



REPORT ON ACCESS 31 RURAL SATELITE PILOT

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Since commencing its broadcasts in June 1999, ACCESS 31 Perth has received ongoing enquiries about the possibility of introducing its community TV service to regional WA markets. Philosophically, the station has always been supportive of the idea of country telecasts. From the outset, ACCESS 31 Perth has offered access to its content (which costs more than \$950,000 per annum to generate) free of charge for this purpose.

The major obstacle to extending the service beyond the metropolitan area has been the prohibitive costs of distributing a full video signal throughout the State. With this difficulty in mind, ACCESS 31 asked the then Labour Opposition to consider giving the station access to the downtime of the State Government's satellite TV service, Westlink. Within a few weeks of taking office, the Gallop Government granted this request. Westlink has 24-hour access to an Optus satellite transponder with national coverage, but only utilises an average of about 7 hours per weekday for its own transmissions. The commercial value of Westlink's downtime is approximately \$650,000 per annum.

No progress has been made towards extending the service into rural communities until now due to financial constraints. No government funding has yet been forthcoming to establish the necessary infrastructure and to implement the service. ACCESS 31 has not had any surplus funding; and even if it did, its licence conditions specifically forbid the diversion of station resources away from its core purpose of serving the Perth metropolitan area.

PILOT PROPOSAL

The Western Australian Trotting Association (WATA) was amongst the original members of the ACCESS 31 TV Consortium and played a key role in helping to bring the service to fruition. WATA has been a consistent advocate of extending the TV service into rural areas and recently has provided some seed funding to support a possible rural ACCESS 31 pilot. Under this initiative, re-transmissions of ACCESS 31 would be implemented in Kalgoorlie, Albany and Bunbury. These three centres have been selected for the trial, because they all have redundant ex-SBS TV transmitters, which can be utilised for ACCESS 31 retransmissions.

Under this proposal, simulcasts of the ACCESS 31 Perth service would be distributed state-wide for local re-broadcast when Westlink is not utilising the satellite transponder for its own programming. Westlink's requirements are generally confined to weekdays, with several additional weeknight commitments. Westlink will confine its weeknight commitments to three nights, Monday and Tuesday and Wednesday. Since the service is completely reliant on Westlink for carriage and switching, the ACCESS 31 component of the service runs from 5.00 PM to 12 midnight on Thursday nights and from 5.00 PM Friday nights continuously throughout weekends until about 9.00 AM Monday mornings.

The pilot would provide participating communities with an additional free-to-air TV service during these times. Also, all unrestricted Westlink programs would be available for local re-broadcast into homes and workplaces.



Nature of the Pilot Service

The likely schedule of community programming has been noted above. The content itself would be a live simulcast of whatever programming is being telecast by the Perth service. The pilot service will be mono, since one of Westlink's stereo channels is already utilised for satellite distribution of the Information Radio service.

Because no network infrastructure is in place to support the pilot, Westlink would take the ACCESS 31 signal off air from the Perth transmitter and feed this signal to the satellite uplink. The off air signal at Westlink in West Perth is slightly imperfect and these imperfections will be magnified somewhat as the signal is sent to the satellite, received locally and rebroadcast. Consequently, the picture quality in rural communities will probably be slightly grainier and/or snowier than other local TV broadcasts. This will remain the case for the duration of the pilot, or until financial resources become available to facilitate a direct telecommunications link between ACCESS 31 and Westlink by landline or microwave.

Equipment and Technical Requirements

Albany and Bunbury both have redundant TV transmitters previously used to broadcast SBS TV. These facilities are all owned by local government agencies and also have adjacent satellite dishes and decoders. However, satellite reception equipment in Bunbury was configured to receive SBS TV on the PAZ satellite, whereas the pilot ACCESS 31 service will be delivered via an Optus satellite. The conversion requires the replacement of the satellite decoders with Optus-compatible units. The dishes should be reusable, but will need to be re-pointed by approximately 4 degrees to receive the Westlink/ACCESS 31 signal. The satellite reception equipment in Albany is already Westlink-compatible.

Frequency information is noted in the table below.

LOCATION	PREVIOUS CHANNEL	NEW CHANNEL
Albany	UHF Channel 54	UHF Channel 54
Bunbury	UHF Channel 33	UHF Channel 45

Costs

The cost of replacing the satellite decoders is approximately \$650.00 per site. Costs associated with dish repositioning and rectifying any possible transmitter problems are not yet determined. None of these expenditures should be needed in Albany, but local viewers still receiving SBS TV on Channel 54 will require advice on how to tune to the frequency of the new SBS transmitter.

There is a small licence fee for each transmitter of \$27.00 per annum. The only recurrent local cost other than maintenance (if required at some point) would be electricity charges to run the transmitter.

Signal switching and coordination activities in Perth would be undertaken by Westlink and ACCESS 31 at no cost.



Regulatory Issues

The Australian Broadcasting Authority has agreed to simplify initial regulatory requirements due to the trial nature of the pilot. An application for an Apparatus Licence in the Broadcasting Service Band (Form ABA 12) will need to be lodged for each location by the owners of the transmitters. A variation to ACCESS 31's licence area and/or applications for test broadcasting licences might be required in the longer term, if the test proves to be highly successful.

It is recommended that the duration of the pilot be 12 months, since this is a standard community test broadcast period. If the pilot lasts any longer than one year, it ceases to be a trial and this has regulatory implications. Conducting the pilot for a shorter period may lead to a cessation of the service before the State Government determines its longer-term commitment to Westlink, when its current satellite contract expires in September 2003. The best way to ensure that the ACCESS 31 component of the service is a factor in the Government's decision is to have the service fully operational at the time.

12 months duration should be clearly noted on the licence applications (Form ABA 12)

Responsibilities

ACCESS 31 and Westlink will handle all signal switching to the satellite. Local governments would be responsible for their own transmitters, but ACCESS 31 can assist with advice on lodging the licence applications and liaison with the ABA. ACCESS 31 would also help with promoting and explaining the pilot service.

FUTURE IMPLICATIONS

There are several possible scenarios for the long-term development of the service and these are briefly described below.

Rural ACCESS 31 may continue to coexist with the Westlink service. This is highly advantageous because it does not require an expensive separate state-wide signal distribution system. The community TV service gets essentially a "free ride" on the Westlink satellite contract. Whether this is a viable long-term arrangement will ultimately be determined by the WA Government, when it negotiates a new Westlink signal carriage contract before the current agreement expires in September 2003.

If this channel sharing arrangement continues it would mean that something like the 3-weeknight and 24-hour weekend service would continue. Since the 31 service would be less than a continuous broadcasting service, the plan would be to move away from a simple simulcast of what is being telecast in Perth toward a separate "cherry picked" rural community TV service. The country service would be comprised of the very best of all programming broadcast in Perth, plus programming generated from WA rural centres.

If the satellite sharing arrangement does not continue, an alternative state-wide distribution method will need to be found. Although this could lead to a 24-hour-a-day rural community TV service, it may also require as much as \$1 million per annum in signal distribution costs plus network operating costs.



There are two major sources of potential revenue for a WA rural community TV service applicable to the Westlink sharing as well as a separate service model. These are rural sponsorship sales and national program distribution. Sponsorship packages (community broadcasting's version of advertising) could be sold both locally and from Perth. ACCESS 31 Perth already has working arrangements with major advertisers and advertising agencies and there has been keen interest in the promotional potential of a state-wide community TV service.

The current Westlink satellite footprint covers all of Australia. Therefore, the satellite service can also be used for a second purpose, that is, to distribute programming nationwide for re-broadcast by community TV stations in Melbourne, Brisbane, Sydney, Adelaide and Lismore. This would create a national program supply network with WA as its hub. The initiative has direct implications for promoting Western Australian products and services such as tourism on a national level. The rural service could derive revenue from supplying national programs as well as a proportion of the sponsorship they contain.

The most likely implications of a permanent service are that a state-wide remote community TV licence (the community TV equivalent to the Remote Commercial TV Service licence held by GWN) would be awarded. This service would serve all Optus satellite decoders throughout the state. Local re-broadcasts of the service would be covered under local re-transmission licences. Larger centres with the capability of producing some of their own content would be encouraged to take out their own local community TV licences allowing them to augment the satellite service with their own programming.

UPDATE ON DEVELOPMENTS

Since the original version of this paper was written in early December 2002, the following progress has been made.

1. Albany's ACCESS 31 transmission commenced on 21 December 2002.
2. Bunbury commenced transmission in June 2003.
3. Kalgoorlie/Boulder are still reviewing the situation and has cancelled the sale of its transmitter at least until a decision is made. The City has also applied to the ABA for its retransmission licence and is currently evaluating the costs of getting the local transmitter operating on UHF Channel 31.
4. Additional locations such as Mount Marshall, Moora, Wickopin, Merredin, Esperance, Kununurra and Broome have also shown interest in initiating local retransmissions of ACCESS 31.
5. The station and Westlink have received considerable positive feedback from remote areas with stand-alone satellite receivers.
6. The Westlink satellite contract with Optus' B3 satellite ran out on 30th September 2003 and has been re-signed with Optus' new C1 satellite. The then Minister Tom Stephens extended the arrangement to carry ACCESS 31 content until further notice.