

# HDTV begins as HETV

November, 1998. A few of us techies drove to Boston's Museum of Science where they had a bank of HDTV monitors arranged in the museum lobby, courtesy Panasonic. They were promoting WCVB-DT, Ch5 (actually on Ch20) and Boston's first commercial HDTV telecast; coverage of the John Glenn Shuttle Launch. We got there at noon as folks began gathering. Had a good front row view of the layout and festivities.



Panasonic and WCVB did a nice presentation job with clear and complete signage declaring the bank of 4 displays; left to right- a Plasma DTV display, an analog 4:3 display of CH5's regular analog programming, a Panasonic 56" HD rear projection system, a Panasonic glass HD monitor. They ran the requisite "scenic vistas" footage with classical music as folks arrived. A thoughtful, thorough staging of the event.

The HD sets were viewable, but had some difficulty with generating the lumens needed to compete in a bright environment. The Museum's open glass lobby is very bright and open to exterior light. I eyeball it at 300 to 400fc. To compensate, the HDTV rear projection display was over-cranked with high color saturation and contrast and crushed blacks. Conversely, the analog video feed was bright and offered ample contrast with the added benefit of a superb anti-reflection coated surface



The Museum lobby crowd was engaged and exuberant. I noted folks curiously comparing analog and digital images at length as best they could, their eyes darting back and forth, squinting. However, all eyes were suddenly riveted to the HD screen at the historical moment, launch time.

Regarding the production values of the coverage it was clear that the analog feed enjoyed the maturity and sophistication of a well-heeled crew and generous DVE/graphics toys to jazz up the stats and factoids. The HD coverage was a visual throwback to earlier days when camera angles were scarce and reporters chained to an anchor desk carried more of the information load. Thanks to Mary Alice Williams for holding up her end.

The visually limited, early TV look of the HD-cast was actually rather appropriate given the program content and the history in the moment. As launch time drew near dads lifted tykes to their shoulders for a better look. In the brief span of a ten second countdown we were transported to all the other big countdowns. The ones that launched our collective apprehensions and hopes. Back to Glenn's first ride. We all became 36 years younger, 36 years less jaded, 36 years more optimistic. John Glenn was doin' it for us again. People counted down out loud. ...SIX! – FIVE! – Thrusters lit. FOUR! – THREE! The

engines powering a rising roar of unabashed applause. TWO! – ONE! The applause pushed us off the launch pad. ZERO! We floated upwards. Discovery rose over LP29 in full HD majesty, lofting our tensions ever higher in the next minute. We hurtled on toward booster cut-off and jettison.

A crackly, “Discovery, go with throttle up.”



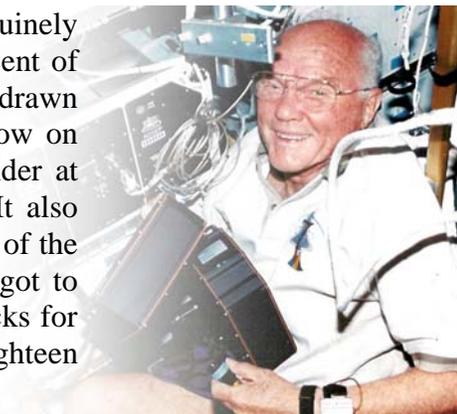
Shades of Challenger hang over the digital Discovery images. This moment is like that moment, only much more so because we now know what can go so wrong. This huge moment fills our faces and floods our thoughts with digital clarity and gravity and apprehension. Brief, pin-drop silence. We wait. The HD scene then faithfully reports the good news as spent boosters drift harmlessly outward. At 77, John Glenn’s aging body and youthful spirit were wholly committed to moving as fast as possible in only one direction, up and forward. Yeeehaaaaaaa!

Ear-splitting applause, cheers and someone in back enthusiastically screaming,

“Godspeed, John Glenn!”

More cheers and more applause, and within all of that I expect there were a few more whispered, “Yeehaaa’s”. It is a complex feeling. A confluence for hope and joy. A place where “Yeehaaa!” qualifies as both a cheer and a prayer.

WCVB’s “HD Launch Day” in Boston was a genuinely memorable television first. It was wholly reminiscent of our early romance with television, when folks were drawn to a soft cool glow from the appliance store window on Main Street; staring with a touch of innocent wonder at something that was very big in some new way. It also marked those times when we came together in front of the TV to share in events larger than ourselves. We got to witness John Glenn jumping out of the starting blocks for some well-earned space-race victory laps at eighteen thousand miles an hour around the planet.



WCVB’s Launch Day was a digitally clear affirmation that the best part of television comes from – and reflects – and amplifies – and celebrates – the best part of us.

Did the HD images enhance the experience? No question in my mind. If the content is there to start, it is *more there* in HD. Each significant, real-time story – each snippet of history that we experience as a *live TV event* is made all the more engaging in HD. Regardless of what got said to marketing folks working the crowd for feedback I saw it all in their rapt connection to the moment. They watched. They participated. They, the People, lingered to savor that last rare drop of glory. Although simplistic, the HD coverage offered an active, full-contact television moment brimming with pristine digital images that conveyed a profound analog meaning. The citizenry came away feeling and knowing that they were touched and made part of a rare moment that will endure.

HDTV service fully delivered on its promise as HETV, highly emotional television. Congratulations to WCVB, Harris, and all the folks who brought “HD Launch Day” together – with the right stuff.

*“Television is a gift of God,  
and God will hold those who utilize His divine instrument accountable to Him.”*  
- Philo T. Farnsworth,  
inventor & father of television.

Godspeed, J.G. Yeehaaaa!

Pete Fasciano

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