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Digital takes off with Glenn, pioneer stations ready for air, programming on slower track

Godspeed, John Glenn--and Godspeed, HDTV.

John Glenn wasn't alone when he was sent into space with a repeat of Scott Carpenter's famous salutation last week. The medium of television, too, turned a corner last Thursday (Oct. 29) when NASA launched Glenn on his historic return trip to outer space and--after years of inventing, negotiating, regulating and infighting--the television industry launched high-definition television.

Orchestrated and paid for by Harris Corp., an estimated 24 television stations and select sites nationwide watched Glenn's liftoff in high-definition television with CD-quality surround sound. At the Smithsonian's Air and Space Museum in Washington, Harris gathered a group of executives, engineers and journalists to see the launch on the museum's Imax screen.

Downstairs, visitors watched space shuttle Discovery's departure on several high-definition TV sets as the museum piped in NASA's on-site announcer from Cape Kennedy.

The clear high-definition broadcast allowed viewers to see such details as a drag chute door falling off the craft a few seconds before liftoff. NASA officials later said that the detached door should not affect the shuttle's landing.

Glenn's flight is just the first of what will be a growing number of high-definition broadcasts. Sunday saw 38 stations begin their digital broadcasts. Some 43 stations plan to come online before the end of November, 27 of them in the top 10 markets.

That should make the FCC happy. The commission had asked only 26 broadcasters in the top 10 to offer digital services by Nov. 1. Broadcasters will beat that number by one.

"We are on track with the broadcast rollout schedule, and things will continue that way," said FCC Commissioner Susan Ness last week at the Association for Maximum Service Television's 12th annual digital conference in Washington. ...

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