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Digitalisation and its Impact

The International Telecommunications Union (ITU), a United Nations agency tasked with coordinating global telecommunications and services, has set a deadline of 17 June 2015 for broadcasters in Europe, Africa, the Middle East and the Islamic Republic of Iran to migrate to digital television broadcasting technology, on both the transmission and the reception side. The ITU deadline refers only to the digitalisation of television broadcasting. Deadlines for the digitalisation of radio have not yet been determined.

The ITU-agreement, however, allows for an additional five years up to 2020 for many African countries, among them Nigeria, beyond the 2015 cut-off point, even though some have voluntarily committed themselves to the earlier deadline.

The ITU sees the digitalisation of broadcasting as a means of establishing a more equitable, just and people-centred information society, leapfrogging ‘existing technologies to connect the unconnected in underserved and remote communities and close the digital divide’.

The switch-over from analogue to digital broadcasting will expand the potential for a greater convergence of services, with digital terrestrial broadcasting supporting mobile reception of video, internet and multimedia data. Digitalisation of television is seen as a means of enhancing the viewer’s experience by enabling better quality viewing through wide-screen, high definition pictures and surround sound, as well as interactive services. It also allows for innovations such as handheld TV broadcasting devices (Digital Video Broadcasting-Handheld, or DVB-H), and will mean greater bandwidth for telecommunication services. Importantly, it will also allow for the creation of many more television and radio channels through greater spectrum efficiency.

53 Ibid.
54 Ibid.
1 Preparedness for the switch-over

The process of digitalisation in the broadcasting industry began in 2007 when the government approved December 2007 as the start-off date for the transition from analogue to digital broadcasting. The regulatory body, the National Broadcasting Commission (NBC), ordered all pay-TV operations to switch over by the end of that year and started to enforce this deadline when it shut down analogue cable TV stations on 1 January 2008. The stations were later granted a reprieve and a new switch-over date was set for 31 March 2008. The NBC announced in June 2008 that a 90 per cent switch-over rate had been attained, and that the small number of operators who had not yet switched over were likely to be in the process of clearing their imported equipment with the customs authorities.55

Government set up a 27-member presidential advisory committee on digitalisation in September 2008 which submitted its report in June 2009 to the minister of information and communication, Prof. Dora Akunyili, on behalf of the president. While the report is not yet in the public domain, the committee gave an insight into some of its recommendations when presenting the document during a press conference. These recommendations include, among others, the separation of the functions of broadcast content providers and signal distributors with the consequent introduction of two categories of licences: broadcasting content licences and broadcasting signal distribution licences. At the time of writing, government had not announced its position on the recommendations.

Broadcasters generally appreciate the inevitability of the digital migration and investments are being made into the purchase of the necessary hardware, with all digital equipment having to be imported at high cost. According to the NBC, over 90 per cent digitalisation in production and post-production equipment has been achieved nationwide.56

In addition, many stations are giving attention to the appropriate skilling of their workforce – through training of existing staff and insisting that newly recruited members possess the requisite information technology skills.

The potential economic cost of digitalisation to the Nigerian consumer is cause for concern for stakeholders, including the government. It is feared that many citizens will not be able to afford the set-top boxes required to receive digital TV signals, which come at a cost of more than US$ 110 per box. In total, an estimated US$ 2.7 billion

will be needed for the purchase of set-top boxes for 24 million TV sets nationwide, according to the NBC.\textsuperscript{57}

The government has acknowledged this challenge. Former information minister, Frank Nweke Jnr, told a 2006 international conference of African stakeholders in Abuja, the Nigerian capital:

\begin{quote}
We [government] strongly desire media penetration to larger sections of our populations, but we are now faced with the prospect of a reversal occasioned by possible inability of large numbers to upgrade receivers or acquire new sets due to their economic circumstances.\textsuperscript{58}
\end{quote}

The advisory committee therefore recommended a policy to make the new technology more accessible and affordable to the general public through the set-top box. Experts have suggested that the government should ease the financial burden on consumers through such measures as provision of free or subsidised set-top boxes.

\section{Convergence}

Mobile phones can now be used for the reception of radio and television. Many brands of handsets (mobile phone receivers) are easily configured to receive signals from various radio stations in the country.

In August 2007, MultiChoice, a company which operates the Digital Satellite Television (DSTV) platform, introduced Digital Video Broadcasting – Handheld, DVB-H, a technological standard which allows digital broadcasting of television and audio feed to a mobile phone. The service was launched through an affiliate company, Details Nigeria, which concluded its first distribution agreement with MTN Nigeria, a local mobile phone operator.

Similar arrangements have also been initiated by mobile phone operators, following their acquisition of Third Generation (3G) licences in late 2006. For example, Globacom, a major operator, announced plans to introduce Triple Play, a service that offers high-speed internet, television and telephone. It recently launched a facility which makes the signal of Silverbird TV, a local channel, available to its subscribers.

On many stations the audience can take part in competitions and game shows and make requests on live television broadcasts through short messaging services (sms)

from mobile phones. It is common to find interactive sms messages being scrolled on TV screens in between news updates and adverts.

The regulatory body, NBC, sees these services as adding value to telephony and considers their operations satisfactory as long as the content provider is licensed and the content conforms to the provisions of the Nigeria Broadcasting Code.

3 Increased competition

The broadcasting industry expects an explosion in the number of players in addition to the 406 licencees now in existence. The resulting competition will be even fiercer in a business environment which is said to be tough already.

4 Conclusion and recommendations

A prime source of concern is whether Nigeria will meet the 2015 deadline set by the ITU. The delay in policy development and implementation gives the impression that there is insufficient political will and commitment by government. This is all the more concerning because the work can only proceed once the policy framework is in place.

Recommendations

- The government should speedily translate the report of the presidential advisory committee on digitalisation into public policy, organise public consultations, invite public input, issue its white paper and give implementation directives.
- The existing broadcasting law and regulation should be reviewed to incorporate issues of broadcasting digitalisation.
- The National Population Commission should release data gathered on TV/radio-set ownership from the last population and household census, so that this information will be available for broadcasting policies and planning.
- The NBC should be empowered to conduct surveys and update the data gathered on TV/radio-set ownership during the last census.
- The NBC should continue to create awareness about the importance and challenges of digitalisation.