

Satellites in low orbit

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commonplace as they are today. By the time the Iridium constellation was actually being deployed, the ground beneath it harboured far more terrestrial networks than before.

In August 1999, Iridium filed for Chapter 11 bankruptcy protection in the US, less than a year after it began providing services. In mid-March 2000, the company announced that it would be terminating service at 11.59pm EST on March 17. Motorola, one of the major investors in the company, said it would maintain the system for a limited period to allow customers in remote locations to obtain alternative communications.

On 20 March, a group of investors headed by hotJump!, a “privately held content network”, announced plans to acquire Iridium. In mid-April, a representative of one of Iridium’s twelve “gateway” companies told Reuters that a rescue package was still being discussed. Motorola, meanwhile, has continued working to facilitate the transfer of customers to alternative providers (the Iridium handsets will not work with other satellite systems).

LEO constellations are, on paper, an excellent idea. They will certainly be a part of our communications infrastructure in the future. At the moment, they would seem

to be an idea that is still just slightly ahead of their time. With so many other avenues of instant communications available to consumers, LEO constellations will need to offer something very unique in terms of price, convenience or service before they will seriously compete with other infrastructures.

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From The Archives

The Future of the SBS

Seven months after announcing, as part of its National Agenda for a Multicultural Australia, that it would introduce legislation to establish the Special Broadcasting Service as an independent corporation with its own charter, the government released in February a discussion paper on the issues arising from this proposal.

The paper summarises the views which have been expressed in the past on the key issues, notably by the Connor Committee of Review of the SBS (1983) and the 1988 and 1989 discussion papers of the Review of National Broadcasting Policy, and while it raises questions, provides no conclusions of its own.

The paper was intended to form the basis of Department of

Transport and Communications consultations with the SBS, the ABC and “other interested groups”, including the Federation of Ethnic Communities Councils and other community interest groups.

Consultations have taken place with ethnic and consumer groups and a preliminary discussion with ABC staff but not, so far, with the SBS. Nothing now seems likely to occur for some time, at least until a new government has settled in.

The direction which might be taken after the election on the SBS question in the event of a change of government is unclear. The Coalition Communications policy published in the December issue of Update contains no specific policies on matters like corporatising SBS, or on the central issue of the extent to which it might be obliged to rely on sponsorship or advertising as sources of funds. Opposition

spokesman, Senator Richard Alston, has indicated support for these sources in discussions with SBS, and the Coalition is in favour of “limited” advertising on the ABC.

Although SBS has had the power to take limited sponsorship (for sport only) for some time, the broadcaster’s first major initiative is Cathay Pacific sponsorship of the 1990 World Cup, involving 30-second mentions during the coverage as well as message “crawls” along the bottom of the screen.

The amount involved is around \$300,000 including contra deals – a drop in the ocean compared to SBS’s overall needs and only a fraction of the total cost of mounting the Cup, which SBS sources suggest is around \$2m.

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