



## CHINA SHOP

### Payoff

**What is it about Pay TV that drives some people into a frenzy?**

Reading a recent selection of exhortations to Canberra bureaucrats and politicians to get moving and start cabling, you could be forgiven for getting the impression that the country will be returned to some kind of pre-industrial state unless we take on Pay.

Opponents of Pay are given the sort of kindly smile reserved for the aged, the terminally bewildered or a sickly pet dog. Yes, sir, the bold spirits who will take us into the 21st century with a hand-held golf game in one hand and a Pay TV channel selector in the other are large-screen types with a clear eye on the future and they don't need narky negative thinkers with the vision of a slug. No sir.

As my old headmaster used to say at the end of year speech night, "Boys, if you aim for the stars you might hit the treetops, if you wish to aim for the tree tops you'll probably hit the ground". He said it every year, mind you, and I always wondered what effect it had on the scrubbed faces below him. Now I know. They went off and became Pay TV promoters.

The federal government is currently considering how Pay TV is to be introduced into this country and, more importantly, who should run it. Whether we should have it at all is a

question that is no longer asked except by the abovementioned, terminally bewildered etc.

Apart from the general concerns as to who runs Pay TV my reservations are much more basic. For a start there will be nothing to watch. How do I know this? By looking at the current offerings of the TV networks. Program making is expensive and the networks' budgets already seem to be stretched as tight as a programmer's post-lunch paunch. If there is money around for additional production then I bet I'm not the first to ask where it is. After all, audiences actually like Australian shows if they are done well. They rate well and we would have more if there was the money and talent to produce them.

Television is a competitive industry, fiercely competitive if we are to believe the hype of the ratings wars. So if one of the networks did have some quality product, there is more than a good chance we'd be seeing it. How else can we explain the decision of one network, in despair at being constantly thrashed by the Channel Nine news, to bring back that creaky comedy series *M.A.S.H.* in the early evening? Now, hey, *M.A.S.H.* was a fine series and maybe it still is, but does this mean that no one has had another good comedy idea for 20 years?

In fact, *M.A.S.H.* is probably a good example of the things we will get on Pay TV. Along with *Gilligan's Island*, *Leave it to Beaver*, *Bonanza*, and whatever else is in the box holding the door open at TV headquarters. We are also told that sport will be a big winner. But hold on a minute. You mean there are sporting events out there of wide general interest that the current networks aren't showing? Never.

My guess is that the Gulargambone Cup and the Kangaroo Valley Harriers will get their big chance at TV on Pay but it's hard to see what else could be put on that's not already being shown. As the curling events at the last Winter Olympics showed, there are some sports that just don't seem to suit a TV audience. Nor, judg-

ing from the empty stands, a live audience either.

So what else can we look forward to after we've toasted the success of Southern Belle in the last on the card from the Bateman's Bay Paceway? Perhaps an old movie. Yes, but we can get plenty of those from the video stores as it is. Okay, politics then. What about a few hours of live broadcasts from the NSW Upper House, with a prize to anyone who can stay awake long enough to understand what's going on? You see the problem.

I suppose I should stop this negative carping, tie up my shoelaces, straighten my tie and accept the fact that pay TV is one of those things that we just have to have if we are to be taken seriously in the brave new world of narrowcasting that is about to descend.

No longer will we have to content ourselves with a mere four channels. We can receive 20 or 30 or, good heavens, 50 if we choose. What will be on these channels if my guess is right are some very golden days of film and TV, as well as some rather obscure sporting contests. Mind you, that still leaves quite a few channels to fill up. Which leaves the way open for a host of financial, weather, fashion and even shopping channels to crowd into the lounge room.

Sadly, this probably yokes us ever more firmly to the tyranny of choice. It's like trying to order a simple cup of tea in the United States. It's difficult. First you have to decide on a range of tedious options such as white/black/herbal/caffeine/imported/perfumed/etc.

Already I fear we are going slowly potty under an avalanche of rainfall figures, gold prices, TV ratings and royal dress designs, not to mention cricket statistics. What can we do? Read a book? Yes, but what about the large pile of magazines I've got to get through? Sigh. I feel thoroughly narrowcasted.

PHILIP CLARK presents *The Radio Quiz* on Sydney ABC Radio 2BL.