Standing vigil for analog TV

March 22 2006

Run for the hills, Feb. 17, 2009, is the day of the apocalypse. This is the day that will affect almost every American household, as it's the drop-dead date for analog television to go the way of the dodo bird. This threat has been hanging over the broadcast industry for about 10 years now and has been pushed back in the past, but this time President Bush officially signed legislation calling for this "hard date" for the official cutoff.

How will all of this happen? How does the industry work with government policy makers to make this transition as smooth and trouble free as possible? That is what many industry executives have been pondering.

"There's nothing as big as having a hard date for the Digital Television transition," said Federal Communications Commission Commissioner

Jonathan Adelstein during last week's Consumer Electronics Association's annual Entertainment Technology summit. "The DTV transition will affect just about everyone in this country, and most people do not understand what's going on."

In less than three years more than 80 million analog television sets will go dark. "Unless we educate the public, there's going to be a tsunami of outrage. The average American needs to know such basic information as 'what is DTV?' 'How do I get it?' The industry needs to develop a simple and coherent message," added Adelstein.

According to Sean Wargo, director and industry analyst with the Consumer Electronics Association, only 20 percent of the American public is aware that this major change is coming. But in a strange twist of the numbers game, consumers are taking to digital-television technology in droves.

"This is the first year where digital television will surpass the sales of analog television sets," Wargo said. "Sixty-two percent of all televisions sold this year will be some form of digital television, and will account for 48.2 million sets shipped," he continued.

So are all of these consumers purchasing new televisions because they just look amazing, without realizing that analog is going away?

One area that was glossed over in Adelstein's keynote was whether poor people will be left behind in this round of upgrades.

Alan McCollough, chairman of the board, Circuit City Stores Inc., believes that Digital Television will be like the DVD revolution, "When DVDs (hardware) first came out, it cost $600 to purchase now you can buy them for $80."

Consumer electronic manufacturers are trying to address this issue more directly.

"LG Electronics and other manufacturers are working together to build a $50 set top box that will be compatible with analog television sets," said John Taylor, vice president, public affairs and communications, LG Electronics USA Inc.

To further help with the transition, Adelstein did say that the government will be providing some subsidies for low-income families.

During the show, CEA announced a deal between AT&T, Bellsouth, Verizon and the CEA to create a series of standards for the rollout of new IPTV (Internet Protocol Television) video networks. The standards hope to establish nationwide compatibility so that consumer electronic manufacturers can build set-top boxes that will be compatible with all the various IPTV services that are slated to launch later this year and next. Other principles include open standards, "reasonable" licensing fees, a testing and certification process and a more uniformed approach to terms of services.

With so many different device makers coming to market next year, compatibility would have become a major issue, so the CEA sought to nip this in the bud by working out this agreement. It's a good first step; we'll see how all of this plays out over the next year or so.

All of this is important as IPTV will become a big part of the future of television and will hopefully provide true choice for consumers. The numbers rolled out at the show suggests that, despite the high costs, consumer adoption of new digital television sets has far surpassed expectations.

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