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Signals of intent

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Analog television fades to black in 2013 but will audiences and networks be ready?

"In about 1680 days, the analog television signal will be switched off and any remaining analog-only sets will go blank.

It's the end of an era that's been coming for years. Digital television was switched on almost a decade ago but, thanks to legislative restrictions on new channels and little enthusiasm from hardware manufacturers or the networks, it was met with a lukewarm response from viewers.

The initial blueprint, which would have seen analog television switched off last year, looked unlikely as early as 2004. Since then, inertia has given way to a modest acceleration and, according to the latest research, 43.4 per cent of Australia's 21.74 million people have switched to digital either by connecting a set-top box to their existing television or buying a new one.

To meet the revised deadline of 2013, some 7300 people will need to switch from analog to digital every day for the next 3? years.

And Sydney, remarkably, has the most work to do. Its digital footprint is the lowest of any mainland capital, at just 40 per cent. Perth, in contrast, has the highest with 47.2 per cent.

The advantages of free-to-air digital TV include sharper picture (significantly so with high definition), better sound and, most importantly, additional channels. The failure of these channels to materialise, however, has been the greatest hurdle to the roll-out of free-to-air digital.

The reason for this was intense lobbying by the cartel of "old" television networks, who saw change as a greater threat than old age.

That costly mistake dampened enthusiasm for evolution in traditional television and allowed pay TV in particular, the digital-savvy Foxtel to gain a significant foothold and go into profit after only a decade, rare for a subscription television business.

The problem is compounded by confusion about what channels are available and what technology is needed to receive them. The free-to-air platform Freeview, invented to sell digital free-to-air TV in a single word, launched a campaign selling 15 channels. But five of those are the existing free-to-air networks and another five are their HD simulcasts, shaving 10 off the total before you've even picked up the remote. In fact, at the moment, there are only two new channels on air: the sports channel One and the general entertainment channel ABC2. To their credit, both are excellent, particularly for start-up channels.

SBS launches SBS2 in a week, general entertainment channels from Nine and Seven will launch around October (neither has been officially announced but there are rumours Nine's will be called GO99) and the ABC will launch ABC3, a children's channel, by December. That's six new channels by the end of the year.

Contrary to prevailing myth, any television can receive digital signals as long as it is connected to a set-top box that decodes the signal. One of the most powerful illustrations used by Foxtel to sell its digital service was a Foxtel box hooked up to a 1970s-era Rank Arena analog TV. The picture was not so crisp but the point was clearly made.

So, to dispel any confusion, here's the capsule tutorial. No, you don't need a new digital TV; a digital set-top box will do. No, that set-top box doesn't have to be a Freeview box; any box will receive the new channels. Freeview-badged boxes come with a navigable electronic program guide (EPG) but sacrifice some functionality (ad-skipping and some off-box copying features) to appease the innovation-fearing broadcasters. **Yes, you might need a new antenna, so check the one you have is up to puff. That point is generally played down by the industry but, anecdotally at least, the Guide hears many stories about new digital TVs hitting an antenna-related iceberg on their maiden voyage.**

Now, to crunch the numbers. Standard definition pictures are composed of 576 vertical lines of 720 horizontal dots each, interlacing two halves of the same image alternately. The technical name is 576i (that's i for interlaced). High definition (HD) is, in theory, anything better than that, so most broadcasters cheat by replacing the interlaced picture with a progressively displayed one.

With a flick of letter legerdemain, 576i becomes 576p and HD. A true HD image is closer to 1080 vertical lines of 1920 horizontal dots each (1080i or 1080p). All you need to remember is this: a higher number is a more detail-rich image and where two numbers are identical, p is better than i.

Hopefully that sorts out the confusion but don't count your digital TV's chickens 'til they've hatched. We've been sold hollow promises already, so the onus is on the industry to deliver on the audience's expectation.

Digital radio is grappling with the kind of inertia digital TV faced when it was launched in 2001. That shouldn't last too long, though. Britain's Freeview, for example, has 30 radio stations in addition to its 50 television channels and when Australian broadcasters realise the market's hunger for new content, they will likely follow suit.

One of the remaining hurdles is the corporate fragmentation of the Australian broadcast market and the gulf between city and regional broadcasters. Regional Australia lags in the roll-out of digital infrastructure and a digital channel such as One can only be seen in the mainland capitals.

The other challenge is the current global financial situation. The clock is ticking and the networks must launch new services but the economic climate has rarely been so unforgiving. The networks should have made digital hay while the economic sun was shining."