Government Review of the Viewer Access Satellite Television service VAST

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Alan and Judith Smedley – users of the VAST service

We do not mind if our submission being published.

My wife and I have been using the VAST service for over three years and other families would have been using it far longer. We are in the Hinterland of the Great Dividing Range on the Central Coast of NSW at Ravensdale and just 20Km from Tuggerah and Wyong, currently among the fastest growing residential areas of Australia. We also have an investment in a rental property in Buderim QLD that relies on the VAST service for television reception.

Our own Free to Air Television footprint is between Newcastle and Sydney which are the closest major centres to our home, whereas in Buderim it is the Sunshine Coast.

Radio broadcast via the VAST system or from the Internet is our only way of receiving any form of reception in our valley so for us it is an invaluable service given our location.

On a positive note, we do appreciate the service and the ability to time shift to SA, NT or WA if we miss a program.

Unfortunately, we are unable to view local television services and content that caters to this region even though the local broadcasters are the service providers, and the advertisers who are supposed to receive the benefits from us as viewers. Here we see virtually no coverage, promotions or advertisements for local events or services covering the Central Coast of NSW.

But a large proportion of the channel capacity and allocations on both government and commercial channels show repeated content including advertising without any time shifting. This seems to be an enormous waste of the satellite resource and capacity.

In a remote regional area such as ours in the hinterland of the Great Dividing Range with its susceptibility to serious flooding and to bush fire inundation, the need for dissemination of reliable and timely information relevant to use is critical in an emergency given that we have limited or not mobile phone services, other forms of radio or television.

It is my understanding that Broadcast Licencing and Aggregation is supposed to cover local areas and with VAST bring all channels to country viewers in line with major cities and regional towns where the viewers receive a terrestrial service, but it is most defiantly inferior.

There is no way that city viewers would tolerate this sub-standard service. We are subjected to Seven News and coverage that is out of Melbourne with advertising and content focussed on the Northern Territory or regional Queensland and Nine coverage that is from Imparja Television with its focus on Alice Springs, Central Australia, the Northern Territory and North and Western Queensland. Unfortunately, the same is the case for Channel TEN content. Obviously, none of these are from our region and they predominantly contain advertising and promotions for these areas and from shopping channels. I am sure that our city cousins would not tolerate this.

As has been stated by others “watching QLD news etc is not super handy in SA” or in our case the Central Coast of NSW” and “Free TV sounds good, BUT when the news and adds don't apply to your area it is very frustrating. I don't need to know what is on special in the NT I need my own area”

In our valley there are resident quite close to the expanding residential areas of Wyong and Tuggerah who rely solely on the service but are having to watch vision intended for other unrelate geophysical locations. I hear of many users who will not subscribe to the VAST service as its content is not relevant to them or their region.

The Freeview web site: <http://www.freeview.com.au/tv-guide/> lists thirty-two channels. I appreciate that six of these will be a few HD and its SD equivalent channel but the VAST Channel guide: <https://www.vansat.com.au/vasttv.shtml> lists only twenty-two channels that we can view. Information from the <http://sattvguide.com.au/> page indicates that the there are currently sixty-eight television channels on the system.

It is disappointing that we don't receive a full channels line-up including the newer channels like Seven Flix or Nine Life on the VAST Satellite Network that are a part of the terrestrial services available to their viewers.

A more user-friendly interface would help many users of the VAST service, particularly the elderly who rely on it, but find the technology as it is presented daunting. I personally know of users who have no idea how to access the radio on the VAST service.

Because of the limited way that many of the more Localised News Services are covering this region and their use the Satellite capacity we can view these channels at very limited times of less than an hour a day. The Satellite transponders have a slide on these channels at other times. This would indicate that the transmitters to the Satellite are still operating. Why is this capacity not being used to provide better localised content and coverage instead of subjecting us to content that is of limited interest locally?

Regarding this delay of news services your own information states that: “These are rebroadcast approximately 30 minutes after the original TV broadcast and contain the same advertising. The delay is because of the time needed to upload the bulletins to the satellite”. This delay does not make any sense. The broadcasters can and should be streaming these services live as delaying them does not serve remote communities well. Delaying them is only adding to the costs and would appear to be an erroneous excuse when sport and other events can be broadcast live.

News service need to be live and relevant to remote areas particularly in emergency situations. Delaying the broadcast only adds to the costs of the transmission for the broadcaster. Technically there is no reason for this delay either.

As compression techniques used in television broadcast improve there may be a way that VAST can provide better more focused local and regional content. But as I am see it the issue will be that the decoders will become obsolete and will need replacing to keep up.

This service clearly needs to be better managed down to the geophysical level - as in the case of the 40,000 Victorians who receive VAST or those on the east coast of NSW don’t need to know about the NT and the need to wash their hands and eyes.

There is clearly a considerable amount freely available Australian content unencrypted and available on the Satellites and with better promotion of the capabilities these systems along with the VAST service the community as a whole would be better served.

With unreliable and often no service through the ADSL, our only communication service here, we believe that the use of VAST as an emergency warnings service should be a made a much higher priority. The VAST service is an essential tool for access to current with informed news bulletins and weather warning along with emergency broadcast information. In a natural disaster or emergency like bush fire or flood in a local region, technically a high priority broadcasts could easily take precedence and be displayed on all channels on the system.

It concerns me that the VAST service is government subsidised but is not really being adequately and widely promoted nationally to the community at large.

Sadly, even the poorest members of the community and those who are recipients of government subsidies consider access to commercial service like Foxtel and Netflix essential and sadly funded from the public purse when the VAST service is free provided the user makes a one-off purchase of a decoder.

A further aspect that I am concerned about is that this review should address is that it has not really be adequately promoted in the community.

Yours

Alan and Judith Smedley