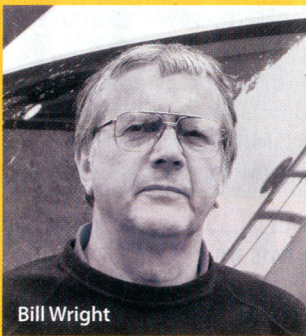


Pro Talk

Why have temporary terrestrial HD transmissions? asks Bill Wright

Pending completion of digital switchover, five of the UK's main TV transmitters are broadcasting a temporary terrestrial HD



Bill Wright

multiplex. We ordinary mortals can only imagine the political and broadcast industry shenanigans behind these short-lived, low-powered transmissions – suffice it to say that common sense and the convenience of those at the receiving end don't seem to have been considered.

In my manor the temporary transmission from Emley Moor is on channel 39. Until last December we were told that

because this would clash with mux 1 from Crosspool (Sheffield) the transmissions will be restricted to northerly directions, but then we were told that they wouldn't, so Crosspool mux 1 would have to move. So in March it migrated from ch39 to ch63. Then came a sudden announcement that ch63 would transmit at 10 times the power of the other muxes. I think that the powers-that-be make it up as they go along. The late decision to increase the power was obviously made when the penny finally dropped that a lot of people in Sheffield are still using Group A aerials (which receive ch21-37 only) and might not take kindly to their BBC channels disappearing – especially just before a General Election.

The power increase didn't solve all the problems. Crosspool serves a big area with thousands of communal TV systems, many of which have channelised equipment. All of these systems have needed a visit and many have needed expensive new components. As ch63 had been a good clear frequency it was a favourite for in-house channels such as CCTV and satellite distribution, so further re-jigging has often been required. Crosspool itself won't transmit the HD mux, so I have to tell the people in Sheffield who have to pay for all this, 'It's so that other areas (not Sheffield) can have HD.' Imagine how that goes down. You might say, 'Excellent! All this will be good for trade!' and you'd be right but, taking a broader view, I wonder if the powers-that-be stopped to think of the cost to the national economy of this futile exercise.

Costs borne by the public

As well as the communal systems, by Ofcom's own forecast 64,000 individual re-tunes were needed in Sheffield alone. The hassle of last year's 'National Retune Day' was repeated in Sheffield. These costs, and those of the communal systems, are borne by the public and by landlords and do not show up in the balance sheets of the broadcasters and regulators.

The service areas of the temporary muxes (except Pontop Pike) will be limited by their low power. The scenario in which Joe Public shells out for a better aerial just to receive DTT HD for a year, when he could have Freesat or Sky for less money, is an Ofcom and hungry-rigger fantasy. Remember the mass apathy 10 years ago when Channel Five needed a new aerial in some areas?

There's also the problem for communal system operators of how to deal with the temporary mux without converting to a seven-mux system. I know some people are retuning the analogue Channel Five filter or amplifier to the HD mux channel, and telling residents that if they want Five they should buy a Freeview box. Another option is to do nothing and tell HD-hungry residents that the short lifespan of the mux doesn't warrant the conversion cost, so they'd best get Freesat.

Knock-on problems caused by the temporary Crosspool mux include a service area reduction at the Blackburn (Rotherham) and Conisbrough relays, due to co-channel interference. Installers everywhere will be finding similar problems.

All this hassle is to make possible a mux with a short life expectancy that few will want to bother with anyway, as HD fans already have Sky or Freesat. Apart from the hidden costs borne by the public, the transmission costs can't be cheap; I wonder how they would work out expressed as quids per HD viewer per month.

For more from Bill, see www.paras.org.uk