

Time of the essence for digital TV protagonists

Glamorous demonstrations aside, where exactly are we with the implementation of digital TV into Australia?

Aritz demonstration of high definition television (HDTV) was the centrepiece of a function in Canberra last month during which members of the government and federal opposition heard representatives from the television industry and the Federation of Australian Commercial Television Stations (FACTS) put their weight behind digital TV and deny that divisions were emerging over the plan to introduce HDTV instead of standard definition TV (SDTV).

The Canberra demonstration was, by all accounts, impressive. The commercial TV networks held the gala launch of HDTV in front of the Prime Minister and a host of VIPs including Publishing & Broadcasting Ltd. chairman Kerry Packer and chief executive of the Ten Network John McAlpine. While Packer was adamant that suggestions that HDTV sets could cost up to \$15,000 each were simple scare-mongering, McAlpine, also chairman of FACTS, reiterated that HDTV was the choice of government and the free-to-air broadcasters, and that both parties were committed to that choice.

Digital television broadcasting will be introduced into Australia on January 1, 2001. Debate over the merits of SDTV and HDTV has always been lively but just last month Kerry Stokes' Seven Network broke ranks with FACTS to argue in favour of simultaneous transmission in HDTV and SDTV format.

Senator Richard Alston, Minister for Communications, Information Technology and the Arts, has said that Australia took the HDTV path because it has sufficient spectrum to be able to do so and that changing from SDTV to HDTV years down the track "would involve another simulcast period and wholesale change of equipment". In other words, it's better to make the hard decisions now.

Provided consumers buy a new HDTV set, some programs will be able to be viewed in a wide-screen format with CD-quality sound and cinema-like pictures. For movies and sport, where picture quality is important, HDTV formatting will make a difference. But its critics argue that at up to \$15,000 a set, and with no indication that people actually want bigger pictures on their screens, the market for HDTV may prove limited.

And while the arguments over the best definition television bounce back and forth, some progress is being made toward the physical implementation of digital television broadcasting in just over 15 months from now. The review process is moving along with nine reviews underway, including:

- the scope of datacasting;
- the nature of enhanced services;
- mechanisms for allocating spectrum for datacasting;
- HDTV formats, goals and targets;
- captioning requirements;
- provision of additional services to underserved areas;
- retransmission of digital services on subscription TV services;

- multichannelling by the national broadcasters; and
- convergence.

A series of issues and options papers have been released at various times throughout this year for all reviews except convergence (to follow soon) and submissions have been received for consideration. Following the January 1, 2000 deadline for submissions and subsequent recommendations the government will make regulatory and policy later this year or early next. The report will be tabled in parliament.

Further reviews will be conducted in 2005 to consider issues such as the implementation of the legislation, the duration of the simulcast period and simulcast requirements.

In the meantime, Standards Australia has finalised a transmission standard for HDTV and the receiver standard is expected to follow shortly. Says Senator Alston: "It is crucial that open standards are adopted to allow interoperability between platforms and conditional access systems. ...It has taken some time to achieve a consensus on these technical matters. And while the debate has been long and, at times, heated - it has ultimately been productive."

Under the digital legislation, free-to-air broadcasters are prohibited from multichannelling. But there is a possibility of national broadcasters undertaking multichannelling of programs that are in accordance with their charter. Some matters being considered in deciding whether national broadcasters will be permitted to multichannel or not include:

- the public benefits to be gained from giving viewers access to multichannel television programming on national services;
- the benefits of alternative uses for the spectrum such as HDTV, datacasting and enhanced programming;
- the potential impact of national broadcaster multichannel programming on the commercial free-to-air and pay TV sectors; and

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Fixing telly in regional Australia

Deciding which telly reception blackspots to fix and getting *Eat Carpet* and other SBS fare out to regional Australia are two of the issues being considered by the government as it tries to figure out how to spend the \$120 million pledged to a Television Fund from the sale of Telstra. Avid TV viewers had until August 20, 1999 to provide comments on the government's discussion paper on fixing blackspots and extending SBS to regional centres with population over 10,000.

In late August, the Department of Communications, Information Technology and the Arts (DCITA) established a unit to analyse submissions and develop a scoping study on television reception issues. According to a DCITA source, the scoping study was expected to address the approaches to be applied in selecting which of the 200-250 reception blackspots could be improved. The study would draw out community views and industry expertise to devise ways to improve service reception and the departmental unit would act as a secretariat for an expert group that would decide priorities and technical issues.

In addition to the extension of SBS and fixing major blackspots, the Fund also contains provision to subsidise the purchase of a transmitter and decoder to allow "self-help" communities in remote areas to receive a second terrestrial TV service and for SBS to spend \$2 million establishing a new media unit to assist its online presence.

While digital television is a few years off for most viewers in regional Australia, the blackspot program is aimed at improving reception of existing analogue transmissions in areas where

terrain, signal interference or distances from existing transmission sites create reception difficulties. But the discussion paper noted that the arrival of digital television in regional Australia from 2001 to 2004 will improve service quality in many areas that currently have problems with analogue transmissions.

The discussion paper noted that the Department would be considering how television services could be improved through linking the Television Fund to other funding and infrastructure programs, and the feasibility of extending SBS in areas where spectrum was scarce. For instance, National Transmission Ltd (purchaser of the National Transmission Network) is required to establish a \$5 million fund to extend or improve communications services in areas that were not previously considered to be commercially viable.

Stephen McElhinney

The Productivity Commission's Broadcasting Inquiry: Debating the Draft Report

The Communications Law Centre seminar in association with Clayton Utz will be held from 9.00am - 5.00pm on Thursday November 4, 1999 at the offices of Clayton Utz, Level 34, 1 O'Connell St, Sydney.

The Productivity Commission is conducting a year-long inquiry into broadcasting regulation in Australia. Public hearings were held earlier in the year and a draft report is expected to be released in mid-October. This seminar is timed to provide an opportunity for public debate about the Commission's proposals well before the preparation of its final report.

Speakers will include Professor Richard Snape, the Commissioner in charge of the inquiry, and representatives from the media and communications industry, regulators and others. Sessions will cover competition and ownership, planning and licensing of new services and program regulation.

Cost: \$325; \$165 full-time students and community organisations. Contact the Communications Law Centre on telephone (02) 9663 0551.

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- the effect on the independence of the national broadcasters of any government regulation in relation to the type of multi channelling provided.

For coverage in regional areas, the Regional Equalisation Plan has been announced and is designed to assist broadcasters in regional areas through subsidising the costs of transition to digital. The intention is to ensure that regional areas continue to receive under the new digital services a diversity of choice in TV services; a similar range of entertainment and information services as those available in metropolitan areas; continued financial viability; commercial TV services that are relevant and responsive to consumer needs; and diversity of media ownership.

Karen Winton