Public Broadcasting in Africa Series: Uganda

Lugalambi, W.

Published by African Minds

Lugalambi, W.
Public Broadcasting in Africa Series: Uganda.
Project MUSE. muse.jhu.edu/book/17532.

For additional information about this book
https://muse.jhu.edu/book/17532
1 Background

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 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’.47

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, and 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.48 Importantly, it will also allow for the creation of many more television and radio channels through greater spectrum efficiency.

---


48 Ibid.
2 Preparedness for switch-over to digital within government and industry

In the national broadcasting policy, the government set itself the objective of designing ‘a comprehensive policy on digital broadcasting’ that would ‘facilitate the process of conversion from analogue to digital broadcasting’. In so doing, the government would develop the relevant legal framework while the regulator (either the Broadcasting Council or the Uganda Communications Commission or both) would ensure a gradual transition to digital broadcasting. By the same token, operators would be ‘encouraged to convert the studio production and communication technologies from analogue to digital and to develop all necessary capacity to operate as a digital broadcaster’.49

In spite of these clear intentions, however, there is still no digital migration policy in place. Mr Godfrey Mutabazi, the chairman of the Broadcasting Council, had indicated in early 2009 that a technical group comprising officials from his Council, the Uganda Communications Commission, the Ministry for Information and Communication Technology, and selected stakeholders was developing a ‘policy paper’ on digital migration, which would be subjected to public hearings.50 After this a draft policy would be tabled before cabinet and then Parliament for approval.

By the end of 2009 the country had taken some steps in preparation for the switch to digital signal distribution or transmission. The government assigned UBC the role of national digital signal distributor, a decision that private broadcasters objected to vehemently because they see UBC as a competitor. The National Association of Broadcasters prefers a ‘neutral’ digital television distribution company and an independent body to take charge of digital regulation.

At the same time the Uganda Communications Commission and UBC are spearheading a pilot project to test Uganda’s migration from analogue signal transmission. Under the project leading television stations, including NTV, WBS, NBS, and EATV are working with UBC and Next Generation Broadcasting, a Swedish company, to relay digital signals to 200 selected viewers in Kampala. Viewers participating receive their TV signals from UBC’s transmission site in Kololo via set top boxes (STBs) or decoders that convert the digital signal into analogue format.51 The first public viewing of the pilot digital television transmission took place in Kampala in November 2009.

Uganda has set a deadline of December 2012 for the switch-over to digital television transmission, which will be via both satellite and terrestrial relay. The majority of Ugandans access TV through terrestrial transmission, and the market for direct

50 Personal interview, 4 August 2008.
satellite TV has expanded only gradually over the last five years.

The national custodian of public data, the Uganda Bureau of Statistics (UBOS), and UCC had no authoritative figures, but a UBOS official, speaking anonymously and in an individual capacity, estimated that there were about 55,000 satellite TV subscribers. Independently verified figures could not be obtained from the providers of satellite TV services because they considered this information confidential. Nonetheless, in early 2009 an official of Multichoice Uganda gave an estimate of 25,000 subscribers for their service, up from 10,000 in 2000, while competitors GTV gave an estimate of 21,000 customers. It is assumed that most of GTV’s subscribers, after the company’s collapse in the wake of the global financial crisis, switched to Multichoice’s DSTV service, which is reported to have grown to about 50,000 subscribers.

In terms of the preparedness of the country’s broadcasters to make the switch to digital, most, including UBC, are already using digital technology in production. An official at UBC TV said their production equipment was 80–90 per cent digital.

3 Preparedness for switch-over to digitalisation on the part of consumers

While there is a small section of consumers already subscribing to satellite TV services, for the majority of viewers who rely on terrestrial TV the switch will be long and financially painful. With over a quarter of the population living in absolute poverty, and millions more not much better off, it is evident that substantial incentives will be needed to enable most of the citizens to acquire set top boxes or digital TV receivers. The minister for information and communication technology, Mr Aggrey Awori, said at the first public viewing of the pilot digital television transmission in Kampala in November 2009 that the government was ‘considering subsidising the cost of additional technology to ensure that the analogue users can access the digital content’. The set top box costs between US$ 50 and US$ 100.

4 Convergence

Individuals with high-end mobile phones are able to receive radio and more recently TV on their phones. There are no specific technical standards for such services, as the regulator appears to have left it to service providers to innovate with new products.

---

52 Personal interview with Ms Helena Mayanja, Public Relations Officer, Multichoice Uganda, 22 January 2009.
53 Personal interview with Mr Mark Walungama, acting manager, UBC TV.
and to consumers to choose the technology that affords them the best value for their money. Subscription TV service providers do carry and offer radio as part of their packages. Interactive features are also available in most of these packages. There are no special regulations for these services beyond the established licensing requirements that providers of satellite TV services have to meet.

News organisations such as Monitor Publications Ltd provide breaking news via SMS to subscribers while mobile phone operators also deliver news and sports updates to their customers who wish to have such access. There is still no special regulation to guide such news production and delivery.

5 Increased competition

Although in theory digital broadcasting is expected to result in more competition, there is no way of telling what impact it will have on the sector as a whole. This will ultimately depend on the policies that the regulators will institute and the marketing strategies of the various service providers or investors in this sector. It is possible that more foreign investors might take an interest in this market. What appears to be constraining the growth of this sector is the price of a TV set and the initial cost of buying and installing satellite TV equipment.

6 Conclusions and recommendations

It is difficult to make predictions other than to reflect on the generic impacts that digitalisation is expected to generate, such as better quality images, more content, and a wider range of programmes. Government policies will certainly influence how broadcasters respond to the benefits of digitalisation. The rate of adoption will depend on the level of intervention that the government is prepared to make to help consumers make the inevitable switch.

Recommendations

Digital migration policy

- The government urgently needs to come up with a fully elaborated policy on digital migration.
Digital signal regulation

- The government should appoint an independent body to manage the distribution of digital signals, as opposed to the present policy whereby the distribution of the signals is overseen by UBC, which has a vested interest in the matter. This violates the rules of fair competition.
- The government should involve the public in critical decisions on digitalisation.