

Position Paper for DTV Conversion Panel: Flow Conference 2008  
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On August 18, 2008, FCC chairman Kevin Martin announced that five FCC Commissioners and “other Commission staff” will embark on a nationwide outreach effort to educate consumers leading up to the DTV conversion on February 19, 2009. This program, which features an ambitious plan to visit 81 cities, offers the opportunity to engage a variety of publics in critical media issues. However, these publics and the depth and scope of the message being offered to them appear limited by poor event planning strategies and by the complicated nature of information pertaining to DTV conversion.

The official website for the FCC’s “DTV Consumer Education Nationwide Tour” identifies six groups designated as most vulnerable in the transition to DTV: seniors, people living in tribal and rural areas, people with disabilities, individuals with low-incomes, minorities, and non-English speakers. The first two visits by the FCC featured presentations made at local Alaskan consumer-electronic retailers, a senior center, and a public library. While it is unclear what the turn-out was like at these events, it is clear that little effort has been made thus far to offer in-person information services via these events to rural areas and non-English speakers. Furthermore, the inclusion of two major retailers as sites for presentations combined with information sessions being held on weekday mornings offers very little room for optimism as to the efficacy of the initiative.

According to the FCC, markets were identified for outreach based on statistical models and demographic analysis. Only those cities with 100,000 households or at least 15% of households relying solely on over-the-air broadcast signals were included in the effort. Events are to be supplemented by an increase in PSAs on radio and television. PSAs, now running on cable and network television in most markets attempt to offer basic information about the switch to DTV. For more information about the conversion, consumers are directed towards the FCC’s website. However, nowhere on any of the FCC’s information web pages is there an opportunity to view information in a language other than English; nowhere is there information for disabled consumers; nowhere is there information geared towards senior citizens.

The ironic nature of the lack of efficient communication strategies being deployed by the Federal Communications Commission notwithstanding, it is difficult to imagine that this outreach program will serve as anything other than a public relations outreach effort. While the FCC has offered any number of tools to aid in the conversion efforts on their website in their “Outreach Toolkit,” these tools fail to solve the inherent problem of reaching those demographics identified above. While banner ads and countdown clocks for websites might effectively reach a small sampling of the desired population, and while YouTube tutorials may reach a few more, the FCC has failed to adequately identify strategies to reach those consumers needing the pertinent information.

As citizen-scholars, we are afforded the opportunity to right some of these bureaucratic errors through our own outreach programs. Properly located and scheduled outreach

events can serve the public good by offering information on media technology and the switch to DTV signals. Locating these events at neighborhood community centers in the appropriate language would go a long way towards engaging key demographics. Consumers, once offered the basic answers on the switch may in fact be interested in the minutia of HDTV vs. SDTV, or the rules governing broadcast vs. cable pertaining to the DTV conversion. In fact, these events hold the potential to create grass-roots awareness of the purpose of the DTV switch; information about multicasting could be of some value. Consumers could be offered access to information about the auctioning off of the airwaves after the conversion to wireless and internet/media conglomerates.

While the opportunity exists for promoting wider media literacy, it is evident from the early stages of the FCC's outreach plan that governmental outreach is simply not effective enough in accomplishing this goal. Citizens not already engaged in the information cycle relating to this subject will undoubtedly be left with brass-tacks knowledge needed to make the television operate post-transition and little else.