Digital radio in Canada

This is the second in CU's two-part analysis of proposed regimes for digital radio in other countries, in anticipation of the forthcoming report of the Digital Radio Advisory Council.

Canada is proceeding down the path of digital sound broadcasting. As in the UK (and, in all likelihood, Australia), Canada has adopted Eureka 147 in the L band and expects DRB to be a mandated technology. Unlike the UK, however (see 'UK's brave new world', March *CU*, pp 4-5), it has also has planned sufficient capacity to accommodate all existing AM and FM stations and vacant allotments, as well as all other classes of service (such as low power and non-profit services) and any 'additional services' that may be developed for the new medium.

The government's regulatory authority, the Canadian Radio-television and Telecommunications Commission (CRTC), has planned a two stage process for the introduction of DRB (digital sound broadcasting) in Canada (see CRTC, *A policy to govern the introduction of digital radio*; Public Notice CRTC 1995-184). The first entails a transitional stage during which the CRTC will award short term DRB licences on the same terms and conditions as existing analogue licences for the same services whilst a comprehensive public policy is being developed. Once this process is complete, longer term licences under a new regime are expected to be issued.

Transitional period

During the transitional period, any existing AM and FM licensee wishing to simulcast in digital bands will be automatically awarded a three year licence, known as a Transitional Digital Radio Licence (TDRL), on identical terms and conditions as its existing analogue licence. The CRTC states that the short term of TDRLs should not be regarded as any lack of commitment to DRB on the part of the government, but rather as part of an evolutionary, regulatory process. Although most programming during this period is required to be simulcasts, experimental programming of up to fourteen hours per week is permissible. Applications for digital frequencies by aspirant digital broadcasters not operating an existing AM or FM service will be assessed by the CRTC on the basis of merit.

During the transitional period, stations will not be permitted to use additional capacity afforded them to provide new programming services (such as subscription services), as this would provide incumbent operators with an unfair commercial advantage and may thereby discourage new players from later entering the market. Existing licence areas will be maintained, with operators required to restrict coverage of their broadcasts to this area.

In effect, this means that if a number of stations share the same multiplexed frequency, their joint coverage must be no larger than the smallest analogue service area of the group. The Department of Industry's draft allotment plan provides for 1.5 MHz multiplexers in each local area, shared between five incumbent AM and FM operators. Under TRDL licence conditions, no operator is allowed more than 20% of the multiplexer's capacity. Low power services are exempt from this requirement, as it would have forced them to find other stations prepared to share a frequency with such limited coverage.

Content and carriage

The Canadian regulations separate content and carriage regimes by not requiring stations to provide their own transmission facilities. Telecommunications-style access principles are to be developed for multiplex operators. Multiplex operators must provide access to a licensed entity on a fair and equitable, and not unjustly discriminatory, basis, subject only to capacity constraints. The CRTC has stated that it '...expects owners of digital radio transmission facilities to find practical ways of accommodating all elements of the radio broadcasting system, including low power stations'. Concentration of ownership rules, which presently prohibit a single entity operating two radio stations of the same category and language in the one market, will be amended to permit simulcasts with either an AM or FM station. No restrictions are placed on ownership and control of transmission facilities other than the foreign ownership limits that presently apply to the broadcasting industry generally.

The maintenance of broadcasting objectives requires the continuation of government control over the planning and licensing of broadcast services. As the proposed Canadian DRB regime demonstrates, existing regulatory regimes can be effectively harnessed to the private control of transmission facilities. A second important aspect of the Canadian regime is its adherence to the DRB's technical ability to deliver a greater number of services. ❑