

Position Paper for DTV Conversion Roundtable
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The digital TV conversion in the United States could well set the stage for a disaster, and an opportunity. Some 50 million in the U.S. still use over-the-air TV, most of whom are poor, elderly, or don't speak English. Thus, broadcasters and the government are asking millions of people to make the leap to digital who can't afford it or are unable to for one or more of a number of technical or logistical reasons. And where TV for many poorer communities still remains a key source of news and information, we could see many communities lose a source of information, widening the digital and informational divide in the U.S., or worse.

The two agencies tasked with the conversion, the FCC and the NTIA, have no plan and no leadership to address the conversion. Money is being spent, but per capita compared with other digital conversion efforts internationally the amount is laughable. The NAB has promised some \$700 million dollars worth of TV time on PSAs announcing the conversion and encouraging viewers to act, but that amounts to a one-time investment of 1% of the industry's annual profits, and since only 13% of PSAs air in primetime and PSAs comprise just 0.5% of all TV airtime, the effort is, in a word, piddling. Plus, precious little action, comparatively speaking, beyond these token PSAs have been carried through.

The lone DTV conversion test -- in Wilmington, North Carolina -- amounts to a false positive, since 92% of the community doesn't use over-the-air TV, and Wilmington broadcasters left the analog signal on for a month after the shut-off deadline. But the entire U.S. will be asked to go "cold turkey", and a number of analysts and even FCC commissioners have termed the transition in stark terms -- a "train wreck", a "fiasco", a "tsunami", and "the mother of all consumer backlashes".

Whether or not this is all chicken-little alarmism or a legitimate matter of historic proportions still remains to be seen. But if we assume the latter, as evidence suggests, there is also some very real potential here for some positive outcomes. On the media front, broadcasters and the very politics of the media could face a degree of public scrutiny and a level of public interest perhaps unparalleled in American history. That is no small matter: In 2003, in the wake of a controversial media ownership rule rewrite by the FCC, an unparalleled three million people responded, exceeding the previous high for responses of about 5,000. The scale of that response directly fueled political action that ultimately overturned the rewrite.

If the numbers and this assessment are anywhere close to accurate, we could see a scale of public response and outrage *fifteen times larger* than that of the uprising of 2003. Amid the public outrage that could well arise, a rare and extraordinary window of opportunity to improve the policies that affect television, and perhaps all American media, is coming quickly, and concerned citizens and scholars would do well now to prepare to seize of the opportunity. A host of proposals for improving television and the

media, which were long considered off the table at best, or unthinkable at worst, could well be brought into play. Such proposals can include (but by no means are exhausted to) the following:

- (1) Tax the commercial broadcasters by 0.5% for use of the public airwaves.
- (2) Tax the advertisers and marketers who air on TV by 0.5%.
- (3) Take the billions of dollars raised annually through proposals (1) and/or (2) into a public trust to help galvanize funding for networks of public-service broadcasting and public-service media.
- (4) Improve the standards for license accountability, including revoking the licenses of one or more commercial broadcast stations or networks and reassigning it to public interest groups.
- (5) Reassign the multitude of new digital TV channels that the commercial broadcasters are presently hoarding to public interest groups or initiatives.

Concerned scholars and activists have a role to play here. New ideas will go nowhere without the political muscle to make them real. Indeed, the DTV conversion and its political aftermath could help unite those long disaffected by the major commercial broadcasters -- including poor communities, communities of color, non-English speaking communities, and the burgeoning media democracy movement -- in coalition efforts to win one or more changes. I believe activists and scholars should work to assist this and other possible coalition efforts.

Of course, this paper outlines but one perspective and one answer to the matter of the DTV conversion in the United States and its aftermath. I look forward to responses on this proposal paper and other perspectives on the issue.