

## Panel: The DTV Conversion

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Next February, millions of people will likely be enrolled in an unwanted crash course in media literacy. As usual, we can anticipate that those whose course will be the "crashiest"—i.e. those whose televisions stop working and they either don't know why or can't do anything about it—will be society's most vulnerable: those with the fewest resources and opportunities to discover and pursue solutions such as digital tuners, converter boxes, FCC coupons, etc.

But even if the digital transition goes relatively smoothly for most people (and the September test run in Wilmington, N.C. went, for many, far from smoothly), it provides a great opportunity to observe *and* intervene in "vernacular" media policy, i.e. the way that "official" policy is translated into everyday life. As the transition will inevitably reveal, official policy can only be fully understood in relation to the vernacular micropolicies that respond to, implement, translate, or resist such policy. To give an exaggerated example, "No TV until your homework is done" is media policy too, and is just as interesting and revealing of the social and political role of media as the more visible policy battles that play out within governments and industries. Observing how viewers respond to the digital transition will not only deepen our understanding of how we experience the world in and through television, but how we take federal policy and translate it into our own media knowledges and practices.

For example, many viewers will be forced to subtly reimagine the world that has been shaped by broadcasting, redefining the spatial dimensions of their locality. Let's say you receive watchable analog signals and, as instructed, purchase a converter box to receive digital signals. Those digital signals are subject to different limitations of geography and topography, meaning that you may lose your over-the-air television anyway. In other words, your perception of your "local community" will have to be recalibrated by the new geographies of digital broadcasting and a signal footprint that formerly included but now excludes you from the community of service. Given that cable and satellite customers won't have this problem, this increased awareness of locality will be disproportionately concentrated among more socially marginalized viewers. Put another way, the experience of encountering your own localness will be, in some sense, something you can buy your way out of.

In addition to the spatial dimensions of locality, some viewers will confront new cultural dimensions of locality as well. With Mexico and Canada remaining largely analog until 2011, viewers on the borders who are used to receiving signals from two countries—and those stations that are used to selling audiences on both sides of the border to advertisers—will find that the local community as newly defined by official policy now excludes bi-national viewing

communities. (Border stations are asking for permission to continue broadcasting in analog, so we'll see how this plays out). Similarly, most low-powered TV (LPTV) stations will not be switching to digital in 2009, so viewers without an analog pass-through on their converter will lose those signals. In other words, those most local of local stations will, for many people, disappear from the local community. And many localities are struggling with the question of how to convert prison televisions to digital; the predictable mocking of such concerns reveals tensions in vernacular media policy as it relates to definitions of cultural citizenship.

Then there is the inevitable attempt to exploit official policy for profit. The FCC specifies that converters purchased using FCC coupons may not be returned for store credit. They don't want consumers to use their coupons on unneeded converter boxes, then return them and apply the \$80 to something else. But the success of the FCC's policy depends wholly on store personnel knowing *and* caring about it, and thus represents a site of local policy translation over which the feds have no genuine control.

Finally, if the digital transition represents a moment in which viewers will find themselves translating, resisting, or negotiating official policy and its cultural, spatial, and social effects, it also represents an opportunity for media scholars and practitioners to act as "policy translators," helping others adapt official policy to their own situations and needs. Public broadcaster WOSU in Columbus, for example, is asking people to send in their unneeded coupons in order to buy converter boxes for the disadvantaged in the community.

Along those lines, who is the point person for the digital transition in *your* town? As media experts, we are uniquely positioned to step up, make ourselves available to confused viewers, talk to our local papers, and help translate federal policy into workable solutions for our neighbors. If we live into our roles as public intellectuals, some viewers' crash courses next February will be a little less crashy.