10 March 2009

Mr Tony George
Manager Complex Licensing and Allocation Issues
Australian Communications and Media Authority
Level 15, Tower 1 Darling Park
201 Sussex Street
Sydney NSW 2000

Dear Mr George

Report to ACMA for the months November – January 2009

Please find below the Broadcast Australia report on its Datacasting trial for the months November to January 2009. As outlined in our application to ACMA for a datacasting trial licence, the purpose of the trial was to determine the:

- viability of datacasting (and now open narrowcasting) as a “product” in the current environment and regulatory regime, including its commercial viability;
- impact and viability of various technical innovations;
- potential of datacasting as a communications platform to deliver services to the public;
- demand for services encompassing ‘public information’ content (e.g. from government agencies) and commercial content.

As reported previously, BA has completed Phases 1 & 2 of the trial but has been unable to complete Phase 3 due to the failure of interactive content to emerge and the consequent lack of MHP receivers in the market i.e.

Phase 1  Datacasting of digital content with limited interactive capability. Any interactivity generated would be via “multi-channelling” rather than the use of “smarts” in the STB receiver. BA believes that this form of datacasting will be the foundation of future datacasting services given the issue of STB legacies;

Phase 2  Datacasting of content with limited interactivity through the use of a “smart” STB;

Phase 3  Fully interactive content, limited only by capacity of the STBs then available to the public including a return path for interactive browsing of remote, third party information services. We also noted that any move to Phases 2 and 3 would be dependent upon the development of a common API platform for STBs or adoption of one of the overseas STB standards for use in the Australian market.
Since the commencement of the trial, legislation has been put in place which provides for narrowcasting content to be carried on “Channel A”. This has expanded the potential programming for a commercial Channel A service should the channel be allocated by the government. On 5 September, 2008 ACMA approved the continuation of the trial and the trial inclusion of narrowcasting content trial subject to the condition requiring each service to display a message advising of the trial nature of the service.

Developments since our last report include:

1. Implementation of a full 7 day Electronic Program Guide (EPG) across the DIGITAL FORTY FOUR trial platform
   This is only useful for those services with a well defined program schedule. It was initially implemented on the NITV channel and has subsequently been provided for the Australian Christian and EXPO channels. Further implementation will continue in the coming months.

   The ingest of program schedule data and transformation into the required on-air format has initially been a semi-manual process. However, it is planned that this process be automated, as much as is practical, over the coming months. We believe this would be a first for an Australian aggregator to source EPG schedules from a number of providers.

   The EPG implementation so far has been a valuable exercise with learnings that will directly benefit any future rollout, both technically and in terms of developing the processes required to support it.

2. Removal of MHP interactive services

   MHP interactive services have been removed from the trial platform following an anticipated change by the broadcasting industry to start to use the MHEG standard instead. BA will evaluate opportunities to test MHEG interactive functionality within the coming months. The removal of MHP and the interactive services has released capacity which will allow BA to provide new services as part of its trial.

3. Rebalancing of bandwidth across the DIGITAL FORTY FOUR platform

   Following the removal of the MHP platform and services the bandwidth of the various services will be rebalanced across the platform with associated testing in order to provide the best quality possible with the limited bandwidth available for all of the services.

Significant technical work was undertaken over the period in order to achieve these milestones i.e.:

- Testing and commissioning of the EventIS EPG platform;
- Developing tools and algorithms to convert channel schedule files to the appropriate format for carriage by the EPG platform;
- Establishment of EPG operational procedures;
- Testing and rebalancing bandwidth allocations between the DIGITAL FORTY FOUR services;
- Technical changes were also required to provide for the sharing of LCN47 between Federal Parliament and Teachers TV, to be transmitted in those times that parliament is not sitting. This required Broadcast Australia to develop an innovative scheduled service switching facility to allow the two services to be automatically switched. This facility also serves to ‘switch in’ the trial service message for the NITV service. Implementation of this facility was completed during this period.

The current channel line up is now:
LCN 4  Video Programme Guide (VPG) all five metropolitan the free to air television broadcasters and DIGITAL FORTY FOUR services;
LCN 40  National Indigenous Television;
LCN 41  ABC News, Sport and Weather;
LCN 44  DIGITAL FORTY FOUR home page;
LCN 45  Channel NSW (multiple services);
LCN 46  Australian Christian Channel;
LCN 47  Teachers TV shared with Federal Parliament House of Representatives from 3 November;
LCN 48  Federal Parliament Senate;
LCN 49  Expo (shopping channel);

Work is continuing both on the transmission system and content production sides with continuous improvements being made: The next three months work programme includes;

- Further roll-out of the new EPG across the DIGITAL FORTY FOUR platform;
- Improving the automation of the EPG system and response to changed program schedules;
- Testing the behaviour of set top boxes with the introduction of new services.
- Reviewing and scoping the testing opportunities arising from the introduction of Freeview accredited set-top boxes into the market. In particular BA will scope possible MPEG-4 and MHEG applications.
- Integration of the DIGITAL FORTY FOUR multi-channel monitoring facility into the BA Network Operations Centre (NOC), and wider skilling of NOC staff in multi-channel monitoring procedures.

Should you have any questions relating to the matters raised above please don’t hesitate to contact me on (02) 8113 4601 or email Clive.Morton@broadcastaustralia.com.au or alternatively Linda Andersen on (02) 8113 4654 or email Linda.Andersen@broadcastaustralia.com.au.

Yours sincerely

CLIVE MORTON
Terrestrial Media Services Director
Engineering Director (Acting)