

Sherman & Howard Attorney Shannon Dunham Weighs In On Digital TV Transition in USA Today



Most portable TVs are analog, can't get digital signals
By David Lieberman, USA TODAY
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In an era of dazzling battery-powered portable devices including iPods, computers and cellphones, it's hard to imagine what it's like to be unable to catch the news and entertainment anytime and anywhere we want.

But millions of people who own portable televisions, including those who depend on them when they flee their homes or lose power during hurricanes and other emergencies, may soon return to the dark ages.

Virtually all of the nation's 7 million battery-powered TVs receive analog signals. They'll become useless after Feb. 17, when broadcasters must abandon analog and just transmit digital signals — unless the sets are connected to digital-to-analog converter boxes.

The problem is, the vast majority of converters must be plugged into the wall. That makes them unreliable in an emergency. "Unfortunately, a lot of well-intentioned policymakers found out after the ink was dry that there were more (portable) devices and households affected" than they imagined, says Richard Doherty of The Envisioneering Group, a research and consulting firm.

That's a "great irony" in the federally mandated move to digital TV, says Shannon Dunham, a communications specialist at law firm Sherman & Howard. Although the government "intended to reclaim the (analog) bandwidth for emergency use" — including police, fire and medical communications — "in the end, they're going to affect people who get emergency information" from portable TVs.

Radios equipped to pick up audio from local TV broadcasts also will lose those analog signals. The Red Cross says that it's not worried. "More people tend to listen to radio (stations) than watch TV in a disaster," spokesman Jonathan Aiken says.

Looking for local news

But many local disaster officials are apprehensive about the loss of portable TV at a time when lots of chain-owned radio stations have cut back on local news. "It is absolutely a concern of ours," says Veronica Mosgrove, a spokeswoman for the Louisiana Governor's Office of Homeland Security and Emergency Preparedness.

Consumers have few satisfactory portable TV alternatives. Digital TV signals are less forgiving than analog; pictures break up

when the digital set is moving, for example in a car or bus. Also, the chips and bright displays on some early portable digital TVs quickly drain their batteries.

That's one reason many electronics manufacturers are waiting to reach an agreement with broadcasters on a technology standard for a new generation of energy-efficient mobile TVs that could work in cellphones, iPod-like portable players and PDAs. Broadcasters would transmit a separate signal to these devices.

The standard is almost done, and "that will be the impetus for a wide range of battery-operated TVs," says LG Electronics USA's John Taylor. Some models will be unveiled in January at the annual Consumer Electronics Show and will appear on store shelves by Christmas 2009, he says.

But it's unclear whether the new devices will be practical for people who want an affordable information lifeline. "We don't know how expensive this new technology will be for the average person," Mosgrove says. Nor is it clear if manufacturers or broadcasters will energetically promote the new products. "This is not where people get rich," says Lynn Claudy, senior vice president of science and technology for the National Association of Broadcasters. "If you make a 50-inch TV that has Internet access, and you can put a Blu-ray player into it, and have cable and satellite connected — all these bells and whistles and cool features — you can pump up the price and make more money. Contrast that with a 7-inch set that doesn't do anything other than pick up over-the-air signals. That's not the stuff that dreams are made of."

Consumers have a few choices if they don't want to wait. For example, RadioShack charges \$200 for a portable digital TV with a 7-inch screen that "has gained interest from people concerned about emergency preparedness," company spokeswoman Wendy Dominguez says. It runs as long as five hours before needing to be recharged.

Slow sales, so far

Winegard, an electronics company, recently introduced a digital-to-analog converter box that works with a battery pack that runs 18 hours on six D-cell batteries. "People overlooked the portable TV market," says Aaron Enberg, who directs sales and marketing. Initial sales have fallen short of expectations. "We're trying to figure out why."

Claudy says he's confident that the problems for portable TV users will get worked out. But for now, "We're in this unsettled, awkward, troubled time between when everything is fine and the steps (are taken) to get there" again. ■