

COMMUNICATIONS NEWS

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Recent Developments in Australia by Ian McGill

PAY TELEVISION

Telstra (in the FOXTEL venture) and Optus Vision are still racing each other to roll out their cable networks. Optus Vision has apparently negotiated for rights to hang cables from power poles in Sydney, Melbourne and Brisbane. Telstra's original plan to roll out a largely underground network is being reviewed in light of Optus Vision's announced accelerated overhead roll out. Galaxy has reported that its signal now passes 1.5 million homes in the country but the reach is expected to increase to 90% of homes in the country when the satellite service is launched.

A price war has already been declared between pay TV operators. Optus Vision is set to undercut other pay television operators with an installation fee of \$29.95 and a four-tier pricing package for monthly fees ranging from \$25.00 to \$39.95. Galaxy currently charges \$99.00 for installation (down from \$299.00) and \$49.95 as its monthly fee. FOXTEL charges have not yet been announced.

Australis has announced that it incurred a \$122 million loss for the year to June 1995. Neil Gamble, Australis' Chief Executive Officer, has said that the loss was in line with budget and business plans. At this stage, Australis has indicated that it has 31,000 households subscribing to its service.

News Limited has agreed to buy 50% of the Packer-owned Sky Channel. The service provided by Sky Channel will be broadcast on Star TV, FOXTEL, Optus Vision and Australis.

Pan TV (an operation owned by Australian Capital Equity (Kerry Stokes), Australian Provincial News (the O'Reillys) and SBS Television) has announced that it entered into an agreement with FOXTEL to provide the pay TV operator with access to the Movie World channel which will broadcast a number of foreign films.

Galaxy will deliver a 24-hour home shopping service in November called The Value Channel (TVC). The chairman of TVC is Michael Milne. The channel will be hosted predominantly by Don Lane.

A new channel Galacta (Gay And Lesbian Cable Television Australia) is due to be launched in May 1996. The channel apparently has a narrowcast licence but negotiations are on foot to have the channel broadcast on pay TV carriers as an add-on service.

BROADCASTING NEWS

Publishing & Broadcasting Limited (the holding company for the Nine Network and Australian Consolidated Press) announced a strong \$150 million profit for the year ending June 1995.

WIN Television is looking to enter into the Pay TV market with a channel called Aussie Gold. WIN owns Crawford Television and is apparently scouring its extensive libraries for programming.

John Singleton acquired the radio station licence 2GB in August 1995.

The Minister for Justice, Mr Kerr, has backed the televising of criminal court proceedings in Australia.

Channel Seven will begin screening a gay and lesbian comedy show called "Out There" which is filmed for the US cable network Comedy Central.

TELECOMMUNICATIONS NEWS

Telstra

In light of recent comment in respect of high charges rendered for ISDN services, Telstra has flagged the introduction of a new range of ISDN packages and prices by July 1996. The new range of packages and prices will be part of Telstra's general upgrade of the ISDN network.

Frank Blount foreshadowed record profits for Telstra in August, 1995. By 11 September, Telstra announced its start to a "watershed" year with the release of its net profit figure of \$1.75 billion. But set against the record profit, Telstra has floated the idea of a program of voluntary job cuts in the lead up to the post-1997 deregulated market.

Optus

As with Telstra, Optus announced in August that it expected to report a profit in the current financial year. The current opinion is that the result will delay any public float of the organisation until the beginning of 1996.

On-line services

Amid the current concerns, worldwide, about content on on-line services, the ABA Chairman, Peter Webb, announced in September 1995 that the Australian Broadcasting Authority would encourage the on-line industry to be self regulatory. In his view, neither the government nor the community would be likely to accept an on-line industry that took no responsibility for content, especially problematic material which could raise social and ethical questions.

There are now three current inquiries into content of on-line services: the ABA, the Department of Communications & the Arts and the Attorney General - Computer Bulletin Board Task Force and the Senate Select Committee on Community Standards Relevant to the supply of Services utilising electronic technologies.

Triple M and Austereo have entered into an agreement with Village Roadshow and On Australia. Under the Agreement, the radio stations owned by Triple M and Austereo will go on-line. The service that is planned to be made available to on-line subscribers is one that will allow access to musical reviews, station program listings, chat sessions with announcers and the ability to make music requests.