

Review of the viability of an indigenous television broadcasting service and regulatory arrangements for the digital transmission of such a service: ABA submission

The creation of an indigenous television broadcasting service is likely to promote a number of objects of the *Broadcasting Services Act 1992* (the Act). Most relevant is object 3(1) (n):

to ensure the maintenance and, where possible, the development of diversity, including public, community and indigenous broadcasting, in the Australian broadcasting system in the transition to digital broadcasting.

More specific provision for the broadcasting needs of Indigenous people also has the potential to promote the availability throughout Australia of a diverse range of entertainment, education and information services, the role of broadcasting services in developing and reflecting a sense of Australian identity, character and cultural diversity, and the provision of high quality and innovative programming by providers of broadcasting services.

There are a number of models for an Indigenous broadcasting service, involving different options for carriage. The choice of transmission option is one of the main factors which will determine the viability of this service. Experience with the community television (CTV) trial indicated that the costs associated with analog transmission adversely affected the ability of trial licensees to deliver valuable community television services. The resources need to meet the high transmission costs encouraged CTV services to seek efficiencies which at times conflicted with the achievement of the community purposes of the service. The capacity of digital spectrum to make available a much greater number of program channels raises the possibility of an existing broadcaster becoming a third party carriage provider for an Indigenous broadcasting service, as outlined in the discussion paper. Based on its experience in planning, the ABA is able to assist in the consideration of issues relevant to transmission options. While the ABA sees advantages in exploring alternative options offered by digital technology, it does not have a view on the preferred model.

Ahead of the determination of the specific nature and structure of a proposed Indigenous broadcasting service, the ABA's contribution is limited to general observations, which are already on the public record. The ABA anticipates providing more specific comment once more is known about what kind of additional services are intended and the scope of the planning task that would be involved.

Spectrum availability

The digital capacity found to date to provide new services is set out in the ABA's Digital Channel Plans (DCPs) - available at www.aba.gov.au/tv/digitalty. The DCPs show (at least) two additional channels planned for DVB digital television transmissions in all markets, the so-called 'datacasting channels', but with power restrictions on some vacant channels and limitations to single frequency networks in key markets. In a paper presented in June 2004,¹ Giles Tanner, ABA General Manager, examined the scope to find further capacity for new television services and the flexibility offered by digital

¹ *Digital Television Reviews* - Presentation by Giles Tanner, ABA General Manager, at the Network Insight Seminar (Tuesday 8 June 2004).

television in particular. Mr Tanner's paper is available at www.aba.gov.au/abanews/speeches/digital_tech

While channel capacity is limited in regional Australia, in the context of planning for an indigenous service, it should be noted that there are usually fewer constraints on both analog and digital channel capacity in remoter areas and in the north western half of the continent generally, due to the sparseness of settlement.

As the discussion paper notes, there are already indigenous analog television services in existence. Aboriginal Open Narrowcasting television, which runs in Broome is an example. At present there is no digital conversion strategy for television open narrowcasters generally, of which there are very few. At some stage it will be appropriate to consider a policy for digital conversion of open narrowcasting television and of Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander open narrowcasting television in particular. While it would be possible for these services to be included in a broader national Indigenous digital broadcasting service, the conversion of each of these services to digital transmission could also be dealt with by the ABA under its existing powers.

Any national indigenous broadcasting policy is likely to raise analog as well as digital transmission issues, and radio as well as television. Mr Tanner's paper also discusses the outlook for additional analog channels and the close relationship between digital and analog capacity. Questions about the use of analog or digital capacity need to be addressed in the context of the totality of demand for new services over the next few years, including community television, additional commercial television services and any other potential demand, such as for other types of broadcasting service or 'datacasting'. It also highlights the difficulty in providing advice on digital capacity for a national Indigenous broadcasting service in the absence of any specific proposals for such services.

The ABA restates its readiness to assist with planning issues that flow from consideration of a more specific proposal.