

It is my opinion that the UK has long led the world when it comes to high-quality (both in terms of content & delivery) terrestrial television. The recent development of the Freeview package has continued this trend, offering great choice and quality to a significant proportion of the population who choose not to subscribe to services via Satellite or Cable. I am concerned that this philosophy is in danger if HD services are not made available via non-subscription, Terrestrial reception. Apart from the fact that broadcasters such as the BBC are producing HD content (which in itself suggests that HD should arguably be available to all license-fee payers), there is a significant point to note regarding the quality of future SD broadcasts.

The specific problem I have in mind is that the development cycles of all major consumer electronics companies drive towards improved quality. As markets develop for newer technologies, prices inevitably fall. It should also be noted that vendors will eventually retire older equipment for which demand is no longer significant. The obvious indication of this trend at present is the rapid drop in availability of VHS tape recorders from a number of high street stores. In the context of displays, the growth of HD ready screens (together with their eventual replacement of most or all SD displays) will present a major problem if HD content is not widely available. The specific issue is that while *any* HD ready screen is capable of displaying SD content, its reproduction is significantly degraded. This is not only compared with HD content on the same display, but also when compared to older SD-specific technology, such as CRT displays. While video processing software can reduce this degradation, it can never completely remove it.

While most if not all people in the future will want to occasionally access SD content (such as pre-recorded SD media, TV repeats, etc.), it is clearly not in the public's interest that HD content is only available to those individuals able and willing to pay for subscription services.

Another key point to note is regarding demand – one of the reasons cited to date regarding the relevance of HD content. It's fair to say that HD demand may be low at present; however I suspect that colour TV sales were relatively slow initially in the same way that DVD sales took several years to reach the ubiquitous levels of deployment available today. The key point here is that *all* new consumer electronics technology sales start slowly and it's therefore extremely unwise to make long term decisions regarding the availability of HD content based on initial demand. Other factors to note regarding the initial take-up of HD equipment is the comparatively recent surge in Freeview box purchases. It is therefore not unreasonable to expect that people who purchased Freeview equipment only 12-24 months ago are probably keen to get some use out of the equipment before replacing it. There is also probably an element of technology overload, where people are only just coming to terms with what Freeview offers and hence don't yet see what HD will offer them in the future.

In summary, while I accept that the sale of spectrum previously allocated to analogue terrestrial TV will bring money into the treasury, I do not believe that the future sacrifice is justified. There clearly needs to be a debate regarding how much of the existing analogue spectrum is made available for free-to-view HD content; however I believe the starting point should assume that *some* content should be made available to all in the future. I am sure that Ofcom do not wish to create social

division where only those people able to afford subscription-based services are able to take advantage of future hardware, or indeed access HD content funded by the license fee of all citizens. Lastly, I would emphasise again the danger of making a decision that will affect a significant portion of our population for decades based on low initial demand. HD TV is not only the latest in a string of developments such as colour, nicam, teletext, etc. – it will also inevitably become the minimum standard to which vendors produce.