

More Channels Are Coming. Will Anyone Be Watching?

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When broadcast television stations first transmitted their signals digitally at the end of the 1990s, consumers received a benefit besides clearer pictures: a multitude of new channels made possible by digital compression technology.

The effort, in large part, was a roaring failure. Virtually no one watched them because getting the channels required an external digital receiver. Some early programmers soon went bust.

But a new crop of digital channels from traditional broadcasters are making their way into homes, and industry executives say that this time, they have figured out how to do it right.

It helps that more homes now have TVs capable of receiving digital channels over the air and more cable systems are offering the channels. The government-mandated switch to all-digital broadcasting by early 2009 will also help the industry.

With digital broadcasting, a standard TV station can "multicast" three or more channels in the space occupied by just one in the old analog days. So in addition to the regular Channel 2, broadcasters can transmit Channels 2.2 and 2.3. Many local stations are starting to fill those "subchannels" with news, weather and other programming.

Some ambitious ventures have not fared well. In 2006, the Tube Music Network started a music video subchannel that aimed to recreate MTV's early, family-friendly days. The Tube was to be a "clean, irreverent channel you can trust," its founder, Les Garland, said at the time. But last October, the network shut down because of "financial limitations," according to its Web site.

ABC News Now began life four years ago as a 24-hour news service on digital multicast. But ABC has abandoned broadcast distribution and reconfigured the programming to reflect the style of "Good Morning America." It is available to 44 million consumers only through premium broadband, mobile services and cable.

"We thought this is a better business proposition," said Paul Slavin, ABC News's senior vice president for digital, who said less than 10 percent of the service's revenue comes from ads.

Industry executives seem to expect the next generation of digital subchannels to have niche programming enhanced with local content.

One of the newcomers, LATV, a bilingual music and entertainment network geared toward the 12- to 34-year-old Hispanic population, recently signed an affiliation agreement with Tribune Broadcasting, adding New York, Chicago and Dallas stations as multicast carriers. In one year, LATV has gained 33 affiliates.

To increase the channel's relevance in each market, an affiliate can add local programming in one half-hour of the day's schedule. Miami, for example, uses anchors from its primary channel to produce one-minute segments for local sports updates.

"We give the local stations the opportunity to reach new Hispanic advertisers," said LATV's president, Howard Bolter.

Another programmer — RTN or Retro Television Network — also views local content as a key to its success. The network, which began operation in 2005, offers its more than 70 affiliates well-known TV shows from the 1960s through the 1980s, like "Get Smart" and "Lifestyles of the Rich and Famous," in addition to old commercials.

Each affiliate receives a program stream customized to its needs. The network will also supply a three-hour block of children's programming when required. The local stations split advertising revenues and can insert local news, weather and sports.

With most TV viewers still unable to receive multichannel feeds from local broadcasters, cable carriage remains an important factor for the commercial success of digital subchannels.

Kevin J. Martin, chairman of the Federal Communications Commission, has proposed that cable systems be required to carry all of a broadcaster's digital feeds. The cable industry objects, saying market forces will resolve the issue. In 2007, 1,600 individual broadcast channels and subchannels, owned by 600 stations, were carried by cable systems nationwide, said Brian Dietz, a spokesman for the National Cable and Telecommunications Association.

The Comcast system in San Francisco carries 10 subchannels, for example, and the one in Union, N.J., carries 8. They feature news, weather, Hispanic-oriented content and PBS programming.

Los Angeles's largest PBS station, KCET, broadcasts three digital subchannels in addition to its main, high-definition service: KCET Orange, geared toward residents of Orange County; PBS World, featuring documentaries; and V-me, a Spanish-language service. The station expects all the channels to be available via cable eventually.

Yet even with the increased number of viewers from cable, advertising dollars remain low. Because the new multicast channels are not Nielsen-rated, spot ads are difficult to sell, and most advertising revenue comes from local advertisers and sponsorship packages.

"This is a concept sale," said Daniel Crowe, LATV's founder. "Advertisers are investing in us because they understand our content and model."

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