

# Digital TV is worth converter hassle

February 4 2009, By Andrew D. Smith

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Converter boxes. Coupon shortages. Congressional squabbling. Mass confusion. Such hassles raise a fundamental question about the digital TV transition: What will consumers get in return? Quite a lot, actually.

Consumers who receive programs over the air will get the best pictures and sound their TVs can produce the instant they install their converter boxes.

A \$50 converter box will never make a 20-year-old TV produce high-definition pictures and sound, but it will eliminate static, snow, shadows, ghosts and other visual debris.

Many viewers will be shocked to see what great pictures their sets can display.

Another surprise will come when they start to notice the extra channels.

Digital technology will allow TV stations to broadcast several streams of programming within a single spot on the TV dial. Current compression rates comfortably support four streams of standard programming or one HD stream and one SD stream.

Rather than getting a single channel 8, for example, customers may someday choose among channels 8.1, 8.2, 8.3 and 8.4.

Most TV stations have yet to begin multicasting - they've been worried about getting the first digital signal working and saving money in a tight

economy - but enough stations have started experimenting to provide some idea of the possibilities.

Some PBS stations, for example, have supplemented their main programming stream with a second feed devoted entirely to children's programming, a third devoted to documentaries and news, and a fourth dedicated to drama and comedy.

Elsewhere, companies are assembling content to sell broadcasters ready-made programming streams with different focuses: sports, music, news, foreign-language programming and others.

"Eventually, multicasting could provide people who get TV over the air with a level of variety that compares with a very basic cable package - but without the monthly payment," said Graham Jones, director of communications engineering at the National Association of Broadcasters.

Even with all these channels packed in, digital television broadcasts consume far less space in the airwaves than their older analog counterparts. The government has thus allocated the extra space for other uses.

Some of the space will go to emergency service organizations, which will use it to improve interagency communication and coordination.

The government sold the rest of the extra space - for more than \$19 billion - to telecom companies including AT&T and Verizon Wireless.

Neither company will say what it plans to do with the space, but observers can sum up their expectations in one word: data.

Cellular carriers expect usage of smartphones and mobile Internet to

explode over the next few years and become as common as wireless calls are today.

They also expect that most laptops - along with a fair percentage of GPS units, portable video game players, electronic readers and other devices - will soon come with cellular cards that keep them permanently connected to the Web.

All those devices sending all that information back and forth will require a lot of room on the airwaves - room the cellular carriers will get from TV stations.

"The spectrum transferred to wireless carriers because of the DTV transition increases their total capacity by 20 to 25 percent," said Joe Farren, a spokesman for the CTIA, the wireless industry's main trade group.

"That extra space will let wireless devices show live TV, download movies and do all the things that we can do now on our home computers."

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