Transponder shifting for Satcom I

HBO and MSN trade time slots on transponder 22, paving way for HBO's 24-hour expansion

Transponder juggling figures prominently in HBO's expansion of its schedule to 24 hours on weekends. That programming shift will take place the weekend of Sept. 4, with HBO running from sign-on at 5 p.m. on Friday through sign-off at 2 a.m. the following Monday. HBO had previously announced plans to expand to a full 24-hour schedule beginning in January.

Facilitating the move is a swap of transponder time between HBO and Modern Satellite Network. The two services share time on transponder 22 of RCA's Satcom I bird (Cable Net 1)—MSN had the 8 a.m. to 1 p.m. slot on Saturdays and Sundays, and a noon to 5 p.m. block weekdays. (MSN recently subleased the bulk of the latter, a 1 p.m. to 5 p.m. slot, to Hearst/ABC Video Services for its planned Beta women's service.)

Under the agreement announced last week, MSN will turn over its weekend hours to HBO, and get the 10 a.m. to noon period on weekdays.

Neither party would discuss the monetary consideration involved. However, given the value of the times involved to each service, the deal would probably require payment of some consideration by HBO.

HBO president Jim Heyworth called the weekend expansion "the logical next step in our move to 24-hour programming," explaining that "the largest daytime audience is available on weekends." He added that the shift would provide "an early bonus" to subscribers, in advance of the fuller January expansion.

MSN found a lot to crow about in making the move as well. The network's director, Jay Campbell, said the additional 10 hours during the week "would put the network in a stronger position to program for its primary audience" and to "complement" the Beta package. (MSN had said back when it made its deal with Hearst/ABC that its intention for the weekday hour it kept was to produce programming for women as well). "This swap..." said Campbell, "permits us to concentrate our resources and talents on programming to one audience segment."

The seven-day, 24-hour schedule HBO plans in January won't affect MSN. In the first place, MSN is a direct lessee with RCA for its transponder time—and transponder 22 is the one HBO has been using for its delayed West Coast feed.

This latest HBO move follows Showtime's switching to 24 hours on July 4 (Showtime had started 24-hour weekends last January). The third major pay movie service—the Movie Channel—has long been a 24-hour service.