

## EXTRA! EXTRA! MORE BROADCAST FEATURES FOR YOU!

Lately there's been a lot of discussion about the huge expense of converting all our over-the-air television stations from NTSC to ATSC, and who's going to pay for it, and how.

Sorry, I don't know, either. But for the last little while I've been ruminating about all those little extra add-ons that television broadcasters are already expected to provide. I guess they fall in to two categories: those that are useful (to someone) and those that really are just a waste of time. What they all seem to have in common is added expense for the broadcaster, and no visible means of support. I'm not talking about colour TV and BTSC stereo, which were certainly added costs, but were for the benefit of all viewers, and not just a minority.

The first one to come along was probably closed captioning for the hearing impaired: a nice little enhancement that could be added to programs in the vertical interval, and before you know it, it became all but mandatory for all programs. Woe betide the broadcaster that has some sort of technical problem and doesn't get those captions to air! If you have ever wondered if anyone's paying attention to these details, try omitting them and watch the switchboard light up! The captioning police are out there.

Then of course we have so-called descriptive video, which isn't video at all, but a verbal description on the SAP channel of what's happening on the screen, for the vision-impaired. In the blink of an eye (sorry, no pun intended), that seemed to become mandatory, too, and you'd better have a jolly good reason for screwing up that feed.

Of course, thanks to Professor Tim Collings at our own Simon Fraser University, aided and abetted by the usual suspects, we now have mandatory program classifications, both open and closed, with the V-chip and the AGVOT (Action Group on Violence on Television) standards. Not only are the French and English Canadian standards different from each other, but they aren't directly compatible with the US standards either, so imported programs need to have the original classification (mostly) overwritten, and the Canadian standard punched in overtop.

Now each of these, taken alone, is probably not going to break the bank. But it's starting to look like the death of a thousand cuts. And while these are all laudable efforts, the responsibility and cost of providing them always seems to land on the broadcast operator.

Well at least the foregoing are (hopefully) useful for *someone*. We're not so sure about the following...

With the advent of HD television, we have a couple of new ones: the lords of Dolby, who somehow seem to have become the self-appointed standards bearers of the audio portion of HDTV, have decreed that television stations should send metadata to help “intelligent” HDTV receivers with setting their audio level controls. First of all, this whole metadata concept, as we have discussed in this column in previous issues, is in the writer’s view hopelessly optimistic and doomed to failure in the real world. But over and above all that, there is probably not a broadcaster in all of North America (or the World?) who is configuring metadata for each program segment, in the way that Dolby hopes and expects them to: the metadata is virtually always set to some arbitrary level by the broadcaster, and left there forever. Not what Dolby had in mind. Quick, now: hands up if you are resetting your metadata bits differently for each program segment! (I didn’t think so...)

And now it comes out that HDTV has its own new closed captioning standards, over and above the SD captioning. According to a digital broadcast standards expert at a recent seminar put on here in Vancouver, by Applied Electronics and Tektronix (and by the way, a big thank-you to Applied and Tektronix!), the HD captioning standard has probably **NEVER** actually been used by **ANYONE** in the real world. It’s complicated, and it’s cumbersome, and whoever is doing the captioning is already required to provide the old SD closed captions anyhow. There’s just no reason to do the whole thing over again to the HD standard.

So somewhere, someone is probably working on a rule to require it!