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LATEST NEWS AND INSIGHT

### Digital simulcast entering the next phase

The idea behind cable's migration to an all-digital platform took center stage in late 2003...and hasn't come off it since. A panel of experts from both cable operators and vendors gathered last month to discuss the next steps of the transition and the barriers that still need to be overcome. During the panel, moderated by *CED*, it became clear that most major MSOs are making big plans for the transition with digital simulcast, a technique that replicates most (if not all) of an operator's analog channels in the digital domain.

Charter Communications, the first U.S. MSO to deploy simulcast, expects to move quickly in other markets, noted Pragash Pillai, the operator's VP of advanced engineering and development. Charter, he added, expects to build a central encoding station that feeds the other simulcast sites.

Charter, which is operating a simulcast system in Long Beach, Calif., has yet to disclose where it will next make the transition. Recent reports have indicated that Madison, Wis. could be Charter's next target for simulcast.

Adelphia also plans to be aggressive with simulcast in 2005, with expectations to have an all-digital product in every "major" market," said Basil Badaweyeh, the MSO's manager of advanced video engineering and development.

Cox Communications, meanwhile, will get its digital simulcast plans rolling in 2005. "I don't think we'll get finished, but we are certainly starting this year," said John Hildebrand, Cox's vice president of multimedia technologies.

Vendors, of course, hope to take a leading role with operators as they embark on their digital simulcast activities. Motorola, for example, already has an all-digital box,

the DCT-700. Although that model is much less expensive than boxes that handle both digital and analog signaling, "we are miles away from the \$50 set-top," said Kevin Wirick, vice president of marketing for Motorola's digital media system division, noting that more progress needs to be made in getting more functionality condensed on the box semiconductors.

While the \$50 bare-bones all-digital box is just one product that will help operators with their simulcast plans, more advanced boxes will play a key role, as well.

"As we look [at] cost reductions of digital-only set-tops, DVR is where we are going to have the biggest cost savings," Hildebrand said, explaining that today's ca-

ble DVRs have two expensive analog decoders and other associated circuitry.

On the network side, companies like Motorola and RGB Networks are presently looking into specific challenges, including the scaling of control systems and conditional access systems. RGB, a relative newcomer in the vendor arena, hopes its technology will simplify operations as MSOs make the all-digital transition. RGB hopes to do that with a product that enables operators to execute all-digital operations all the way to the edge of the network, explained Adam Tom, RGB's president and CEO.

*Note: The entire video-taped discussion is available on the Web at: [www.cablechannel.com/alldigital/](http://www.cablechannel.com/alldigital/).*