

SUBMISSION TO THE INQUIRY ON THE UPTAKE OF DIGITAL TELEVISION BEING HELD BY THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES STANDING COMMITTEE ON COMMUNICATIONS, INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY AND THE ARTS.

Digital television should be providing a significantly better standard of transmission and an improved choice of programming to viewers. This would form the enticement for viewers to adopt digital reception technology. Unfortunately, digital television in its current state in Australia provides neither of those benefits, which undoubtedly goes a long way to explaining why many people are happy to stay with the analogue service for as long as possible.

I would like to individually examine these two factors and explain why, in my opinion, neither has been satisfactorily addressed.

TECHNOLOGY

Digital television has been promoted in a blaze of hype and promotional bluster as being the greatest revolution in television since the introduction of colour in 1975. However, unlike the transition from monochrome to colour, the technical advantages between analogue and digital television are not so obvious.

A comparison of the analogue and digital services side-by-side shows how little difference there actually is. One of the biggest selling points for digital television is the widescreen format; and yet most widescreen programs are shown on the analogue services in 16:9 with letterboxing, or matted slightly to 14:9. Even when a 16:9 originated program is cropped back to 4:3 on the analogue service, comparing the two services shows that very little useful picture information is being lost at the sides; usually it is just bits of scenery, or people's shoulder blades. The width of the picture alone is hardly an improvement at all.

At least most of the programs are presented properly; the real letdown of widescreen digital transmission comes during the ad breaks. It is astoundingly common to see advertisements which appear to have been shot in a 16:9 widescreen format presented letterboxed and pillar boxed, so that the result on air is a shrunken little image in the centre of the screen with a large black border. It looks incredibly amateurish - the impression on air to the moderately technically minded viewer is that someone has set the aspect ratio flags incorrectly (again). The actual explanation appears to be that the material is supplied to stations in the wrong format; but it is not good enough for the television stations to use that as an excuse. It reflects badly upon the station, and it makes the digital service look like it is being run by people who don't know what they're doing. It is up to the broadcasters to enforce stricter technical requirements to save their own reputation. It is hardly an encouragement for people to go out and spend money on a widescreen digital television and receiver if the commercials (which, to the commercial stations, are surely the most important part of their service) are presented in such a degraded manner. It can only be a matter of time before someone inadvertently transmits a program in the same way.

The much-vaunted high definition service is a completely wasted opportunity. Most of the time it seems to merely consist of station logos, demonstration films, or standard definition material, with only a few actual high definition programs spotted here and there. Whilst the technical quality of the high definition broadcasts when seen on a high definition television is breathtaking, it is hardly an incentive to spend the many thousands of dollars required for even the smallest, most basic high

definition display when the benefit can only be seen on a few select programs, and you have to keep changing channel when the high definition program is finished to keep watching the same station.

The best aspect of digital transmission should be improvement in reception quality. Analogue signals are susceptible to interference and noise; but it is reasonably easy to get an acceptable picture. A more interesting phenomenon is the number of people who put up with interference, ghosting and marginal reception (which can often be fixed by simply adjusting the antenna or using a signal amplifier) because they think that it is an unavoidable part of television reception. The videophiles who demand excellent reception quality are the people who are more likely to have good analogue reception and may not see the need to upgrade to digital; whilst the people who put up with poor analogue reception and have not done anything to improve it don't seem to care anyway.

Ironically, the station which has the most marginal and difficult reception of all, and could benefit most from digital transmission, the community station Channel 31, is the only station which has not even had digital spectrum allocated to it. With OzTam figures showing that over one million Melburnians tune in to Channel 31 each week, this seems to be an overlooked opportunity to get digital receivers into homes.

CONTENT

The great technological breakthrough in digital television is that it is a system whereby each television station can provide discrete, separate channels of programming in perfect digital quality. Or, at least, they could, if they weren't prevented from doing so by impossibly restrictive legislation.

Under current legislation, the commercial channels cannot provide multichannel services. The national networks can, subject to the limitations on program content as itemised in Schedule 4, Part 1, 5A(2) of the Broadcast Services Act; which essentially means that the digital channels cannot be used to broadcast national news, sports or current affairs, or drama, comedy or variety programs - or, as it has been more cruelly put, anything that anyone would actually want to watch.

These limitations appear to have been put in place so that the commercial stations and pay TV operators will not have any extra competition. The result is that the potential of multi-channel broadcasting has been completely squandered in order to artificially boost the viability of parts of the broadcasting industry.

Given that, as outlined above, the technological improvements of digital broadcasting are not sufficient to tempt viewers to install a set-top receiver, it must fall to the content of the services to convince the vast majority; and clearly repeats of six flavours of *Stateline* are not enough.

If we look to the United Kingdom, we see digital services being provided by the BBC, ITV and Channel 4 which offer exclusive content. To take two examples, the BBC's digital only channel BBC3 provides repeats of popular BBC1 programs, and generates its own first-run material such as the cult comedy series *Little Britain*. BBC4 contains documentaries and also provides a welcome home for repeats of archive programs for the television connoisseur. None of the programming is aimed at a wide audience, but it provides a useful forum for niche interest content.

So how can Australian digital television provide more content to entice viewers over to digital reception? One easy step would be to allow the community station Channel 31 onto digital. It is an existing service which could start digital transmissions immediately, it already has a decent viewing audience (OzTam figures show that around one third of Melburnians watch C31 each week) which could only increase with digital transmission, and those loyal Channel 31 viewers who have suffered through poor reception - and those people who are missing out because they cannot receive it at all - would have good reason to buy a digital receiver to see their community favourites clearly.

One outstanding omission from the schedules of pay TV is classic Australian television. Whilst there are channels full of sixties sitcoms from the US, the absence of Australian archive material is very noticeable. This surely is where the ABC in particular could step in, with its library of Australian classics. If the restrictions on the type of programming allowed on digital multi-channel services could be modified slightly to allow, say, Australian programming over 15 or 20 years old, this could provide an opportunity to have a TV service that, whilst not having overt commercial appeal, could at least offer an interesting alternative. Newly produced niche programming exclusive to the digital channels could also provide a reason for viewers to go digital.

Anything to make the line-up of digital channels look significantly different from the analogue has to be considered to help encourage digital uptake. This means that the current policy of trying to keep digital channels as unappealing as possible so that they don't provide the slightest competition to the existing broadcast channels and pay-TV has to be rethought.

The technological aspects of digital broadcasting are clearly not sufficient to encourage people to upgrade. It's not good enough to merely offer the same product in a slightly shinier container. People need to feel that they are missing out on something before they will take the plunge on a digital receiver. If digital broadcasting continues as it is now, the only way to force a mass upgrade from analogue to digital will be the switching off of the analogue services, with all the nastiness and political ill-will that that will entail.

Matthew K Sharp, 6 May 2005