

Eyes wired open:

the ABA's "Digital Odyssey 2001"

The battle over the nation's eyes from the convergence of technologies and digital broadcasting provided the perfect backdrop for the Australian Broadcasting Authority's latest planning and strategy conference. Stephen McElhinney reports.

Held in the Art Deco splendour of Canberra's Hyatt Hotel on November 8-9, the Digital Odyssey drew together communications pundits, industry players and an army of regulators to hear the latest round of promises and predictions on how Australians might access television, radio and Internet in the future. However, although the usual great visions were displayed - promo videos, PowerPoint presentations and even conjurers tricks, it was apparent that the digital future continues to be uncertain and often unlikely.

General Manager of the ABA, Giles Tanner opened the conference by cautioning that the digital environment would be fraught with ongoing economic and regulatory decisions which made planning difficult for industry and regulators alike. He noted that spectrum was the key to the digital future and that it was in relatively short supply in most major cities due to overlapping transmission footprints from regional centres.

Tanner's caution acted to steady some of the more hyperbolic presentations on the types of new services which could become available if government were to shift digital broadcasting regulation one way or another. Giles Tanner also spoke on the evolution of regulation for the community broadcasting sector.

He noted that the increase in community broadcasting licences had not met demand with numerous aspirant groups now vying for the few remaining slots available in major centres. The ABA was considering a range of options to address demand including the possibility of set-term access to community licences, a 'winner-takes-all' system which would allow a single aspirant to control a licence, and the possibility that multiplexing through digital services would increase the number of outlets available to community broadcasters.

David Sice from the Community Broadcasting Association of Australia (CBAA) prefaced his presentation on the recommendations contained in the Productivity Commission's report on Digital Broadcasting. Sice lacked enthusiasm for the recommendation that the government consider revenue forgone from letting spectrum to community broadcasters as a component of support to the sector. He noted that the sector would face considerable financial difficulties funding conversion to digital broadcasting. The CBAA estimated that conversion would cost up to \$22m.

The ABA's Jonquil Ritter and Fred Gengaroli also pointed out the costs and issues to be confronted by broadcasters and regulators as they sorted out whether digital broadcasting would provide the same area coverage as existing analogue transmission. The issue of viewer transfer to digital services prior to the proposed shut-down of analogue transmissions in 2007 was also keenly debated with recognition that no government would shut down TV services whilst people still

depended on them. A range of technical and policy issues were presented including the possibility for broadcasters to provide set-top boxes to remaining households to allow switch-off and the fact that people in outlying areas may be required to purchase antennas to receive signals until digital transmission could be switched to full power.

Of the industry presentations Justin Milne of OzEmail ran the video showreel to illustrate the apparent possibilities of interactive TV via data-casting to change the way consumers can be entertained whilst shopping from the comfort of the couch.

In the same vein, Jim McKay of Interactive TV Australia demonstrated how 'two-way' television could provide opportunities for the audience to participate in gambling on the outcome of sports, quiz and gameshows. McKay noted that revenue generation would be a considerable problem for new digital broadcasters. Interactive TV, which has shareholders including Ladbrokes bookmakers, see gambling via the TV as a way to generate revenue to cover the start-up and expansion of new digital services.

Dr Duane Varan from Murdoch University provided insight to how advertising might change with digital broadcasting. He noted that digital broadcasting would be one of many media competing for audiences and advertising budgets. Advertisers would be more attracted to media which had high viewer participation such as Interactive TV or the Internet rather than more passive media such as television. One bright spot for broadcasters struggling with implementation of HDTV was that any viewers in the first years would more than likely be wealthy and early adopters. <