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Editor

How are people feeling?

Attending conferences and forums is one of the best ways to get a real indication of how people in the industry are really feeling on certain topics. As such, the CASBAA Satellite Industry Forum (SIF) 2017, which took place on 22nd May, was an excellent opportunity for those seeking to learn more about the Asian market.

We've all been hearing a lot about the threat of OTT to traditional broadcasters, but those active in the sector don't see it as the harbinger of doom we're hearing about. "Standard viewing is remarkably resilient, dropping by around only two percent each year, despite OTT disruption for the best part of 10 years," commented Andrew Jordan, Executive Director and CEO, AsiaSat. Deepak Mathur, Executive VP, Global Sales, SES Video, agreed: "We're not seeing the drop off in linear TV consumption in developed markets even when there's great broadband access, they're both being consumed at the same time. There's going to be a long-term transition rather than a complete death of TV."

With key flight routes in the Asia-Pacific, mobility was always going to be an important topic for discussion. An increasing amount of capacity designed for mobility applications is coming online as demand for in-flight and maritime connectivity booms. "We expect terrific growth in the aviation business, and we see the maritime business changing, despite it being a traditional business that adapts to change slower. Combining technologies and getting the best out of the data that's transmitted is becoming more and more important," said Philip Balaam, Chief Strategy & Marketing Officer, Inmarsat.

However, it's important not to just keep adding more and more capacity without considering the markets in question, according to PJ Beylier, CEO, SpeedCast: "It doesn't make sense to me that all these satellite operators are putting huge amounts of identical capacity over the same areas – it's mad!" Patrick Carroll, Regional President, APAC, Gogo, also held rigorous beliefs about capacity: "Not all areas of the Asia-Pacific need the same amount of capacity, it's a major social differentiator. China and India both want higher levels of connectivity. Do we require these higher data rates? In time, maybe in 5-10 years, but not today."

Antenna technology was highlighted as a key limiting factor to delivering inflight connectivity. "One factor about aero that's really important is that we have these very small disadvantaged terminals on the antenna on the aircraft. There's a real mismatch between cost and expectation, and very few people are willing to pay more for service," stated David Bruner, VP, Global Sales & Marketing, Panasonic.

There was a lot of controversy around electronically steerable antennas (ESAs) this year. Pricing and affordability is key to widespread uptake, but many are dubious that they will ever be affordable en masse. Leslie Klein, President & CEO of C-COM Satellite Systems Inc, expects a trickledown effect of ESAs to the wider market over time: "Phased arrays are inherently expensive; they're going to enter the premium market first and work their way down through aviation, maritime, and finally the consumer or ground market. For them to really take off, they've got to fall to less than US\$1,000."

Market readiness was another aspect under dispute. Erwin Hudson, VP of Telesat LEO, Telesat Canada, stated: "Telesat LEO has based its business plan on parabolic antennas; we don't expect ESAs to be ready in the next couple of years. ESAs don't operate as well when they're aligned in certain directions, so parabolic antennas still make a lot of sense for many applications."

The satellite manufacturer panel had a great deal to say on future technologies, with mixed constellations, flexibility, and future-proofing integral to their plans. "The prevailing topic is flexibility. We've got to get the costs down low enough to compete with terrestrial and 5G in the future. As well as ensuring the satellites last as long as possible, customers also want to update content on a frequent basis," said Dawn Harms, VP, Global Sales & Marketing at Boeing Satellite Systems International, Inc. Thomas Choi, CEO at ABS, agrees: "In the future, our competition isn't going to be other satellite companies, it's going to be 5G. The future is software definable satellites, which are going to enable capacity to be moved and changed to where it's needed. It's right around the corner." ■

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