



# Challenges of Digital Switchover in Nigeria

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## ABSTRACT

The use of digital technology facilitates the coverage of computer, telecommunication, audio and visual and consumer electrical and electronic gadgets. It is making considerable impact on the broadcasting industry, on individual, families and on society as a whole. All governments attach great importance to digitization and formulate policies and plans, reflecting active encouragement of digitization. There are a lot of benefits derivable from switching from analogue to digital TV broadcasting in Nigeria; nevertheless, this paper identified a series of challenges to the process of digitization in Nigeria among which are the lack of fund, the lack of skilled manpower, knowledge gap (poor audience sensitization on digitization process), and the apparent lack of enthusiasm from the government among others. Based on this, there is need for government to ensure enhanced delivery of digital broadcast equipment by removing all tariffs on these equipment and where possible, mandates their assemblage in the country. This will make the equipment generally affordable and easy to acquire. Also, relevant training and educational programs in the use and management of digital technology should be conceived and used as strategies to build the capacity of media personnel in the country. This will enable the presence of a skilled manpower to operate the digital equipment. Lastly, the Nigerian government should accept to make sufficient financial sacrifices to entirely support the process.

**Keywords:** Digitization, Switchover, Challenges, Benefits, Broadcasting

## INTRODUCTION

About two decades ago, television was synonymous with analogue terrestrial television. With the development of new distribution channels, such as satellite TV and cable TV the demand for adaptors to link the new broadcasting technology to the existing TV and VCR equipment started to grow. These converters were the first set-top-boxes to be added to the existing TV-set by the consumer. Set-top-boxes opened the door to new broadcasting systems for the consumer. The set top box will still exist as a product genre to provide high functionality to basic television equipment as new broadcasting and home networking technologies emerge. Compared to other media, television has, since the 1950s-60s, come to play a dominant role in many countries as a means of mass communication and entertainment; global television has become an important aspect of globalization [1]. Digital Television (DTV) is widely seen as a major paradigm shift in television history. The U.S. Federal Communications Commission states that DTV will “transform your television viewing experience” [2].

The European Commission [3], refers to the term switch-off as the termination of terrestrial transmission of analog television; and switchover as the transition from analog to digital broadcasting of all networks, including terrestrial, cable, satellite and DSL (digital subscriber lines). Digitization is a concept revolving the media industry including the prints and the electronic media. Digitization is a process through which information, whether relayed or through sound, text, voice or image is converted into digital, binary language for computer use FCC–Federal Communication Commission [2]. The use of digital technology facilitates the coverage of computer, telecommunication, audio and visual and consumer electrical and electronic gadgets. It is making considerable impact on the broadcasting industry, on individual, families and on society as a whole. All governments attach great importance to digitization and formulate policies and plans, reflecting active encouragement of digitization. Non-addressability of cable systems was a big challenge with the analogue cable industry. Addressability can be achieved when the subscriber base is auditable or verifiable [4]. The actual number of subscribers was unknown. Information about the actual number of subscribers was available only to the local cable operators. Local cable operators often undervalued the amount collected. So the broadcasters had to incur heavy losses by way of revenue; and to revenues of the government by way of Service Tax and Entertainment Tax collection. Moreover, analogue transmission does not support emerging technologies like High Definition (HD). It does not provide a good quality viewing experience to the end user and has limitation on the number of channels that can be carried on the platform. The number of channels that can be carried on an analogue transmission is very low as 60-70; of which only 10-12 are of good quality; whereas a digital based system can carry over 1,000 channels [5]. In this light, many countries developed a timetable for digital switchover and analog switchoff because of the relevance in today's highly technological, innovative and competitive media industry in the world.

Depending on the differentiation of the transmission signals of the television, digital television consists of three types – terrestrial DTV, cable DTV and satellite DTV. The development of these types of digital TV is also a factor any government will take into consideration in establishing a policy for the digital TV industry. In compliance with the agreement with ITU, Nigeria started the process of digital broadcasting because of the many advantages over analogue. According to [6], since information technology has opened a world of possibilities for broadcasting industries, a wider scope will be available for radio and television broadcasting in the country. Therefore, more frequencies or wavelengths will be available for television stations in the country". It is unarguable to state that digital broadcasting obviously has many advantages and benefits over the analogue however; it is not without its challenges. The paper aims to highlight the positive sides as well as the challenges of digital switchover in Nigeria.

### **The Benefits of Digital Switch Over**

There are a lot of benefits derivable from switching from analogue to digital TV broadcasting in Nigeria. Some of them include:

- a) **Freeing of Spectrum Band:** It is expected that when the process of DSO is completed in Nigeria, some frequency bands of the spectrum would be vacated by broadcasters and would be ceded to the telecommunication regulatory agencies for sale and used in the mobile broadcast industries. The spectrum according to [7] which is expected to worth over one billion dollars would change the entire creative industry ecosystem. This is also capable of creating millions of jobs in the years to come.
- b) **Utilization of Broadband:** Everywhere in the world, video consumption has been the key driver for majority of homes acquiring broadband. Consequently, the commercialization of broadband requires homes to consume the large pipes of data which uniquely video can do. An example of such commercial utilization is the thriving local film industry with lots of home-grown contents. Most other uses do not require much data. Free TV and DSO can provide the best of local content to drive purchase of last mile home data. Also, the home equipment used for the home can be the Free TV boxes which already have the data port to bring data to the home [8].
- c) **Encourages Multiplexing:** Analogue broadcasting provides a limited choice of programming due to restricted bandwidth, and it is no longer an efficient technology. The same transmission channel used to broadcast a single analogue programme could carry a multiplex of up to 10 or more digital programs of equivalent quality. Free TV is available nationwide on both digital terrestrial TV DTT and direct-to-home DTH transmission [8].
- d) **Value Added Services:** In addition to broadcast services, Free TV also provides value added services such as enforcement and collection of TV licenses, Premium PayTV channels, Push video on Demand, Information Service Audience Measurement, etc.
- e) **Job Creation:** The DSO is not just about high-fidelity sound, and picture, it is about creating jobs, especially for the teeming youth, stimulating local content and empowering channel owners. It is estimated that in the next three years, the DSO in Nigeria will be capable of creating more than one million jobs in the manufacturing of set-top boxes or decoder manufacturing, TV production, film production, distribution (supply of STBs, TVs, and dongles for the internet), as well as TV and Online advertising.
- f) **Payment of One-a-year Access Fee:** Another major advantage of the DSO is that viewers will not pay subscription fee. Once a subscriber has acquired the set-up box and pays the once-a-year access fee, which of course is a token, the subscriber is connected for free viewing all the way. By this, millions of Nigerians who cannot afford to pay the rising subscription fees being charged by the Pay Tv platforms are assured of free digital viewing. This is the meaning of bridging the digital divide [9].

### **Challenges to the Process of Digitization in Nigeria**

Nigeria's digital migration has been– and is still - faced with serious challenges. These challenges include a variety of phenomena including the lack of fund, the lack of skilled (computer literate) manpower, knowledge gap (poor audience sensitization on digitization process), the slow elaboration of a working legal framework for the digitization process and the apparent lack of enthusiasm from the government among others. It has for instance been observed that the Nigerian government has visibly not maintained the same zeal at all stages of the digitization process. The enthusiasm manifested by the late President Musa Yar Adua's administration from the onset of the process seemingly kept reducing as years went by. This factor, coupled with others – notably Nigerian bureaucracy, the lukewarm attitude of media operators, the prohibitive cost of the digitization project especially for state media organizations – caused the initial deadline of the switchover to be postponed three times. These challenges equally caused some unnecessary delay in the definition of a legal framework for the digitization scheme. In line with this, there was a delay in the release of the White Paper on the report of the Presidential

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Advisory Committee (PAC) on Transition from Analogue to Digital Broadcasting, a document which seeks to provide vital parameters (a framework) for the accomplishment of the project. Akinreti et al point Nigerian Government's responsibility to the slow nature of the process of digitization when they note that: "the dominant belief in the broadcasting industry today is that Nigeria's digital migration plan is one of the casualties of the death of President Umaru Yar'Adua in May 2010, as the succeeding administration practically went to sleep with no action taking place on the process". As of now, the Nigerian Government has simply supported and facilitated the realization of the necessary background planning, including licensing of manufacturers for the production of Set-Top-Boxes (STB); transmission carriers; Signal Distributors, among others strategic tools. However, clear political will – symbolized by the procurement of the necessary funding to support the digitization process – is yet to be manifested. The lack of such a financial support from the government is identified as one of the principal factors which have hampered the effective digitization as earlier planned in January 2015. The digitization process in Nigeria has therefore been faced with serious financial challenges. In effect, huge financial sacrifices are naturally required to fully acquire the digital technology so as to totally revolutionize both production and transmission of programs. Both new entrants in the Nigerian broadcasting industry and government owned broadcast organizations – notably the Nigerian Television Authority (NTA) and the Federal Radio Corporation of Nigeria (FRCN) – have been compelled to deploy enormous resources to surmount the constraint. These stations have been compelled to pay as much as about 3 million Naira per trimesters, for their respective bandwidths and Internet access [10]. As poignantly remarked by [11], efforts by most Nigerian media houses towards digitization have mainly been an attempt at insufficiently imitating their Western counterparts [11]. Such attempt at 'rubbing shoulders' with the Western media has virtually stopped just with the internet sites which some of the Nigerian media organizations have been able to set up. Other vital facilities and resources are still largely unavailable to Nigerian journalists. These resources include equipment such as company sponsored laptop computers with mobile internet access, digital recording devices, open access mobile telephones, well equipped and functional news rooms fitted with state-of-the-art multi-media equipment. To this wide range of facilities could be added the provision of salaries and working conditions that will take into consideration global trends, market prices and national inflation rates. Similarly, the audiences are still faced with the same financial constraint as viewers without digital compliant sets need to disburse relatively heavy sums of money to acquire a Set-Top Box for digital TV signal or a High Definition Television. Given the fact that a STB and a HDTV cost dearly, the serious financial implications can be said to be a non-negligible challenge to the effective completion of the digitization process in the country.

Another non-negligible challenge is that of manpower and skilled media personnel to operate the new and fragile digital equipment in the various media organizations. This situation calls for adequate training of the existing computer illiterate personnel of media houses or the recruitment of computer literate ones. All this strategies (capacity building and recruitment of computer literate media personnel) is not without (marginal) financial and technical implications. It is viewing these negative implications and challenges of digitization that Chalaby and Segell contend that: The digitization of television has considerably increased the sources of uncertainties and the level of risks for the rapidly expanding number of players involved in broadcasting. Although there exist certainties in broadcasting, such as the fragmentation of audiences and the globalization of the field, many developments are still open-ended and very few analysts can predict the direction they will take. Furthermore, even though some future features of broadcasting are clear for all to see, most market players are unsure about their own future in broadcasting. They are uncertain how to relate to both predictable and unpredictable developments, and are aware that they need to take risks and tough decisions if they are to prosper in the time ahead. Another challenge closely connected with the above mentioned constraints is the ineffective sensitization of Nigerian audiences to the technical and financial implications of the digitization process. This ineffective sensitization is responsible for the lack of awareness among audiences on the implications of digital migration. Few months after the ITU's deadline for the switchover to digital, only a negligible few can be said to be actually aware of the migration deadline or the strategies in place to ensure that audiences are not cut-off from television viewing in the country [12]. Though the digitization scheme has already progressed to a crucial stage, many Nigerians – especially illiterate audiences and rural area dwellers – are still unaware of the Nitti gritty of the process. This is seriously hampering effective digitization as the process is unnecessarily drawn back by audiences who do not grasp the various implications of the process.

### **CONCLUSION/RECOMMENDATION**

This paper identified a series of challenges to the process of digitization in Nigeria including the lack of fund, the lack of skilled manpower, knowledge gap (poor audience sensitization on digitization process), and the apparent lack of enthusiasm from the government among others. Based on this, there is need for government to ensure enhanced delivery of digital broadcast equipment by removing all tariffs on these equipment and where possible, mandates their assemblage in the country. This will make the equipment generally affordable and easy to acquire.

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