

TV CONVERTS TO DIGITAL: WILL IT CREATE A NEW DIGITAL DIVIDE?

By Wade Henderson

WASHINGTON-When most television broadcasts in the US go all-digital in February, it will mark a new triumph for communications technology. Across the country, the conversion from an older method of transmitting TV signals, known as analog, will give way to digital technology.

The transition to digital TV, which is taking place around the world, will bring vast improvements in both picture (high definition) and sound quality, and the ability of broadcasters to multicast – sending multiple signals over the same airwaves used for one analog signal. There are other benefits as well. There will be more space on the airwaves for public safety communications, allowing police, fire and rescue squads to keep us safer. In addition, it will make a new generation of wireless technologies available. Multicasting may allow more free ethnic media broadcasts.

Yet, there may also be a serious downside: We may be creating a *new* digital divide.

While many Americans take their cable and satellite TV services for granted, millions of families still rely on rooftop antennas and rabbit ears to receive their television stations. On February 17th, when most television stations must broadcast digitally, those old over the air televisions sets will not pick up the stations many Americans rely on.

Not surprising, low income families and communities of color will be impacted the most. The Nielson Company, leaders in television viewer research, has completed a study with stunning results. Their report shows that 12.5% of African American households and 13% of Hispanic households are using analog televisions and are not ready for the digital transition. Moreover, households with annual incomes of less than \$25,000 are five times more likely to be unprepared for the digital conversion than households earning over \$75,000.

The impact on communities of color is underscored by Nielson's listing of locations with the highest percentage of households with analog televisions; most have large minority populations. For instance, 15.8% of Houston households aren't ready for the conversion, 14.3% in Dallas-Ft. Worth, 14.1% in Tulsa, 13.4% in Salt Lake City, 13.3 in Milwaukee, 12.7% in Albuquerque-Santa Fe, 12.0% in Minneapolis-St. Paul, 11.6% in Austin, 11.6% in Los Angeles and 11.6% in Memphis.

The data paints a disturbing picture. Many low-income and people of color who were part of the broad coalition that lifted Illinois Sen. Barrack Obama to the presidency face the real possibility of not being able to follow his progress once he takes office. Moreover, as the nation confronts one of its most challenging economic crises ever, millions of people won't be getting the latest news and information about public policy changes from their television sets.

It's crucial that public officials, as well as corporate, community and civic leaders join in the effort to inform those with analog televisions how they can obtain converter boxes that will allow their televisions to continue receiving stations after the conversion.

The government is sponsoring a conversion assistance program. A Digital-to-Analog Converter Box Coupon is available; households can receive two \$40 coupons for the purchase of converter boxes.

Depending on the television, converter boxes cost between \$40 and \$70. For more information, visit www.dtv2009.gov, or call 1-888-388-2009 (voice). The process can take up to six weeks, so people must order their coupons now.

The Leadership Conference on Civil Rights is urging civic, community and political leaders to help their constituents keep their televisions on. Here are ways to assist those who need our help:

- Post flyers to community and office bulletin boards.
- Place announcements in newsletters, bulletins, and newspapers.
- Send postcards or emails to everyone in your address book.
- Give bookmarks out at your neighborhood school.
- Attend conversion education events in your community.

There are 21 million households currently relying on analog television. As our nation breaks many barriers, including the election of its first African American president, we can't allow millions of people to lose their source of news and information. That would be taking a giant step backwards.

Let's help those who can't afford new televisions keep their access to the airwaves.

(Mr. Henderson is the president and CEO of the Leadership Conference on Civil Rights, which is the nation's premier civil and human rights coalition. Information regarding the digital conversion can be found on their website at www.civilrights.org/dtv/. To arrange media interviews regarding the digital conversion, please contact Alicia Ingram at 404-493-1724).