

Submission No. 63

I am a blind consumer. I have no pecuniary interests in any media producer, broadcaster or equipment retailer. I am interested in technical innovations and have a low income.

I have been watching the development of digital free-to-air television in Australia with interest. It provides many opportunities and potential benefits. But I don't think that it is currently meeting its potential, partly due to regulation and partly due to a lack of enhancements which could be provided under the current rules.

To my mind, those who have or will shortly adopt digital TV fit into one or more of the following categories:

- * Early adopters. I dare say that most of these have probably made the switch by now.
- * Technofiles, those who must have the latest gadgetry or who at least buy because it's neat technology rather than any other reason. I feel that the price point has now dropped far enough for pretty much anyone in this category to be able to purchase now.
- * Audio/video fanatics. These people are going to care most about the improvements to audio and video. Many of these people will want to purchase a high definition setup which costs a considerable amount of money. Even for those wanting surround sound primarily, the purchase of a high definition set top box may be necessary, and of course they will need a home theatre system capable of decoding such signals. Still, I would think that most people in this category would have made the change already, since they probably already own at least some of the required equipment.
- * Sports fans. Digital TV provides wider and sharper pictures which are ideal for sports coverage. Note that a widescreen TV and a high definition receiver are necessary to take full advantage of this aspect. Also, some enhancements available on digital TV for sports coverage, particularly on the Nine network, require the use of certain receivers to be able to access them.
- * People from non-English speaking backgrounds. SBS is currently offering a number of services which are of interest. Many people are unable to receive both SBS radio services over analogue radio, and a significant portion of the population (particularly in regional areas) are unable to receive any SBS radio services at all. Providing them via digital TV makes good sense, though it is of some concern to me that, at least during casual listening, the audio quality of the SBS FM service is poorer via the digital set top box than it is via their FM transmissions here in Brisbane. This may be a bandwidth issue (see below). SBS also

provides its News Digital channel, allowing people to watch foreign news services at a time more likely to be suitable than is possible via the traditional SBS TV channel.

* People with a hearing impairment. It may not be well known, but some digital set top boxes are able to decode and display subtitles for the hearing impaired on ordinary unmodified television sets. Previously, analogue televisions required extra equipment in order to display subtitles for the hearing impaired. The economies of scale may well result in a digital set top box proving to be more affordable than these other modifications. Note that apparently only some decoders will display these subtitles on screen, others still require extra equipment.

For the average consumer with a low to medium priced television set, I personally feel there are no real incentives to make the switch unless they particularly want to watch ABC2 or they fall into one of the above categories. It is my belief that the main driver for consumer take-up will be content. People are unlikely to make the change while the vast majority of what can be received on digital free to air television can also be received using traditional analogue television.

The most accurate source for comparison in technology adoption is DVD. DVD provided convenience, reliability, higher quality and more content in comparison to video tapes. Digital television doesn't really have convenience going for it, it's probably as reliable as analogue television, and it has the quality angle covered. Standard definition receivers are now also approaching the DVD price point, they are certainly as low as DVD player prices were when adoption had become mainstream. So this just leaves content.

As mentioned above, unless you are an enthusiast, a foreign language speaker or love the ABC, there's not much to drive you towards adoption of digital television. Unless of course you live in Tasmania, where one of the commercial services is only available via digital TV. Digital Broadcasting Australia seems to think that interest has been strong in these markets. CITA probably has access to more objective figures, but if this is indeed true then the content argument stands up well.

I think several things could be done to improve digital television's attractiveness.

First and foremost, the regulations as they currently stand pretty much prevent much more in terms of extra content than we have already. I've not read the relevant legislation, but it is my understanding that only SBS and the ABC can multichannel and only certain things can be shown on these extra channels. This they are already doing, and at least the ABC seem to feel that they've pretty much filled up their capacity (see <http://www.abc.net.au/dig/about/default.htm#countrydtv>).

So I feel the regulations need to be loosened. It seems silly for example

that we have a situation where say sports programmes have to preempt regular programming, when the ability exists for a network to broadcast both. A reality show may want to show more content than the current rules would allow for. I can understand the government's desire to balance the needs of free to air and pay television providers, but it is in their own interests to encourage conversion to digital so they may free up the analogue spectrum currently occupied by broadcasters. And surely freeing up the rules would create more competition between commercial television and pay TV, though it might make it harder for commercial providers on free to air to compete with each other.

If the government is reluctant to loosen regulations as regards multichanneling, networks could still be encouraged to provide more in the way of programme enhancements. As an example, the blind community has been lobbying for some time for the inclusion of descriptive narration on free to air television (see <http://www.bca.org.au/digtv.htm>). This service is provided in the United States via an analogue subcarrier not used widely in Australia, and in the UK via digital free to air television and Sky Digital. Until the advent of digital television in Australia, there has been no real delivery mechanism available for getting such description to viewers. But now there is the ability to send out multiple soundtracks with the digital picture, allowing the viewer to select between soundtracks if available.

Blind Citizens Australia and the Australian Caption Centre have entered into a project to encourage DVD producers to include descriptions on DVDs released in Australia (a few from overseas already have this feature, see <http://www.michaeldvd.com.au/Search/TitleSearch.asp?AudioID=86>). This is being done with a view to encouraging description on free to air television. Whilst very little description is being produced in Australia, there being no real willingness to carry it, a number of programmes imported from overseas already have descriptions produced for their local markets, and technical issues aside, there should be nothing to prevent importation of these descriptions along with the main programme. Programmes imported from the US which air with descriptions there include The Simpsons, Arthur, KSI, Angelina Ballerina, Jag, Boston Public, Law and Order, That 70s Show ... and that's just programmes showing currently. You can see a complete list at <http://www.washear.org/dailylogs.htm> (warning, this page is big). The number of programmes described in the United States is only likely to grow.

I've not come across a good UK resource as yet, but I have found a Sky listing that, while out of date, should give an idea of what is available. <http://www1.sky.com/disability/tvguide.htm>

You'll notice that this list includes some programmes not made in the UK. These have had descriptions added by the British. Amazingly people in the UK can watch Australian shows like Neighbours and Home & Away with descriptions, whereas we can't. This seems fundamentally wrong to me.

A good international resource for description is <http://www.adinternational.org> though it does seem to be a bit US-centric.

Digital television could easily make viewing easier for blind people if there were a will to do so. Not only could descriptions be imported with programmes that already have them, networks and producers could be encouraged to produce a descriptive track when making their programmes. Sports programmes could make arrangements with radio broadcasters to make a more descriptive commentary available as an alternate soundtrack. SBS could be encouraged to run English language dubs of foreign films where available. And SBS and the ABC could finally be forced to voiceover all foreign language content in current affairs programming by providing them with enough spectrum to provide a translated and non-translated version of the programme, thus making it accessible to anyone who can't read the subtitles. I am confident that blind people would switch to digital television in droves if these enhancements began showing up on digital TV.

Other items which I think would help drive the switch to digital TV include:

- * Better promotion of equipment, particularly at the budget end of the market. K-Mart had a receiver at just \$99 during the post-Christmas sales, and there are numerous receivers available for less than \$200.
- * Better promotion of existing enhancements and capabilities. I really think the captioning for the deaf would reel in some customers if it were known about, for example. Also, some TV programmes regularly run enhancements without much promotion (e.g. sport coverage and game shows).
- * Equipment manufacturers should be encouraged to allow viewing of supertext on regular televisions.

In conclusion, I made the switch because I've an interest in technology, I am hopeful that some of the innovations listed above will someday come into force, and I realise that everyone is going to have to switch sooner or later. I made the switch when I did because the price became affordable and ABC2 went on the air. But I don't think these factors alone are enough to make people go out and buy new gear to receive the same old stuff. I really think that extra content is going to be the major key in pulling in lots of viewers, and the government needs to rethink its current regulation of the digital TV landscape. I also think that the regulator needs to ensure that broadcasters have sufficient bandwidth to provide required services, such as additional audio tracks, without a drop in sound or picture quality.