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Media

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Community TV for digital program guide

Sally Jackson
Television

COMMUNITY TV stations will be included in the Freeview electronic program guide when they go digital, putting them on an equal footing with the other free-to-air networks, which is a huge boost for the often-overlooked sector.

Their inclusion will also give Freeview an extra free channel to promote, a useful selling point given research shows one of the biggest digital drawcards for viewers is having more to watch. Industry group the Australian Community Television Alliance said pay-TV network Foxtel had ignored a request to be included on its EPG.

"ACTA received a letter from Freeview saying the directors voted unanimously to include community TV in the proprietary EPG," said ACTA secretary Laurie Patton, who also heads Sydney's community TV station, TVS.

"The community channels have offered this to Foxtel but, to date, Foxtel has not taken up the offer."

Freeview is the marketing arm for the free-to-air networks' digital channels.

Its EPG is expected to be available by year's end.

Hopes are rising in the community TV sector that May's federal budget will at last see funds allocated to help the stations go digital, and a timetable

set. With the other networks already simulcasting, they alone remain marooned on the analog signal, while more and more of their viewers switch to digital technology.

People in the sector point to comments made by federal Communications Minister Stephen Conroy at this month's press conference to launch the Government's campaign to get Australia ready for digital TV.

'We're not going to leave them behind'

Stephen Conroy, Communications Minister

Asked about community stations, Senator Conroy replied: "We don't want them to close because of a lack of willingness to transition them into the digital world. We're not going to leave them behind."

The sector was encouraged by the support Senator Conroy had shown, Mr Patton said.

"He certainly understands the value of community TV in terms of improving the amount of local content produced and increasing the diversity of programming," he said.

"The community TV sector has asked the Government to provide us with the ability to simulcast in both analog and digital, as the other channels are doing, and for financial support during the simulcast period, sim-

ilar to the way they have provided support to the ABC, SBS and regional broadcasters."

ACTA has made it clear it does not want the so-called "hot swap" option, in which the stations would be switched from analog to digital without a simulcast period.

"A hot swap would be sudden death," Mr Patton said.

"It would disenfranchise all the people already watching the channels."

Community TV rune-readers believe Senator Conroy's use of the word "transition" at the press conference indicated he favoured a simulcast period.

Mr Patton said going digital would dramatically increase the audience for community TV, which has a cumulative monthly reach of about 3.5 million viewers in Sydney, Melbourne, Brisbane and Adelaide.

"It really (would be) a coming of age for community TV," he said.

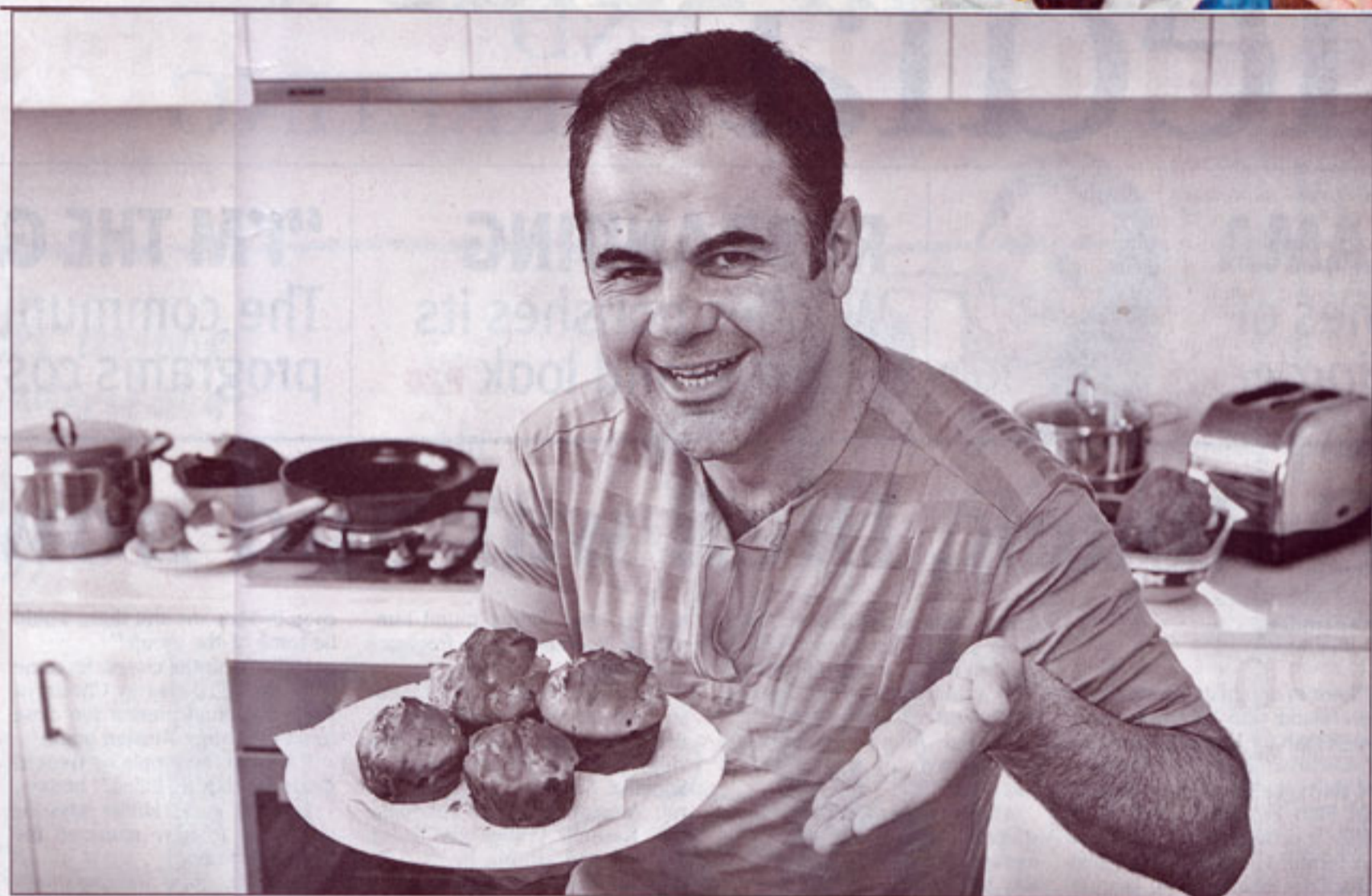
"(With a) more powerful transmitter and access to an EPG we would ... confidently expect our audience to at least double in a fairly short period of time."

Perth's new community TV station, West TV, said it aimed to start broadcasting in October.

It was given a two-year trial licence by the Australian Communications and Media Authority following last year's collapse of former licence-holder Access 31.

"I'M THE GAY, GREEK KERRI-ANNE"

The community TV cook whose programs cost \$200/episode **P28**



Looking for a break: Yianni Zinonos films his community TV show in his kitchen in Sydney largely at his own expense

Picture: Bob Finlayson

Help for shows on a shoestring

Sally Jackson

MAKING programs on the memory of what an oily rag once smelt like is part of community TV tradition, along with having to endlessly explain to people how to find your channel on their TV set.

Like many other community TV producers, Yianni Zinonos not only spends many of his Sundays taping his cooking show, *Yianni's City Life*, but also a lot of his own money, to the tune of a couple of hundred dollars an episode. And that's not all.

"I also shop, I wash the dishes, I have to look after people. And I'm a celebrity," says Zinonos, who describes himself as the "gay, Greek Kerri-Anne Kennerley".

"But I get more out of it than I put into it. I get recognised all

the time. And community TV is a fabulous platform to promote community organisations. People want to support community."

While help with the dishes is not in sight, there is a chance of some assistance with fundraising, after Sydney community station Television Sydney announced it was setting up a foundation to support local producers.

TVS provides free airtime to not-for-profit community groups but doesn't fund production.

The TVS Foundation will seek tax-deductible donations from viewers as well as "socially engaged" companies and individuals, much like the US Public Broadcasting Service, says TVS chief executive Laurie Patton.

Money raised will subsidise the creation of locally made programs from Sydney's communities,

helping with equipment hire, training and in some cases mentors. "Every week we take calls from community groups and individuals with really great ideas but, alas, no money," Patton says.

"We see ourselves as a great place for people to try new ideas. But until we can generate more funds we are sadly limited in what we can achieve."

Zinonos, whose day job is in fashion, keeps costs to a minimum by taping his program at home, in Sydney's Kingsford, and using free trainee staff.

Like many, Zinonos got his start on community TV with a segment on stalwart Joy Hruby's long-running variety show, *Joy's World*. "I was doing anything from political interviews to tarot readings ... and whenever guests wouldn't turn up I'd do a cooking

segment as an emergency," he says.

When TVS took over the running of the channel in 2004 it offered him his own cooking program. *Yianni's City Life* is now in its fourth year.

Zinonos says he averages about 50,000 viewers in Sydney, 35,000 in Melbourne and some in Brisbane and Adelaide.

However, like many, he dreams of making the Rove McManus-like leap from cult community TV darling to mainstream media star.

"Seven, Nine, Ten, SBS, Foxtel, Freehand (Productions) and Beyond (International) all know who I am. But they all keep you dangling," he says. "It would be great if they approached me. But I don't have to go to commercial TV. I love what I do."