

Swiss TV by satellite

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Following recent correspondence George went to the top to get the definitive answers. Probably not the answer wanted but this is how it is.

In the last few months, several members have raised questions about the possibility of receiving Swiss Television in Britain by satellite. Although not strictly a railway matter, enough people seem to be interested to answer the question in the magazine. So I went to the Swiss Ministry of Telecommunications, to get it straight from the horse's mouth, so to say.

I will not bother you with the several dozen pages of legal mumbo - jumbo, but will only give you the essentials. All material produced by painters, composers, performing artists, writers and the like, is protected by copyright. As a matter of interest so are the texts and photographs I produce as a journalist. Every medium distributing the material to the public must pay a fee to the owner of the copyright - unless he/she waives it specifically for a medium, as I and indeed all other contributors to *Swiss Express* have done.

One of the criteria the fee depends on is the size of the possible audience. Swiss Television is normally distributed by terrestrial transmission and cable. This limits possible distribution to about eight million people, which is the basis on which Swiss Television pay their copyright millions. The viewers pay their individual part with their licence fee. In Switzerland, we pay 270 francs a year for the TV-licence and 162 francs for the radio-licence. Terrestrial transmission to an acceptable standard in a mountainous country like Switzerland requires many antennas and a lot of maintenance. Also, in order to avoid interference, every antenna must be tuned to a different frequency. The liberalisation of broadcasting has meant that a lot of frequencies had to be vacated for use by private broadcasters. Cable transmission is not the answer, as it is only financially viable in densely populated areas like cities, of which, as you all know, there are not many in Switzerland. So the only other possibility is digital transmission by way of satellite. The problem is, that the so-called "footprint" of a satellite, the area that can receive its signals, is huge. It reaches between 2 - 300 million potential viewers. The copyright payments would cost Swiss Television several times as much as they have to pay now for their eight million viewers.

The solution is scrambling the signal. Viewers in Switzerland can get a card with a decoder-chip for a one time handling fee of 50 francs, as they live in an area already covered for copyright purposes. In order to allow Swiss citizens in neighbouring countries to view their national channel, a special arrangement was made. It is possible for them to apply for a decoder-chip, but, as their copyright is not covered, they have to pay an additional annual fee of 120 francs. Each application is decided upon individually. Viewers in Switzerland applying for the chip-card must be existing registered licence-fee payers and sign a declaration that they understand they will be prosecuted if the card is used by anybody else, if they give it to anybody else or copy it. After all, it is stealing; I also do not appreciate my text and pictures being used by somebody without proper authorisation and payment. And remember, the technology to find out is there: the chip inside any mobile phone can be identified and located to within a few metres...!

Large countries like Germany, which already pay for almost 100 million viewers by terrestrial distribution, hardly have to pay any more for the 300 million viewers by satellite - due to a sliding scale of charges - so they do not need to limit viewing by scrambling. In due course, when everybody will be using satellite only, this will have to be changed so a universally acceptable solution can be reached. But as with everything involving international law, this is ten years off - sorry!