

Who's unprepared for digital TV: vegetables?

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Friday, January 30, 2009

Here's an early initiative from the Obama administration and Democratic Congress we can do without. Under our new protectors on the Potomac, the government sought to delay for four months the switch from analog to digital broadcasting of television signals.

The reason for this change to a deadline set long ago, as expressed by Sen. Jay Rockefeller, D-W.Va., was no compliment to the intelligence and resourcefulness of the American people.

"I firmly believe that our nation is not yet ready to make this transition at this time," said Rockefeller Tuesday as the Senate voted to put the changeover date off from Feb. 17 to June 12. Fortunately, the House refused to go along, rejecting the delay on Wednesday.

It isn't broadcasters who Rockefeller and Obama think are not yet ready, mind you. It is television viewers themselves.

So where have those viewers been the last several months? It can't have been in front of their television screens. There, network after network and station after station have been running announcements about the pending switch from a low-quality analog signal to a high-quality digital signal that will make almost everyone's picture better.

And no, you don't need an expensive new high-definition television to get that better picture. You don't even need a set with a digital tuner.

If you get your TV signal from a cable company or a satellite dish, you need nothing. Your provider will convert the digital signal and transmit it to your television set, no matter when it was made and no matter what kind of tuner it has.

If you get your signal by antenna from actual broadcasters themselves, and you do not have a digital television, you need a simple converter box. It is those boxes on which most of the public service announcements have focused. They are available for a reasonable price, from \$40 to \$80, but the government long ago issued coupons to pick up most of that cost.

Now we are told by Consumers Union and others that many people failed to get coupons and boxes, and face the loss of television altogether.

Good. Anyone who couldn't get it together to ensure continued TV reception needs a kick in the pants to do so now, and what better kick than loss of reception?

This isn't winter heating or electrical power we're talking about, after all. It is entertainment.

Yes, there is now a waiting list for coupons, probably because many people who don't need them got them. Let those who dragged their feet wait for unused coupons to be replaced, or buy their own boxes.

So why not make everyone wait until June? Because it costs broadcasters more money for every day they must transmit both analog and digital signals. Most of them are doing that now, in preparation for the change, but they shouldn't have to do it for four additional months.

Rockefeller says that under his scheme, they wouldn't have had to; they could have made the switch earlier if they chose. That's some solution - a patchwork of digital and analog broadcasts from different stations changing over at different times. If Americans are as out of touch as he says they are, that could send them to the mental wards. - J.F.