



High-rise digital set for snowy reception

It will be costly to upgrade apartment buildings to digital TV, writes **Jesse Hogan**.

BRENDAN Foley should be gleefully looking towards the December 2013 end for analog television broadcasting. As the head of contracting services for BSA, owner of Mr Antenna, his division should benefit from the rush of people looking to upgrade to digital.

His dreading the deadline is telling. Foley warns that television viewers must be prodded to make the switch faster because, if they do not, installers will be unable to cope.

"If you're talking to somebody about their TV upgrade in 2008 and they know that the broadcast close date is 2013, (there isn't) a sense of urgency," he said. "You talk to those in the industry and they will tell you, they firmly believe there will be a lot of consumers caught short and lose their TV pictures in 2013."

Since digital television broadcasts began in 2001, one of its biggest selling points has been the ability to get better pictures and sound by connecting a set-top box to the TV. An added lure is being able to watch ABC2 and three additional high-definition channels, with Seven, Nine and Ten to each launch another standard-definition channel in

the new year.

The Australian Communications and Media Authority's latest annual report on digital TV found that at the end of last year 41.2% of premises received digital TV broadcasts. When additional TVs were counted, such as in bedrooms, digital's reach was only 25.7% of receivers.

Communications Minister Senator Stephen Conroy has acknowledged that the switchover "could well be the largest change on a national scale since the introduction of decimal currency in 1966". But while most viewers will be able to upgrade by buying a new TV or a set-top box, those living in apartment buildings could face hefty costs.

"The multi-unit dwelling is actually the toughest of all the issues," Conroy said this week. What makes it difficult is that in most apartments, the TV signal travels from two antennas atop the building to a device that splits the signals into individual channels. Each channel is then fed into an amplifier that boosts the signal so all residents can receive it. That is fine for analog but not for digital.

The best-case scenario is that buildings can be upgraded by

installing master antennas designed for digital signals. The signal is fed into a digital distribution amplifier, with repeaters every four or five floors. Upgrading an apartment building of 12 to 20 units using that method, according to Foley, would cost about \$300 to \$400 a unit — as long as the cabling used could carry the signal.

"Television systems installed prior to 2000 . . . you're pretty much looking at replacing the lot," he said. That is, new cables throughout the building.

While it is in Foley's interests to talk up the switchover problems, his pricing estimates are backed by the Owners Corporation of Victoria, which represents bodies corporate.

Rob Beck, OCV's general manager, says the cost of \$300 to \$400 a unit is "realistic, and could be much higher . . . depending on the situation".

"The costs will be directly passed on to the owner-occupier because that's the (type of) levies they would be paying, but indirectly, certainly all these things have an effect on your rental rate," he said.

While all analog TV signals must cease by the end of 2013 — the Government reiterated the December 31 deadline in March



— the switch-off date for metropolitan areas is, formally, December next year. But Conroy insisted that “no one should work on the basis that that will be the actual cut-off date . . . The next time I have to make the adjustment, towards the end of this year, we’ll actually move it (the metropolitan deadline) out to the end of that timetable,” he said.

Beck highlighted two factors that could slow the digital upgrade in apartments. Firstly, that many owners’ corporations would “wait until the death knock before deciding to do anything”, in the hope of getting upgrade subsidies from the Government, and, secondly, because of problems in getting all apartment owners to agree to pay for digital upgrades.

“The very nature of an owners’ corporation is that there’s a very lengthy approval process as well (from the individual owners),” Beck said.

“If people don’t, on an orderly scale, start to convert (now), then the technicians aren’t going to be able to cope at the point of time when it comes closer and people all of a sudden want to switch over . . . they’re going to have difficulty coping with the demand.”

Opposition communications spokesman Bruce Billson predicted that delays in making digital TV accessible in high-rise apartments would prompt some disgruntled residents to attempt their own, crude solutions.

“You can imagine in these higher-storey buildings and office complexes seeing people sticking aerials out their

windows,” Billson said. “That’s hardly the aesthetics people would be looking for after putting such effort into areas around Southbank and the like, to start seeing all sorts of technology out the sides of buildings.”

The Federal Government has allocated \$1 million to finding ways to solve reception problems in apartment buildings, and the problems are the focus of one of four committees within the Government-appointed Digital TV Industry Advisory Group.

While digital signals do not suffer the same “ghosting” problems of weak analog signals, Billson said one of the few problems with the new technology was that “unlike analog television, where you might get varying degrees of picture quality, with digital you either get all or nothing”.

Julie Flynn, chief executive of the Free TV group, which represents the commercial free-to-air networks, said it was important to note the sustained, intense criticism of Telstra by rural residents in the lead-up to the closure of the CDMA mobile phone network.

“If you think that was a problem, you try taking away their free-to-air television,” Flynn told an ACMA summit on Wednesday.

“We all need to get our skates on to make sure we can deliver the same coverage to all Australians in that time frame.”

In confirming the switch-off date last month, the Government committed \$37.9 million to help its Digital Switchover Taskforce promote the change (albeit as

part of a plan similar to the former government’s Digital Australia scheme that Labor scrapped, and headed by the same person, Andy Townend).

This will include the development of a logo to be put on new televisions and recording equipment to indicate digital compatibility.

But this may be usurped by the free-to-air networks’ recent collaboration to develop a digital set-top box under the Freeview brand to promote the switchover, mimicking the approach of British broadcasters.

Conroy was this week given a demonstration of Freeview by the networks and described it as “a pretty significant development”.

“The free-to-air have dragged their feet for most of the past 10 years — they’re really behind it now,” he said.

The day after the Government confirmed the deadline in March, Ten chief executive Grant Blackley insisted that it had caused “no trepidation from this camp”.

“We see it as a target that the industry should aim towards, and I say ‘the industry’ on behalf of government, (television) manufacturers, broadcasters, the retail sector and other interested stakeholders as well,” Blackley said.

But did he think the December 31 target for the end of analog television broadcasting would be achieved? “I think that’s a very good question (to ask) in December 2013.”



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Getting the right signals: John Bramich (left) and Paul Antnio search for digital TV reception.

PICTURE: CRAIG ABRAHAM