes of the Studies of the Single Frequency Network Consultative Group*, after undertaking extensive consultation with industry. The use of single frequency networks reduces the number of channels existing broadcasters require to transmit their digital signal and will make some additional capacity available for new services in most markets. During the variation process to the digital channel plans, the ABA has planned for wide use of single frequency networks for the introduction of digital television in New South Wales and Queensland.
For further information, refer to ABA Update *Nos. 87, April 2000 and 88, June 2000.*

Interference management scheme

Following the release of the draft code of practice for industry consultation, the ABA released a draft Interference Management Scheme in November 2000. The scheme outlines the digital licensee's responsibilities regarding interference occurring to analog television transmissions which are caused by digital transmissions and will be included as a new part of the ABA's *Technical Planning Guidelines*. The scheme is designed to provide a safety net to ensure that viewers experiencing interference to their analog television service achieve resolution in a timely manner. The ABA expects to finalise the scheme before digital switch-on.

Interference consultaancy

With the commencement of digital television tests in mainland cities and the startup of digital broadcasts from 1 January 2001, ancillary devices (such as wireless microphones and VCRs) which share a part of the same radiofrequency spectrum as analog and digital television may experience interference. These devices operate on an oppportunistic basis and, as such, are not afforded protection from any interference that may be caused by local television signals.

In July 2000 the ABA, in conjunction with the Australian Communications Authority and the Department of Communications, Information Technology and the Arts, established a joint consultancy to assist in identifying and managing interference issues. The focus of the consultancy was, among other things, to examine the scope of potential interference to such devices and generate possible solutions for interference issues. Information gained from the study will assist the ABA when making broadcast planning decisions. The ABA expects a final report from the consultancy late 2000 early 2001.
For further information, see ABA Update *No. 91, September 2000.*

Industry activities

Finally, the ABA welcomed the formation of Digital Broadcasting Australia in May 2000. DBA consists of representatives from retailers of consumer equipment, major manufacturers, suppliers of industry electronics equipment and commercial and national broadcasters and was formed to provide information about, and the promotion of, digital free-to-air television in Australia. This industry group recognises the need for collective responsibility for managing the digital conversion process in Australia. *Further information can be obtained from www.dba.org.au or refer to* ABA Update *No. 90, August 2000.*

Where to from here?

The ABA will be busy planning more digital services over the next few years in both regional and remote areas.

For more information on digital conversion issues and ABA activities, please contact the ABA on Freecall 1800 810 241 or visit the ABA's web site: www.aba.gov.au.