

FCC Will Determine the Opportunities for Public Broadcasters in Next Generation TV

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Next Gen TV (the ATSC 3.0 standard) represents transformative technology that will result in significant opportunities for broadcasters, viewers, and communities. The new standard is expected to include developments in Ultra-HD, mobile broadcasting, and the introduction of personalization and interactivity into broadcasts. Next Gen TV also presents public service opportunities through broadcasting advancements in education, public safety, accessibility, and civic engagement.

The FCC is currently proposing that the Next Gen TV standard would be introduced on a voluntary basis through a phased deployment process over a number of years. Any station that chooses to deploy Next Gen TV, however, must arrange for another station in its local market to serve as a “host” to the simulcast its primary program channel using the current standard (ATSC 1.0) in order to minimize disruption to viewers during the transition.

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The question posed by the FCC rulemaking proceeding is whether those opportunities be available to non-commercial educational (NCE) stations.

How the FCC addresses a number of policy decisions in the proceeding will affect the opportunities for public broadcasters:

- Can NCE stations host commercial stations as those stations transition to Next Gen TV?*** The FCC’s proposed approach for hosting ATSC 1.0 content is similar to how the Commission addressed temporary channel-sharing arrangements during the incentive auction. Originating stations would retain licensee responsibilities for the content that is simulcast on another local host station. This approach would mean that NCE stations could serve as hosts for commercial stations without running afoul of the FCC’s advertising prohibitions and sponsorship restrictions. However, the FCC also proposes an alternative “multicast” approach and acknowledges the limitation inherent in that arrangement – for example that NCE stations would not be able to host commercial stations.

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- ***Will public broadcasters be able to make the switch to Next Gen TV?*** If NCE broadcasters serve areas with no host station available that could provide substantial coverage of the originating station's community of license, flash cutting to Next Gen TV may be the only practical solution. The FCC's willingness to grant NCE stations flexibility in finding a host station in this scenario will have a large impact on the ability of some public broadcasters to adopt the new standard.
- ***Can NCE stations use of incentive auction repack reimbursements for Next Gen TV-capable equipment?*** On April 13, 2017, the Commission launched a 39 month post-auction channel repacking process. During this process, nearly 1,000 stations will be required to change their broadcast channel. This repack period will likely be the best opportunity for stations to become ATSC 3.0-ready regardless of when a station might ultimately begin broadcasting Next Gen TV. Without the appropriate flexibility for repack reimbursement funding, NCE stations could be financially bound to purchasing new equipment for the repack that would unnecessarily be destined for obsolescence in a comparatively short period of time once the transition to Next Gen TV is complete.

Comments filed by Public Media Company and other public media organizations urge the FCC to adopt a flexible regulatory approach that will give NCE stations a fair opportunity to adopt the new technology.

NCE stations can play a vital and necessary role in facilitating the transition to Next Gen TV by serving both as host stations and as early adopters of the exciting innovations that will come with the new technology standard. The FCC's policy choices in the final rule will determine how big an opportunity Next Gen TV is for public broadcasters.

The Commission has set a June 8th deadline for reply comments.

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