

There are several factors which are inhibiting the take-up of Digital Television (DTV) in Australia, but the biggest single deterrent to spending a significant sum on the new technology is the simple fact that while digital TV will certainly improve the quality of reception, it will definitely not improve what Australian viewers actually see. Regardless of possible competition from DVDs and the Internet etc., the overriding obstacle to the take-up of DTV is the sad but undeniable fact that the four major television channels : ABC ; Channel 7 ; Channel 9 ; and Channel 10, treat their viewers with complete and utter contempt! This fact is illustrated in several ways, the abolition of which is the primary "key driver" for uptake of digital television :

1) Watermarks. Unfortunately, all these broadcasters have now adopted this evil practice which is nothing but a distraction and annoyance to all who wish to enjoy television viewing. Without exception, all watermarks are too bright, too conspicuous, distracting and unnecessary. This point will be elaborated upon later.

2) Lower Screen Promos. At any time while watching Channels 7, 9 or 10, the bottom portion of the screen, sometimes as much as one third, will disappear beneath a brightly coloured promotion for some other programme at some other time or date. This abomination can last up to 10 or 15 seconds and is a prime example of the truly arrogant, inconsiderate behaviour of those channels. It happens time and time again, every evening without fail!

3) The Vanishing Credits. Perhaps, at the end of a film, one might wish to see details of the cast. However, all too often the credits are suddenly squeezed onto one half of the screen, where they are then completely unreadable. The other half of the screen contains another brightly coloured promotion, often with a voice over. Surely this is major breach of etiquette, aggravating the fact that even without this unwanted overlay, credits usually scroll off the screen so quickly that only a speed-reader would be able to grasp the contents. What right have broadcasters to deprive viewers of this information and prevent the cast and studio staff from receiving their due credit?

4) Averaging Advertising Minutes. Far too often, commercial channels will reduce advertising in one or two less popular programmes in order to used the "saved" minutes in another program likely to attract a much larger audience. This is a tremendous disadvantage to viewers who then find that the programme they have tuned in to see only appears in the short breaks between the advertisements! If, as I understand it, commercial channels are allowed 12/13 minutes of advertising/promotional material in each hour, then this should be mandatory. No 60 minute period should ever contain more than the allowable 12/13 minutes of non-programme material.

5) The Vanishing Serials. Channels 7, 9 and 10 are all guilty to a greater or lesser extent of starting a serial and then, with no word of explanation, ending it partway through. The earliest experience of this I personally recall was Channel Seven's "Band of Gold".

My wife and I were so incensed at this that I rang to enquire whether we would ever see the remaining episodes. The young lady at Channel 7 couldn't answer that question, but did offer to put my name on Channel Seven's List of Dissatisfied Viewers!

If a serial is interrupted by the Olympics, or a similar major event, then an interruption is understandable. However, to withdraw a series before it is completed is unforgivable and any explanation, possibly relating to perceived Ratings problems is not valid.

6) The Moving Programmes. A variation on the above is the tendency of all four channels to peremptorily move a programme from one time slot to another; and often to a different day. While nowhere near as serious a problem as the above, it is just another example of a complete lack of any consideration for their customers - we viewers - when The God of Ratings is involved. And yet, it is we viewers who create those Ratings figures!

7) Programme Overruns. While Channel 7 is probably the worst offender, all commercial channels will at times, and without adequate notice, run a programme for ten, thirty, or even 50 minutes beyond its allotted time. No explanation, let alone apology, is ever given to those tuning in for the subsequent programme.

8) The News that is not News. As far as I know, there has only been one attempt to deliberately deceive the viewing public and the world at large - and I am still surprised that Channel 7 retains a broadcasting license. However, the episode of "Majorca in Barcelona" several years ago is a perfect illustration of the disease which affects all the Commercial channels - Ratings at any cost, and complete disdain for truth, authority or viewers.

9) Missing Scenes. While I am unaware of any Australian channel deliberately cutting scenes from a broadcast, it is an unfortunate fact of life in the United States where scenes are edited out in order to make room for more advertising material. Viewers in the United States were, of course unaware of this until DVDs of those same programmes became available and the differences were then obvious. This practice should never be allowed to commence in Australia.

This point, together with the problem of competition from DVDs, watermarks ("station IDs" in America) and promotional overlays is the subject of a fascinating article by the "ADVERTISING & MARKETING REVIEW", a publication for American advertisers. A full copy of the text is attached and it may also be viewed at :

http://www.ad-mkt-review.com/public_html/air/ai200103.html.

Although dated March 2001 this critique of commercial television, **from an advertiser's point of view**, is especially significant and makes for compelling reading.

A further obstacle to the take up of DTV is the Australian Federal Government!

Government Legislation 1. Current legislation restricts the kinds of programmes that can be shown on any additional digital channels broadcast by the ABC or SBS. Specifically, the legislation prevents ABC2 from broadcasting drama, national sport, national news or current affairs, comedy and entertainment. As a result, ABC2 is spectacularly boring. One wonders why the ABC wasted their limited resources on it.

Government Legislation 2. It is a widely held belief that analogue broadcasts will **not** cease in 2008 as indicated by the Government. While this assumption persists, the take-up of DTV will remain extremely slow.

EQUIPMENT & SALES

It concerns me that staff in many retail outlets are not aware of or choose not to mention to customers the problems of plasma and LCD screens, such as burn in and dead pixels, and the potentially short life and high replacement cost of projector globes.

This situation is not helped by many retailers, including big groups such as Myers, describing a 76 cm TV as 32". According to my conversion program, the exact equivalent is 29.92126", significantly short of 32". Also, surely Australia is now a fully metricated Country?

The public needs to be better informed of the cons, as well as the pros of Digital TV in order to make considered decisions. It is my personal opinion that the viewing public are to large extent ignorant of the real benefits of DTV and perhaps put off by some of the very expensive equipment currently advertised. Surely the ABC should have a role in promoting DTV, rather than introducing a disincentive in the form of a watermark?

PRICING

DTV does not have to be high cost. An 80 cm CRT TV set with a 4:3 screen (perhaps better thought of as a 12:9 screen) and a good Standard Definition (SD) Set Top Box (STB) can cost less than \$800. With an effective screen width of 65 cm, a 16:9 broadcast on such a TV screen appears in 'letterbox' format at the same size as a 76 cm wide screen TV. Such a combination has the added advantage of allowing a full-screen display with a "centre-cut" view, where the extreme left- and -right hand edges are cut off. This is the manner in which most movies are currently broadcast on analogue transmissions. This fact should become more widely known.

On a personal note, my wife and I adopted the above means of accessing DTV. However, our timing was bad as it was only a matter of weeks later that the ABC embraced watermarking! If, after whatever recommendations this Parliamentary Inquiry may make have been adopted, that situation persists, then our STB will be disposed of on eBay!

WATERMARKS

Watermarks have been a contentious issue since first introduced by Channel 7, one of whose staffers recently admitted that it was a marketing exercise. Unfortunately, every other channel except SBS has now followed suit. The ABC'S defence of its use of watermarks would apply equally to all the other channels, and is on the basis that :

A) That it is well established.

Response : A pathetic reason to follow my leader.

B) That in a multi-channel environment there is a need to "subtly identify" the channel for viewers.

Response : Whether SD or HD, every channel selected opens with its identification and the name of the programme currently running! The same information can also be selected from the remote control unit at any time.

C) That it has a duty to copyright owners, and watermarks work against piracy.

Response : People who can overcome the sophisticated coding designed to prevent the copying of DVDs, laugh at a simple watermark. It is useless in this regard and easily made invisible.

Several samples of 'before and after' pictures are available on the Internet. If there really was a need to watermark broadcasts to prevent piracy, far more effective watermark systems exist which are invisible to the viewer, but are considerably more effective against piracy.

Furthermore, why are my tax dollars being spent on broadcast equipment by "my ABC", which has NOTHING to do with the transmission of the programme or the creation of any content? Their Corporate plan 2004-07 states "The Corporation also aims to demonstrate to the Parliament and the community that it provides *high value for money*. It will work to achieve the *optimal use of assets and resources* and manage the long-term sustainability of the Corporation." (My italics.) Finally, watermarking is a policy that does not agree with the spirit of the Code of Practice, and certainly does not accord with the ABC Charter. It will also complicate or, in some cases, deny access to clean library footage later. In the United Kingdom, the BBC was forced to remove a newly introduced watermark by widespread public opposition.

It might be argued that watermarks perform an identification in the event of a channel replaying all or part of another channel's live broadcast which is not copyright. However, this situation is much better handled in a different manner.

RECOMMENDATIONS

I respectfully suggest to the Honourable Senators, Members of this Parliamentary Committee, that they consider the following points :

- (1) That legislation be enacted to abolish all watermarks. That any repeat of non-copyright material from another channel be with the permission of that channel and prefaced with "By courtesy of Channel X" or similar acknowledgment.
- (2) That legislation be enacted to disallow any form of overlay, visual and/or audio, on any broadcast programme. Emergency advices to viewers and headlines of significant breaking news to be the only exceptions.
- (3) That legislation be enacted to require all Free to Air Channels to continue to the final episode any serial or mini-serial programme they choose to commence, with no episode omitted or repeated.

- 4) That legislation be enacted to compel all commercial channels to restrict all advertising/promotional material to an absolute maximum of 12/13 minutes in any one hour of broadcasting.
- 5) That legislation be enacted to ensure that any programme which has been correctly timed and dated in the print media shall not be changed as to time and date unless and until revised dates and times have been published in the weekly print media.
- 6) That commercial channels shall not be allowed to have any programme run over its published time by more than 90 seconds minutes in an hour, or pro rata..
- 7) That in the event of any channel deliberately creating and broadcasting a false news item (except, possibly, on 1st April) that channel shall forthwith lose its Broadcast License.

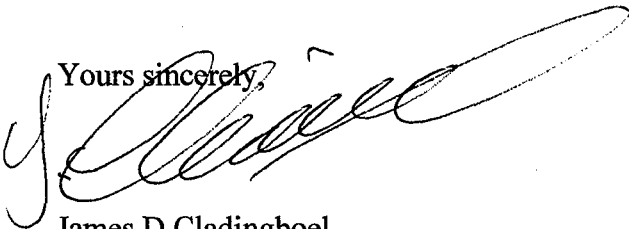
With all these extreme adverse conditions currently abusing viewers, who in their right mind would spend serious dollars just to bring about a clearer, perhaps larger view of these perverted distortions of what was originally entertainment?

PUNISHMENT FOR BREACHES

There seems to be little punishment meted out to broadcasters at this time, with only the threat of loss of License, which can hardly be justified for any but the most serious transgression. However, advertisers are able to exert their own pressures.

I therefore respectfully suggest that punishment for a commercial channel which is in breach of (1) to (6) above could be the requirement that for one or more days, as determined by the ABA, that channel must broadcast all programmes as published, but with the time allowed for advertising and/or promotional material reduced by up to 3 minutes in every hour. While this would result in a loss of advertising revenue for the channel concerned, that would be as nothing compared to the wrath of those advertisers whose material was omitted in favour of advertisements from other companies.

Yours sincerely,



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Attached : "ADVERTISING & MARKETING REVIEW"
Sydney Morning Herald Article, "FLAW SHOW", 25/04/2005

ADVERTISING & MARKETING REVIEW

Billboards in Space

by Glen Emerson Morris

Amazon.com is now selling boxed sets of TV series under the headline "No Commercials Ever Again. When Once a Week Isn't Enough: TV Boxed Sets on DVD." Unfortunately, Amazon may be on to something. There's a big consumer demand to own complete sets of favorite TV series, and this has very serious long term implications for advertisers and the commercial television industry.

Most consumers only have time to watch, perhaps, four one-hour shows, not counting news, in an average evening. If they can afford to own their four most-favorite TV series on DVD, will they be watching much commercial TV? I wouldn't count on it. Especially since commercial television has placed itself at a disadvantage against the DVD challenge in two major ways. Commercial television programming is frequently incomplete, it's altered visually, and consumers are beginning to notice the difference.

Over the decades, it's become a standard practice to cut a syndicated show's running time to make room for more commercials. (The SciFi Channel not too long ago boasted that they were showing the original Star Trek series, uncut, for the first time in decades.) In the past, the practice of editing out entire scenes from shows wasn't pointed out to the public too often, and even if the public noticed, there wasn't much they could do about it. However, now that TV series are being marketed to the public, the completeness of the shows is a major selling point. Ads are telling consumers that the boxed sets have material they can't see on TV, and to the hardcore fans, that's frequently enough reason to buy the sets, at least if it's economically feasible.

Unfortunately for advertisers, it looks like consumers will be able to afford a lot of DVDs. Unlike VHS tapes, which have to be recorded in real time (or something close to it), DVDs are stamped out, much like records and CDs. Already DVD boxed sets of classics like The Little Rascals and Red Skelton are showing up at the \$5.00 per hour price point. As the demand for DVDs picks up, manufacturing costs will decline even further. Within three years, the DVD market will be flooded with boxed sets of older shows, like Perry Mason or Bonanza, going for under \$2.00 per hour. At that price the average consumer, not just hardcore fans, will be buying complete TV series.

Newer TV series are on the way too, at higher prices, but with other selling points. Paramount is well under way marketing the complete original Star Trek TV series on DVD, and with newly re-mastered 5.1 surround sound, no less. It's only a matter of time before they market all of the Star Trek series on DVD, and well before then, their ads may claim the shows are not only complete, but missing network and station IDs as well. This is likely to become a major selling point since ID overlays stand out particularly blatantly against a black background, like space. Rather than blend in with space scenes, network and station ID overlays appear as huge floating billboards in space, sometimes dwarfing the Enterprise and the planets it orbits. Any chance of experiencing the suspension of disbelief required to really enjoy the show is immediately torpedoed.

In the long run, the practice of superimposing, or overlaying, network and station IDs may drive more consumers to DVDs than the missing minutes lost to make room for more commercials. As long as a reasonably professional job was done on the editing, a show will still have continuity, and can still be enjoyed. The ID overlays are a different matter. The IDs are a constant visual intrusion into the suspension of disbelief required to experience and enjoy most entertainment, and that, after all, is what advertisers are paying for.

Sometimes the IDs even make it difficult to see the show at all. Some stations in the Silicon Valley area are putting overlays on both sides of the lower screen, especially at the beginning of the program, when they run pyrotechnic promos that completely obscure whatever is happening on a large part of the screen underneath.

Some networks are going even further. When the Discovery Channel recently broadcast the British produced "Walking With Dinosaurs," several times during the broadcast the show's image was compressed upwards, distorting the image noticeably, to make room for a promo at the bottom of the screen. The effect was similar to the way stations are already compressing the ending title credits of shows to make room for promos now.

At a time when commercial television is facing what will likely be the most serious threat of its life, competition from reruns on DVD, it is unfortunate to think that constantly degrading the image of the content they provide is part of their strategy for keeping an audience. To quote a point from Jurassic Park, people in the commercial television industry are using technology long before they ever consider if they "should" use it.

TV stations that overlay IDs and promos over advertiser sponsored content are doing a disservice to both their audience and their advertisers. If they keep it up, they may lose both. The audience has already started opting out. It doesn't make sense for advertisers to continue to support television channels whose programming practices are driving the most affluent consumers to a media that doesn't support advertising.

From an advertiser's standpoint, it would be unfortunate to lose the commercial television industry, but not a disaster. Within a few years, nearly any advertiser will be able to sponsor uncut, unaltered, "broadcasts" of movies and other content directly to consumers over the Internet, bypassing commercial broadcasters completely, and just as well. If the commercial broadcast market keeps eroding, advertisers may have to resort to Internet "broadcasting," just to find an audience.

March, 2001.

Fairfax Digital

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Flaw show

April 25, 2005



Illustration: John Shakespeare

Viewers are mad as hell and they're not going to take it any more. Greg Hassall reports on our poll of readers' gripes.

We recently asked readers what drove them crazy about TV and, judging by the letters and emails, there's plenty.

It seems the growing belief out there is that the networks treat viewers with contempt, that they're so focused on every precious ratings point they've lost sight of where good ratings come from - contented, loyal viewers.

Maxine Collins of Castle Hill speaks for many when she observes: "I get the impression many of the current ploys used by commercial channels are to prevent viewers changing channel when a program finishes and to promote viewer loyalty.

If they want loyalty, perhaps they could begin by showing respect towards us."

The free-to-air networks alienate viewers at their peril. The available audience isn't getting any bigger. It's becoming increasingly fragmented, with pay TV, DVD, electronic games and the internet providing alternative entertainment in the home. Viewers are also more tech-savvy and impatient. Rather than wait for local networks to air overseas shows, people are taking matters into their own hands by downloading shows from the internet or buying them online. The last thing networks should be doing in this environment is giving viewers reasons to look elsewhere.

There was a remarkable consistency among our readers' responses. Here's a snapshot of the complaints, beginning with the most common.

SHOWS RUNNING OVERTIME

Nothing annoyed readers more than programs not starting and finishing when scheduled. It makes a mockery of G-Codes, causes video recordings to stop at crucial moments and it prevents switching channels to catch the start of another show (unless that show runs just as late). Mick Dwyer of Burwood likens the free-to-air schedule to a CityRail timetable.

This practice has been going on for years, but shows rarely ran more than a minute or so overtime. This year, however, programs routinely begin 10 minutes late. The benefits for the networks are obvious. Running a show overtime dissuades viewers from changing channel, as they'll have missed the start of other shows. The strategy also has implications for ratings. If a popular show begins late it can artificially boost the ratings of the shows before and after. OzTAM adjusts its ratings figures to account for late starts, but networks can get around this by officially logging the show at the late time while scheduling it at the earlier time. It's what Seven did with *Lost* before its rivals cried foul (*Lost* is now scheduled at 8.40pm).

The networks regard overrunning shows as a legitimate tactic, but an equally legitimate response would be for viewers to switch off the telly and get their hands on the show from another source.

Geraldine Silveri of Keiraville says that if networks are going to be honest about when a show starts, they should avoid lines such as "the special time of 9pm".

"What's so special about it?" she asks.

POP-UP PROMOS

The practice of advertising coming programs while shows are running has become endemic and viewers are angry.

The promos are visually distracting and make viewers feel like they're captive to network marketing. "If any programmer wants to ensure I will not watch the advertised program, continue with this obnoxious practice," writes Grant Heafon of Port Macquarie. "It's the TV equivalent of finding hair in your food."

SQUASHING, CUTTING OR RUNNING PROMOS OVER CREDITS

These promos are less distracting, but they are usually more obtrusive, with the credits squeezed into half the screen and the soundtrack replaced with a voiceover. Most readers who complained think it's disrespectful. "An insult to the people who worked on the movie and deserve recognition," emails Miranda Hilton. What's clear is that people not only read credits, they enjoy them.

ERRATIC SCHEDULING

This includes delaying popular programs (such as the finale of *Sex and the City*), double-pumping episodes to get through a series more quickly, "entire seasons of unaired programs gathering dust on a shelf while they dish up repeats" (Alex Mayo of Newtown), shows being removed mid-season with no explanation and not giving shows time to settle into the schedule and find an audience. "How do they expect to build an audience when they do their best to stop viewers watching?" Silveri asks. Hilton says: "We have VCRs so if something doesn't rate don't take it off the air, put it on in the middle of the night or daytime so we can still see it."

Then there's that bugbear of *Guide* readers - Nine's treatment of *The West Wing*. "Nine jerked around a very loyal audience to the point where I finally thought, bugger it, I'll just get the DVD on eBay," writes Andrew Einspruch of Braidwood.

WATERMARKS

Viewers really hate those permanent station logos in the corner of the screen. "For many years I managed to be aware of what channel I was watching without assistance, yet now I have suddenly become incapable and need a reminder," writes Maxine Collins, expressing the frustration of many. She reserved special vitriol for Channel Seven's jumping TV logo: "It's not funny or cute, just pathetic."

The networks argue that digital and pay TV have increased the number of channels and the watermarks help viewers navigate, but it's hard to believe they are little more than a branding exercise and a way to ensure footage isn't lifted without attribution.

ADS

Readers seem fairly tolerant of ads, accepting they're the price you pay for free-to-air TV. However, many suspect the number of ads is increasing. "Sometimes it seems the commercials are interrupted by the programs," writes John Heal of Potts Point. In fact, the ad limit imposed on free-to-air networks hasn't changed (13 minutes of ads and promos an hour from 6pm to midnight). But networks now often go straight from one show to the next to stop viewers changing channel. This means more ads are packed in later, giving the impression the overall level of ads has increased.

Harder for some of you to cop are ads on pay TV, which Kevin Watts of Penrith believes is beginning to reach the level of free-to-air TV.

Other complaints included the same ads repeated in the same break, inappropriate content, and another chestnut: ads louder than the programs they appear within.

LOUD BACKGROUND MUSIC

Many readers complained about background music obscuring dialogue, particularly in documentaries. It's a real problem for our older readers and is likely to become more of an issue as the population ages.

There are many other complaints, but none shared as widely as those above. Other general gripes include non-ratings periods, poor pronunciation and diction (particularly "semi-literate newsreaders", writes G. Newton of Lilyfield), interviewers who ask shocked people and exhausted athletes "How do you feel?", news tickers at the bottom of the screen, the lack of quality drama, canned laughter, not enough cultural diversity (the ABC and SBS excepted) and not enough Australian content.

And then there are specific complaints, such as the dumping of *Burke's Backyard*, the shows that replaced *George Negus Tonight*, Nine's "Still the One" slogan and Eddie McGuire.

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