

**The recent entry of high definition television on the Euro1080 satellite platform is likely to create a significant competitive threat to Europe's unprepared standard definition broadcasters, according to Jeff Bird lecturer in Film and Television, Swinburne University.**



# HDTV emerges in Europe

While high definition television is well under way in countries such as Australia, Japan, the United States, Canada, Brazil, China and South Korea, Europe has, until now, remained an HDTV wasteland, resolutely committed to a standard definition multi-channel environment. The recent entry of high definition television on the Euro1080 satellite platform, however, is likely to put a cat among the pigeons and create a significant competitive threat to Europe's unprepared standard definition broadcasters.

HDTV broadcaster Euro1080 commenced broadcasting this month with one of the world's most prestigious classical music concerts: Vienna's spectacular New Year's Concert. European HDTV viewers were offered front row seats to an event that has a nine year waiting list. The concert was performed by the renowned Vienna Philharmonic Orchestra in the ornate Golden Concert Hall, and was broadcast at four times the resolution of standard definition television.

According to Gabriel Fehervari, the chief executive officer of Euro1080, multilingual events such as the Vienna concert are perfectly suited to a European audience with its myriad languages and cultures. 'European Championship soccer, the Olympics, the Eurovision Song Contest, as well as a range of rock concerts and other theatrical performances are just a few of the events we'll transmit in HDTV this year', said Mr Fehervari.

Without a European regulatory authority prepared to make a decision on HDTV, unlike the ABA or the USA's Federal Communications Commission, Euro1080 has had no option but to kick-start HDTV itself. The company has been busy forging

partnerships with consumer electronics companies to bring high definition capable displays and set-top boxes to European consumers. Encouraged by the astonishing growth of DVD and large screen display technology, the European consumer electronics industry has finally awakened to the retail potential of HDTV.

The Belgium-based Euro1080 will broadcast high definition content to European households, cinemas, small venues and public spaces on two channels: the main channel and the event channel.



## **The main channel**

The main channel is the European consumer's first introduction to HDTV. It will initially transmit 12 hours per day, although this is likely to increase as more European consumers enter the high definition market. An essential element in the channel's strategy is broadcasting to small venues and public spaces such as sports bars, cafes, hotels, airports and retail outlets.

Consumers require a 60cm satellite receiver dish, a dedicated high definition set-top box and a high definition display to receive the main channel. Although the broadcast is free, viewers must purchase a conditional access card, at a nominal fee, allowing Euro1080 to track viewer

numbers, negotiate rights with rights holders and ultimately protect the high resolution broadcasts from unauthorised access and piracy.

## **The event channel**

The second channel, the event channel, will distribute exclusive high definition event programming, often live, to digitally-equipped cinemas. The focus will be on crowd-pulling international events, as well as a range of popular regional sporting and cultural events.

Euro1080 will not seek the rights to these events, but will offer rights holders an opportunity to tap into an additional revenue stream through digital cinemas. The costs and revenue will be shared between the cinemas, rights holders and Euro1080. In some cases, Euro1080 will offer to upgrade a standard definition program to HDTV by providing its own high definition production facilities and outside broadcast trucks.

Euro1080 has set its sights on becoming the world's first continuous supplier of alternative content to digital cinemas. With more than 400 million people in the channel's satellite footprint, Euro1080 aims to have at least 150 participating cinemas by mid-2004, and has a long-term goal of one theater per one million inhabitants. Since much of this content will be exclusive to digital cinemas, Fehervari is confident that cinemagoers will embrace the concept of live high definition events, accompanied by Dolby Digital 5.1 surround sound and the shared viewing experience.

Watch this space as Europe's standard definition broadcasters scramble to meet the Euro1080 challenge.

