

TELLING THE NEVER-ENDING DTV STORY



THANKS FOR SHARING
Fox's WNYW-TV technology reporter Brett Larson recently appeared on ABC's "The View" to discuss the DTV transition.

Finding New Ways to Cover the Transition Poses a Challenge to Newsroom Staffs

By Daisy Whitney

Not only are stations around the country in the midst of shedding their analog signals forever, their news departments are tasked with creatively covering the drawn-out digital transition in their newscasts, too.

The massive shift from the analog world to the crisp clear digital one is a major news event, but the fact is it's been under way for a few years now and will continue to play out until all stations flip the switch to digital on June 12. Finding innovative ways to cover the transition is increasingly a challenge.

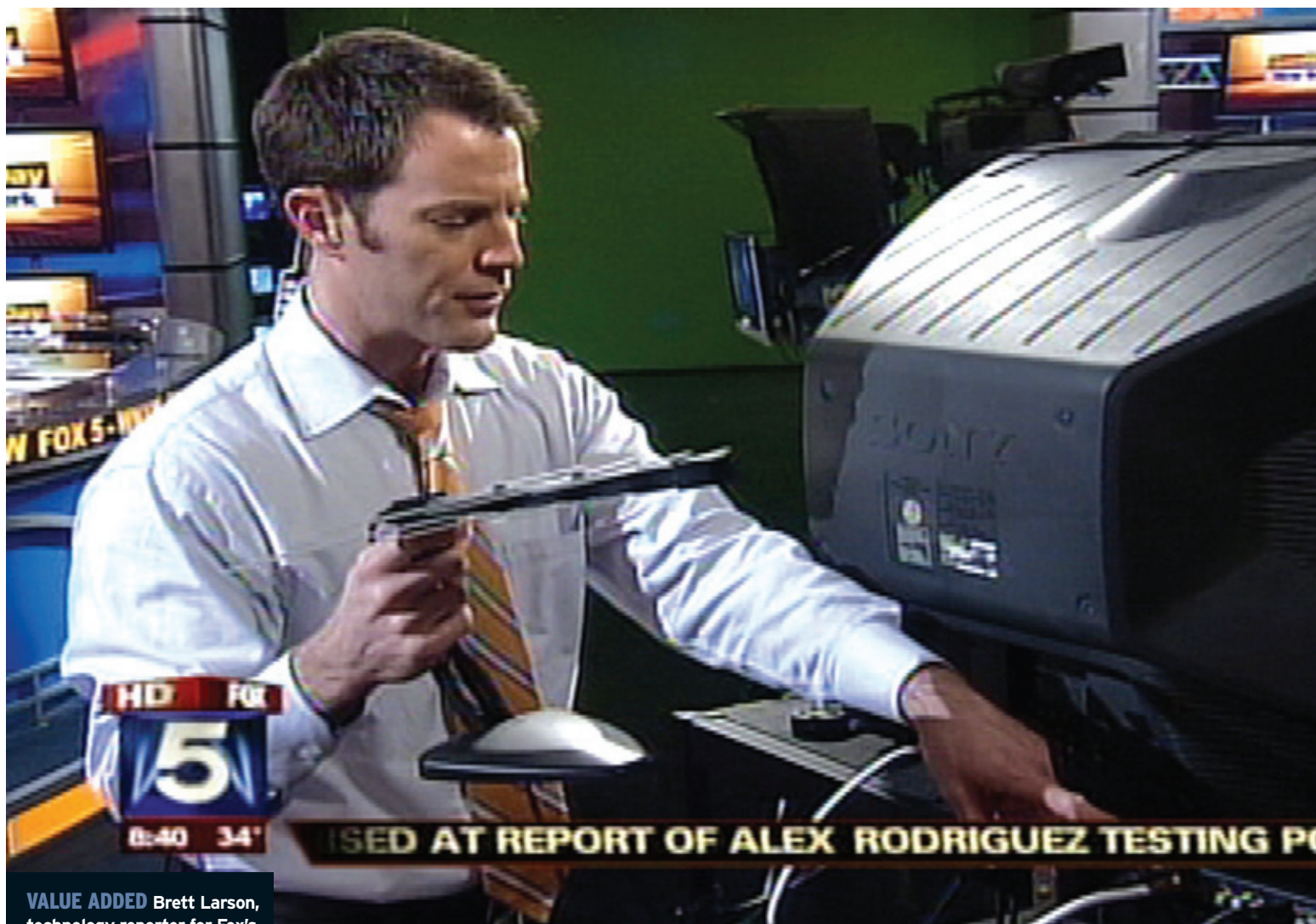
CBS-owned Philadelphia station KYW-TV recently tried something different. It conducted a training session with local Boy Scout leaders to teach them how to hook up converter boxes, then covered that initiative as a news story in late February.

Scouts' Honor

Philadelphia-area Boy Scout leaders will be assisting viewers who need help with going digital, particularly seniors and the disabled, explained Mike Nelson, spokesman for the 29-member CBS Television Stations group, which will flip the switch in June.

The entire group has extensively covered the transition and will continue to do so for the next few months. "All of our stations have been airing half-hour specials hosted by their local anchors and reporters," he said, adding the stations "have been participating in soft analog shutoff tests to help viewers determine if all of their TVs are prepared for the transition to digital."

Mr. Nelson said the CBS-owned stations have presented detailed stories about converter boxes—"who needs them, who doesn't and how to install them"—and regular updates regarding the coupon program. Many stations also have assembled phone banks to answer viewer questions about the transition, he said.



VALUE ADDED Brett Larson, technology reporter for Fox's WNYW-TV in New York, has reported on the benefits of switching to DTV and how to do it.

San Francisco's ABC-owned station KGO-TV, which will turn off its analog feed in June, has been producing "what you need to know" reports.

The station's DTV coverage has been led by consumer reporter Michael Finney. "He's done the stories explaining the transition and is the one who does the DTV tests that we've been running marketwide," said Kevin Keeshan, the station's news director. "We did three live tests prior to Feb. 17. We have three more live tests across three dayparts scheduled between now and June 12."

NBC-owned KNTV in the San Francisco Bay Area has produced half-hour specials devoted to the

digital transition, as have most stations in the Fox group.

The Fox station group has been including stories in its newscasts on how to hook up converter boxes, too. In addition, the group is leaning on the station's local Web sites as resources for ongoing information and how-to content on the transition.

Broadly speaking, Fox-owned WNYW in New York has produced reports touting the benefits of switching to digital television from the station's technology reporter Brett Larson, who also appeared on "The View" recently to discuss the transition. Sister station WWOR has run "do it yourself" pieces to show viewers how to outfit their TV sets for the digital transition.

More Information Online

On the Web, the Fox-owned New

York stations feature more detail, such as the timeline of the transition, reasons for the DTV conversion, who will be affected, how to

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Mike Nelson, CBS Television Stations

determine if you have a digital tuner, what to do if it is not ready for the conversion, how to obtain converter box coupons and what antenna is right for you. Visitors

will find DTV answers in English and Spanish, links to manufacturers' DTV sites, a countdown clock and a tutorial from Mr. Larson.

Even broadcasters that shut off their analog signals last month continue to produce reports on the transition. Fort Myers, Fla., CBS affiliate WINK-TV is still running stories on how to tune in the digital channels, said Greg Stetson, the station's programming director. That follows months of coverage in advance of the original switch date, he said.

"Most stations went far above and beyond to lay out how it all works, and what to expect," said Tom Petner, editor of the Web site TVSpy.com. "The question, of course, is how many people absorbed it all. Judging from what I can see in the local market, the transition so far has been pretty smooth." ■

SIGNALS

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stations have already gone all-digital.)

"We are really trying to give viewers as much information on how the transition impacts their lives and answer whatever questions they might have," said Mark Ginther, news director of Seattle's KING-TV, which has run many enterprise feature stories on the transition in the past year and a half.

Reporter Glenn Farley, who normally covers the aviation and technology industries at KING, has made the DTV transition his beat, contributing at least a dozen stories about it since 2007. The consumer unit also has done reports on purchasing new TV sets and how to properly dispose of old ones.

"We have transitioned from doing stories on the basic converter box to actually getting the signal," Mr. Farley said. "Most of the stories moving forward will be focused in that direction."

The Seattle market is what Mr. Farley calls "terrain-challenged," because of the mountain ranges in the broadcast coverage area, making it difficult for some residents to receive a clear digital signal.

In a recent piece, he went out in the field in Olympia, Wash., with an antenna installer who measured the signal in various hilltop neighborhoods. In some areas, there was no signal at all, meaning residents there may have to erect taller towers or buy special antennas.

Beyond telecasting the DTV message, Mr. Farley and other KING staffers have participated in a number of public hearings on the transition, most organized by the city of Seattle in an effort to reach out to diverse populations, including those who don't speak English.

In addition, the station has participated with other broadcasters in the market in synchronous digital signal testing during morning, evening and weekend newscasts—and then manning phone banks to answer viewer questions about the transition.

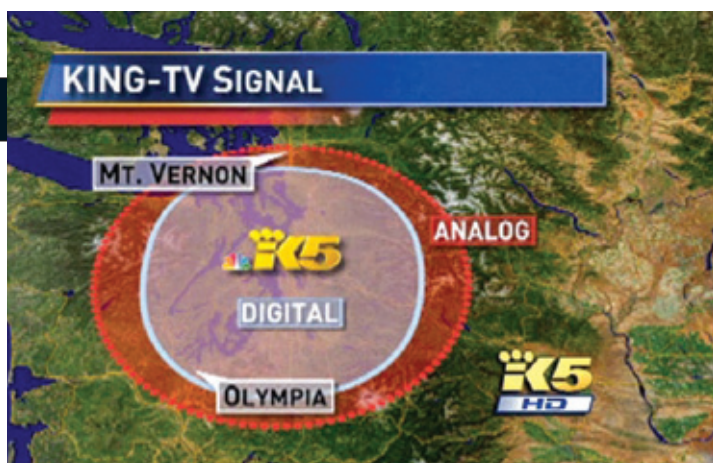
"The phones would just light up," Mr. Farley said. "The response from viewers has gone up as the deadline approached. I don't know how you could have missed this."

"We've learned a lot ourselves," Mr. Ginther said. "Portable radios that have TV sound on them won't receive it after the conversion happens. In an emergency, if the cable or satellite goes out in severe weather, it may be important to have a converter box in the house."

In the nation's two largest markets, New York and Los Angeles, most of the major stations have been broadcasting a digital signal for 10 years now.

New York City stations recently mobilized to get out the word on the "official" transition under the aegis of the Metropolitan Television Alliance, a group formed after the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks to coordinate efforts among broadcasters to replace facilities that were destroyed.

"We got seven local anchors of the 5 and 6 p.m. news to hold a press conference with Mayor



Bloomberg to talk about how people could get coupons and what they had to do to prepare with the right kind of antenna in order to get covered by all the stations," said Saul Shapiro, president of the Metropolitan Television Alliance.

"Having the mayor involved almost guarantees coverage. Also, because of his TV background with

his own cable channel, he knew exactly what it was about and what it entailed," Mr. Shapiro said. "He was the best advocate of the coming transition and simple things to prepare for."

At KNBC-TV in Los Angeles, the primary focus of its news stories also has been making sure people knew what steps needed

ROAD BLOCKS Reporter Glenn Farley of Seattle's KING-TV termed the market "terrain-challenged" due to mountain ranges.

to be taken.

"The way people watched TV for years would change, and we have tried to give some clarity to the whole issue," said Keith Esparros, KNBC's assistant news director.

Mr. Esparros said there was a lot of viewer confusion between two informational Web sites, www.dtv.gov, run by the government, and www.dtv.com, which is a commercial site that sells products.

"Our goal is fairly simple. We didn't want anyone to be without TV, with an uninterrupted stream

of news, information and entertainment, from a public service or even a selfish point of view," Mr. Esparros said.

KNBC also has done stories on disposing old television sets, from donating them to senior centers and other facilities to safely recycling them.

"We understand how difficult this transition is, and people may not understand the complexity," said Mr. Esparros. "Changing the way millions of people watch TV is daunting. Even with the amount of PSAs on the newscast, and the live demos we've done, still hundreds of thousands didn't get the message, which is part of the reason the current administration delayed the transition." ■

Tune in to a Greener Environment

Ready to upgrade to a new DTV?
Get tips on buying green and where to recycle your analog TVs at www.myGreenElectronics.org.