

Weather Data Commercialisation and the International Association of Broadcast Meteorology

Historically, weather services within Europe have been provided by National Meteorological Services (NMS's) agencies funded by the taxpayer who provided weather forecasts at little or no charge to the general public, through the medium of the national broadcasting services. In the last decade or more, these NMS's have come under increasing pressure from their governments to increase the (non-tax) revenue they receive for the provision of weather services. Side by side with this development has been the growth in Europe of a substantial private weather industry for the provision of forecasts to specialised users, including broadcasters. This private weather industry uses as its source weather information which has been collected, at the taxpayers expense, by the NMS's. The increasing quality and accuracy of weather forecasts from both public and private source has ensured that forecasts are now an extremely marketable product to weather-sensitive businesses. It must be said that much of this increased quality has been because of the development of powerful atmospheric computer models by the NMS's, either individually or through the European Centre for Medium Range Weather Forecasts, a co-operative venture. Yet another element in the development has been the development of EU competition legislation, which gives the freedom to the provider of any service to operate anywhere within the EU. The NMS's have responded to these challenges in two ways:

They have banded together to form ECOMET, an economic interest grouping of European Met Services. This group has attempted to establish a common tariff structure for weather information that will apply right across Europe. ECOMET has also introduced into place regulations which will define the basis for competition between the private and public sides of the weather industry, and also for competition between NMS's, themselves, as each NMS is now allowed to offer forecasts outside its own national boundary.

EUMETSAT, the European weather satellite organisation, controlled by the same NMS's, has recently put in place technology which will allow it to charge broadcasters and others for the use of weather satellite images which were previously available free.

The IABM takes the view that its members are the public face of the weather industry, and have the task of presenting the weather forecast to the citizens of Europe (and beyond). The impact of weather forecasts delivered through the media is heavily influenced by the credibility of the presenter, and our members have worked to establish a credibility for themselves which, in turn, reflects on the credibility of the entire weather industry. We take the view that any restriction of access to weather data to the forecasters and weather presenters will inevitably lead to weather forecasts that are less credible and therefore less credible. This will reflect poorly on our members initially, but in time will lead to less credit being respected being given to the entire weather business, both public and private. The basic position of the IABM is that broadcasters must have a say in the development of policies relating to the supply of weather data.

At a seminar organised in Paris in conjunction with the Festival International de Météo, held on Feb. 27th last, reports which suggested that some NMS's were quoting prices for the supply of data to private weather companies which equalled or exceeded the prices that these same NMS's were quoting for the supply of data plus forecasts to the general public. This would be an abuse of a dominant market position, if it were proven to be true. Taking this into account, and the above points, the IABM has developed the following policies for the Association:

-) The Association believes that the commercial, revenue generating activities of NMS's should be completely separate from the public service activities of these same organisations, and it should be clearly established that these commercial activities do not benefit from any hidden cross-subsidisation in the form of free or preferential access to weather data.
-) The Association wishes that an arrangement be established whereby the Association may, regularly and at various intervals, make representations to the Council of ECOMET on matters concerning the supply of weather data.
-) The Association wishes that an arrangement be established whereby the Association may, regularly and at various intervals, make representations to the Council of EUMETSAT on matters concerning the supply of weather data.

The Association would be happy to co-operate with the EBU or with any other relevant organisation in the implementation of these policies. It must be stressed that the members of the Association do not object to charges for weather information per se, but do object to the unilateral imposition of a tariff structure, by what is in effect a cartel, on the input from the users of that information. The Association is mindful that the entire weather business is built on the foundation of quality observations, and that European NMS's in particular have built up a network of quality observation sites that are expensive to maintain. The Association recognises that it is in the interests of its members, and of the users of weather information, that this network continue to be maintained and enhanced. The Association will ensure that, where possible, its policies do not conflict with this need to maintain quality observations and quality processing. Indeed, it would like to work with both NMS's and broadcast organisations to ensure that this aspect of the work is duly recognised and appreciated by the citizens of Europe.

