

Technology

Could HDTV's answer be a 'grand alliance'?

Blue-ribbon committee suggests that four systems vying for acceptance as FCC transmission standard combine best features and work together

By Randy Sukow

Life would be simpler for the television industry and Washington regulators if they could have just one all-digital HDTV transmission system to consider rather than the current four, according to the FCC's Advisory Committee on Advanced Television Service. The advisory committee's "blue ribbon" committee strongly suggested such a "grand alliance" during its Washington meeting last Wednesday (Feb. 24).

"The concept of the grand alliance would be to take the best elements of the different systems and combine them in order to give the advisory committee, the FCC and the nation, ultimately, the best possible HDTV system," said Advisory Committee Chairman Richard Wiley, senior partner, Wiley, Rein & Fielding.

But some, including the National Association of Broadcasters, said an alliance is not necessarily the perfect solution. The four proponents themselves doubted that such an alliance will be possible, at least in the near term.

The blue-ribbon committee's decision last week was to approve a month's worth of additional testing for each of the four proposed systems at the Advanced Television Test Center, to begin as soon as the test center can be ready—between March 15 and April 1. But the committee said it would accept—and recommend—a consolidation agreement, if it can be reached before retesting begins.

The committee did not rule out agreeing to consolidation after testing begins, but now, Wiley said, is the most opportune time to form an alliance without creating great delays.

As recently as a few months ago, it was expected that the blue-ribbon

committee would recommend one of the four digital systems at last week's meeting. But analysis of the first-round tests found that no single system tested high enough on all technical and economic criteria to be considered a winner or tested low enough to be considered a clear loser.

After retesting of the four systems, the advisory committee now expects a final system to be chosen in early 1994. If a grand alliance is formed now, it will take slightly longer to complete the advisory committee's work as the proponents work to fit the pieces of the consolidated system together and then retest it.

Several advisory committee members said their actions should not be seen as simple approval for a one-year delay. Much of the work of the next year's testing will involve system refinements the FCC would have to have done itself had a system been chosen last week, they said.

NAB did not oppose the grand-alliance concept during the meeting, but

did register some concerns later. "If the grand alliance produces a better system [than the four now proposed], then I guess we'd probably be in favor of it," said John Abel, NAB executive vice president, operations, an advisory committee member. But NAB fears it will not be better.

"There might be a proponent out there that wants to build a better system, just as an example, for cable that does not transmit as well on broadcast channels," Abel said, although he refused to name proponent names. If the four proponents continue to improve their systems in competition with each other, NAB believes their incentive to build a system solving all problems for all media will be greater.

NAB's worries may never materialize. As one proponent, Donald Rumsfeld, chairman and chief executive officer of General Instrument, said, the grand alliance "is going to be very difficult to achieve."

Rumsfeld suggested that instead of a grand alliance, the blue-ribbon committee opt for a "current alliance" strategy, based on the GI/MIT/Zenith-AT&T agreement.

The advisory committee heard Rumsfeld's arguments but did not put the current alliance idea to a vote.

Members of ATRC—made up of NBC, Thomson Consumer Electronics, Philips Consumer Electronics, the David Sarnoff Research Center and Compression Labs Inc.—complained that GI was unfairly putting them in the role of "the bad guy."

"We've become involved with discussions with the other proponents within only the last couple of weeks," said Peter Bingham, president, Philips Laboratories, Briarcliff Manor, N.Y. "We would very much benefit from a grand alliance, and we are trying to be very proactive in our approach."

Retesting schedule

Immediately after last week's advisory committee meeting, the three competing consortia drew cards to determine the order of retesting to start around April 1, should a grand alliance fail to form: (1) DigiCipher, proposed by General Instrument and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology; (2) Advanced Digital HDTV, proposed by the Advanced Television Research Consortium; (3) GI/MIT's Channel-Compatible DigiCipher, and (4) Spectrum Compatible HDTV, proposed by Zenith Electronics and AT&T.

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