



Conference Report: Future Directions In Broadcast Programming Sydney 20-21 June

# Those Encroaching Satellites

**An increasingly near future in which satellites will straddle the world - or at least large sections of it, including Australia - seems to suggest that the question of program regulation may soon become fairly academic.**

The types of satellite now operating in our region are:

- Domestic (eg Palapa, Optus).
- Operational or planned satellites controlled by ASEAN countries like Malaysia, Thailand, Japan and China.
- Regional satellites covering many countries in the region, like Asiasat, Apstar (HK), JCSat (Japan) and the next generation of Indonesia's Palapa.
- Global satellites like Panamsat and Intelsat.

Currently, it appears, the main constraint on receiving foreign-sourced satellite broadcasts is the size and cost of the dishes that would be required. Even ABA representatives at this conference seemed uncertain of the legal position. ABA Program Services Manager Deb Richards said it was a complex question and there was no easy answer. The Broadcasting Services Act does not provide for such services, but there is no legal impediment to operators beaming them in - though currently they cannot uplink from within Australia for distribution here.

Legal issues arise only when the operator starts to charge for the services, thus becoming a subscription satellite operator. This requires a licence, and such licences will not be available until the Optus satellite monopoly ends in 1997.

## The View from One Operator

The three year wait is of little concern to Panamsat's Asia Vice President, Andrew Jordan (the only television industry executive *CU* has ever encountered who has an honours degree in Chinese language and literature from London University). Panamsat has based their Asia office in Sydney because they have a long-term view, Jordan said. For political and other reasons Asia will become increasingly difficult to do business in, and Sydney presents an attractive alternative.

In the space of ten years, Panamsat has built a global empire, particularly in Latin America (it is now half-owned by a giant Mexican television company). Its second satellite (just launched) covers from Los Angeles to Siberia, all of SE Asia and the Pacific area including Australia, and with a third satellite it will cover 98 per cent of the world's population by mid-1995.

Jordan said he did not see satellite programs as a cultural invasion but as a cultural exchange. It was not only major language/cultural groups whose programs were available; for example, Burmese and Mongolian programs

are available throughout the Asian region. Digital compression offers the prospect of many more niche services tailored to specific markets. Programming would stand on its own merits, and Panamsat is keen to get Australian programming on to the satellite, believing that it has a big future in the region. The market has evolved as broadcasters have realised that people would rather watch programs relevant to their experience, Jordan said.

Satellite television has been a catalyst for change throughout the region, Jordan said. Regulation has not worked particularly well; for example although China banned dishes, people are still using them.

## An NZ Perspective

Karl Rossiter, Business Development Manager of TVNZ, said that because the main focus of satellite television is in Asia, New Zealand is being marginalised, and Australia may be as well. He sees unregulated pricing of satellite capacity as a threat to user nations. In New Zealand's case, it is entirely a user, not a seller of capacity.

Rossiter noted that, in addition to the existing and planned satellites already mentioned, Russia had two major satellites, Intersputnik and Gorizonts. An enterprising small Pacific country, Tonga, has formed alliances with the Russians and has no fewer than six global spots as a result. Malaysia has taken six spaces on Tongasat.

Rossiter showed a slide of the infrastructure which serves Fijian television. While it looks primitive to Australian eyes, it produces perfectly good material appropriate to its own market. He suggested that services like this and a similar one in Samoa may be pointers to the future.

TVNZ is involved (along with partners like Dow Jones and Singapore Broadcasting) in the Asia Business News service, which is tailor-made for the burgeoning Asian business market and is already extremely successful, attracting advertising way ahead of budget. This is typical of the kind of niche market service that will characterise the new environment, Rossiter said. TVNZ is involved because it opted to view such services as an opportunity rather than a threat. TVNZ is also investing heavily in digital compression because it offers 'so much more for the same money'.

Satellite television offers the prospect of a 'huge change in viewing habits', Rossiter said. It will be viewer controlled, with the capacity for wide choice, viewer participation, niche services, timeshifting, multimedia and 'personalised' media. In future, broadcasters will have to think locally while acting globally. □