

Public Television Stations in the Digital Age

FCC Consumer Facts

Background

In October 2001, the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) adopted rules governing public television stations' use of digital technology. Public TV stations, like commercial TV stations, are in the process of converting to digital television (DTV). Today, more than 85 percent of public TV stations are on the air with a digital signal.

What Digital Television Means to You

Digital technology allows public TV stations to provide even more educational programming than they now offer. Digital technology also permits transmission of programming with higher resolution for dramatically better picture and sound quality. Digital technology includes "high definition television," or HDTV, which has theater-quality pictures and CD-quality sound. Additionally, digital technology enables public TV stations to transmit several different programs at once in standard definition format. This transmission is called "multicasting." Digital technology can also be used to transmit large amounts of data to a viewer's computer or television set.

When the DTV rules were being developed, the FCC decided to give public broadcasters a great amount of flexibility to encourage their development of innovative services. The FCC rules require public broadcasters to provide at least one free video programming stream of at least the same quality we see today.

Beyond that, public broadcasters may offer a wide range of services that are "ancillary or supplementary" to their free video programming service. If they provide certain types of ancillary or supplementary services, like subscription channels, they must pay a fee of 5 percent of the gross revenues generated by those services to the U.S. Treasury.

What Digital Television Means to You (cont'd.)

The FCC has concluded that this flexibility must not be allowed to jeopardize the noncommercial and educational mission of public TV. Therefore, in addition to having to provide at least one free video programming service like all TV broadcasters, public TV stations must use all of their digital capacity to provide a primarily noncommercial, nonprofit, educational broadcast service. This requirement means that a "substantial majority" of a public TV station's digital programming must be noncommercial. In addition, public TV stations may not air advertisements or commercials during any of their free video programming service. Like commercial broadcasters, if they choose to provide ancillary services that generate revenues, they must pay a fee of 5 percent of those revenues to the U.S. Treasury.

For More Information

For more information about DTV in general, visit our DTV Web site at www.dtv.gov or see our DTV consumer fact sheet at <http://www.fcc.gov/cgb/consumerfacts/digitaltv.html>.

You may also call our Consumer Center at: 1-888-CALL-FCC (1-888-225-5322) voice, 1-888-TELL-FCC (1-888-835-5322) TTY; send an e-mail to fccinfo@fcc.gov; send a fax to 1-866-418-0232; or write to:

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For More Information (cont'd.)

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