



Today, we bid a nostalgic farewell to analog television, as all broadcast stations are required to deliver a digital signal. Do the challenges the nation has faced in making this not-so-momentous transition suggest a bumpy road ahead as policymakers push for a “smart” electric grid? Should low income and minority consumers be especially concerned?

Most TV watchers subscribe to cable service. For those viewers, the digital transition is pretty much of a non-issue. But [17% of American homes](#) rely on rabbit ears, or rooftop antennas. For quite some time, the government and broadcasters have tried to make the move to digital for those consumers as painless as possible. There have been endless public service announcements, and vouchers issued to cover almost the entire cost of a set-top digital/analog converter box. And when the Obama administration moved in, it issued a stay, giving *analoglodytes* such as myself extra months to get ready.

The day of reckoning has arrived, and what do we find? The [New York Times](#) reports that, according to Nielsen, about 2.8 million homes are completely unready for the transition, and another 9.5 million homes are partially ready (they have upgraded some of their TV sets but not all).

What on earth does this have to do with the smart grid? The heart of that dream is the conversion from the current analog electric meters at our homes to fully digital meters, capable of providing two way communication and (some hope) charging people more for electricity during peak periods and less during the relatively quiet portions of the day. The image offered is one of fully-automated homes with computer chips inserted in major appliances, allowing the air conditioner or dishwasher to ramp down when rates are high. One has to wonder, however, whether the more than 12 million customers that are ill-prepared for digital TV are only a fraction of those who would not handle well a transition to digital electric meters.

After all, for many people, TV viewing is about as high on the priority list as sleep. We are told that on average, Americans watch the tube more than 4 hours a day. If that isn't enough motivation to avoid losing access to all broadcasts, what is? Maybe a lot of the 17% of us without cable just don't care that much about television. But maybe these mandatory technology shifts affect some groups more than others. The Times points to [tvnewsday](#), which reports that younger, African American, and Hispanic homes are disproportionately unready for the TV switch.

In California, the electric utilities are changing out all of the meters. Who might be more or less ready to handle that transition? Who will be able to afford the fancy new appliances with computer chips automatically adjusting to high prices? Who will have the time and resources to sit by a laptop monitoring fluctuations in price and consumption? Who will face higher bills because they are unable to avoid peak power usage for one reason or another? Who may simply fail to comprehend the changes that will have occurred, and the options for protecting one's pocketbook?

The answers are unclear. What is quite clear, however, is the need to ask these questions and understand the challenges.