



Media

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Community TV for digital program guide

Sally Jackson
Television

COMMUNITY TV stations will be included in the Freeview electronic program guide when they go digital, putting them on an equal footing with the other free-to-air networks, which is a huge boost for the often-overlooked sector.

Their inclusion will also give Freeview an extra free channel to promote, a useful selling point given research shows one of the biggest digital drawcards for viewers is having more to watch.

Industry group the Australian Community Television Alliance said pay-TV network Foxtel had ignored a request to be included on its EPG.

"ACTA received a letter from Freeview saying the directors voted unanimously to include community TV in the proprietary EPG," said ACTA secretary Laurie Patton, who also heads Sydney's community TV station, TVS.

"The community channels have offered this to Foxtel but, to date, Foxtel has not taken up the offer."

Freeview is the marketing arm for the free-to-air networks' digital channels.

Its EPG is expected to be available by year's end.

Hopes are rising in the community TV sector that May's federal budget will at last see funds allocated to help the stations go digital, and a timetable

set. With the other networks already simulcasting, they alone remain marooned on the analog signal, while more and more of their viewers switch to digital technology.

People in the sector point to comments made by federal Communications Minister Stephen Conroy at this month's press conference to launch the Government's campaign to get Australia ready for digital TV.

'We're not going to leave them behind'

Stephen Conroy, Communications Minister

Asked about community stations, Senator Conroy replied: "We don't want them to close because of a lack of willingness to transition them into the digital world. We're not going to leave them behind."

The sector was encouraged by the support Senator Conroy had shown, Mr Patton said.

"He certainly understands the value of community TV in terms of improving the amount of local content produced and increasing the diversity of programming," he said.

"The community TV sector has asked the Government to provide us with the ability to simulcast in both analog and digital, as the other channels are doing, and for financial support during the simulcast period, sim-

ilar to the way they have provided support to the ABC, SBS and regional broadcasters."

ACTA has made it clear it does not want the so-called "hot swap" option, in which the stations would be switched from analog to digital without a simulcast period.

"A hot swap would be sudden death," Mr Patton said.

"It would disenfranchise all the people already watching the channels."

Community TV rune-readers believe Senator Conroy's use of the word "transition" at the press conference indicated he favoured a simulcast period.

Mr Patton said going digital would dramatically increase the audience for community TV, which has a cumulative monthly reach of about 3.5 million viewers in Sydney, Melbourne, Brisbane and Adelaide.

"It really (would be) a coming of age for community TV," he said.

"(With a) more powerful transmitter and access to an EPG we would ... confidently expect our audience to at least double in a fairly short period of time."

Perth's new community TV station, West TV, said it aimed to start broadcasting in October.

It was given a two-year trial licence by the Australian Communications and Media Authority following last year's collapse of former licence-holder Access 31.