Broadcasters still hold their 6 MHz spectrum sacred, Telecommunications Online

A. Michael Noll
Columns · 2009
Original: http://www.telecommagazine.com/NewsGlobe/Commentary/article.asp?HH_ID=AR_4896
Archived copy, Internet Archive snapshot 2009-03-26

Carrier Services

Commentary

Broadcasters still hold their 6 MHz spectrum sacred

Digital TV conversion delay accomplishes little

by A. Michael Noll

Many decades ago when television broadcast standards were chosen for the United States, each broadcaster was allocated 6 MHz of spectrum for each TV channel. This 6 Mhz became sacred — with each broadcaster religiously believing in its right of ownership to its slice of the VHF or UHF spectrum.

Today, along with all other media, video has gone digital. Digital signals in their basic form require more bandwidth than analogue. But digital signals can be compressed to a fraction of that bandwidth — a compressed digital version of a standard TV signal could be transmitted in only 1 MHz.

In an attempt to protect U.S. manufacturers of television sets and also to release some UHF spectrum space, the government mandated a conversion to a digital format for over-the-air television. After a few postponements, that conversion was to occur this Feb. 17, but the U.S. Senate and House approved a further delay until June.

Since broadcasters hold their 6 MHz sacred, they were given 6 MHz to broadcast either a high-definition digital TV program or multiple standard programs. An alternative would have been to give each only 1 MHz, thereby releasing considerably more spectrum for mobile applications and wireless high-speed Internet access.

Today roughly 90 percent of Americans pay to obtain their television either over cable (coaxial or fiber) or by direct broadcast satellite (DBS). Broadcast over-the-air television is the province of those who do not want to pay to watch TV. They will not convert to pay TV — unless the government requires cable and DBS operators to offer the existing broadcast stations for free, or at a government subsidized minimal rate.

There has been a tremendous effort to educate the American public about the digital TV conversion that was supposed to occur this February. The possible problems with antenna reception of weak over-the-air signals will still exist in June, as will the difficulties in understanding converter boxes and new remote controls. However, the delay could be used to examine completely the entire question of digital broadcast TV in terms of today's technology and viewership.

The additional delay accomplishes nothing — other than demonstrate once again that the government has little idea about what it is, or is not, doing. If a simple issue like digital TV conversion can be so confused, one can only wonder how government will solve the current economic crisis. Perhaps the Congress should vote next to postpone the recession!

A. Michael Noll is a Professor Emeritus of Communications and past dean of the Annenberg School for Communication at the University of Southern California.

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