

A CRITICAL DISCOURSE ON THE CHALLENGES OF MIGRATION TO DIGITAL TELEVISION BROADCASTING IN NIGERIA

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Abstract

At the Regional Radio communication Conference of ITU which took place in June 2006 in Geneva, Switzerland, participants unanimously endorsed a motion for broadcast stations to migrate from analogue to digital broadcasting with deadlines of June 17, 2015, and June 17, 2020, for countries using frequency bands such as VHF. In a bid to fully comply before the ITU deadlines, Nigeria had set 3 unsuccessful deadlines for herself. It first of all set June 17, 2012, which it failed to actualize. The date was extended to December 31, 2012, without success, while a further extension to January 1, 2015, could not equally herald the intended success. Sequel to these failures, the critical question that demand urgent response is, what are the specific factors that have continued to hinder Nigeria's transition to digital broadcasting? On this premise, the researchers(using the intensive interview research method as well as a review of relevant empirical studies), aim to critically unveil and explicate the various factors impeding the successful migration from analogue to digital television broadcasting in Nigeria, this is with a cardinal intention of advancing well thought-out recommendations that will ensure successful transition.

Keywords:• Television •Digital •Migration •Broadcasting •Critical

1. Introduction

At the Regional Radio communication Conference (RRC-06) of The International Telecommunication Union (ITU) which took place in June 2006 in Geneva, Switzerland, participants unanimously endorsed a motion for broadcast stations to migrate from analogue to digital broadcasting with deadlines of June 17, 2015, and June 17, 2020, for countries using frequency bands such as VHF. “The conference was held to develop digital terrestrial broadcasting plan in the frequency bands III (174-230 MHz) and IV/V (470 –862 MHz) in Region 1 countries being Europe, Africa, Middle East and the Islamic Republic of Iran. The RRC- 06 established the Geneva Agreement of 2006 (GE-06) by which countries that are party to this agreement are required to replace the existing analogue television broadcasting under the GE-89 Plan for the same frequency bands on 17 June 2015 when digital broadcasting should be fully implemented (Somaila, 2013).

Within a 10-year window, each country was allowed to choose its own switchover date. Several countries chose one single date for all broadcast operators to switch over to digital broadcasting while others such as the United Kingdom and India chose different dates for different cities and regions within their territories. Buoyed by optimism, stakeholders in the Nigerian broadcast industry adopted June 17, 2012 as the nation’s switchover date. This date was approved by the late President Umaru Yar’Adua. By the approval, June 17, 2012 became Nigeria’s official switchover date. However, few months to the Nigerian deadline, the National Broadcasting Commission (NBC) and the federal government came up with December 31, 2012 as the new switch over date. The reason given by the federal government was that it wanted “everybody to be ready by 2015” (Ocholi, 2009 cited in Ihechu&Uche, 2012, p.38). Unable to still meet this deadline, it was extended to January 1, 2015, which the nation also failed to fully comply with. According to the ITU time table, the start date for transition from analogue to digital television broadcasting was 17th June, 2006 while the deadline was 17th June, 2015. Some African and Arab countries were granted an extension to protect their analogue stations till 17th June, 2020 only in Band III, that is 174 230 MHz frequency. Since the coming into force of the 2006 agreement, many countries, among them the United States of America and eighteen (18) European countries have completed their switchover to digital television (Somaila 2013). This is a sharp contrast to the Nigerian situation where the switchover has become a herculean task for broadcast stations in the country.

2. Objective of the Study

The study was aimed at unravelling and explicating the challenges impeding the successful migration from analogue to digital television broadcasting in Nigeria.

3. Challenges of Migration to Digital Television Broadcasting in Nigeria

There is no doubt about the fact that the inability of television stations in Nigeria to successfully migrate to digital broadcasting is as a result of several factors. The fundamental question is, what are the challenges to effective migration from analogue to digital television broadcasting in Nigeria? Some of the core challenges are hereunder explicated;

3.1 The challenge of unawareness: This is no doubt a very cardinal factor impeding the successful migration from analogue to digital television broadcasting in Nigeria. It is heart breaking that many Nigerians are not even aware of the switchover. Worse still, some broadcasters are even ignorant of it.

This has slowed down the pace of the switchover in Nigeria. Giving credence to this, Ihechu and Uche, (2012, p.42) asserted that another challenge is the issue of awareness of the audience, government officials and sundry, of the digitization process. Nigeria has a large segment of illiterate population. Most of this population dwell in the rural areas. They do not readily get information concerning the process. Also in the government offices, the awareness is not yet there. These scenarios create a gap between those that are aware of the process and those that are not. In this wise, the digitization process is faced with the challenge of being drawn backwards by people who do not understand the issues and other intricacies of the programme. Njoku (2015) also found in his study that the ignorance level of both the media personnel and audience members alike regarding the migration to digital broadcasting is at a high level thereby affecting the overall effort of migration. Furthermore, indepth interviews conducted with some broadcasters and audience in Northern Nigeria revealed that many of the respondents have never heard of the switchover to digital broadcasting.

3.2 Challenge of unavailable/inadequate digital equipment: The issue of unavailability/inadequate digital equipment is also a core impediment to the successful migration in Nigeria. Many television stations in the country lack the needed digital equipment to make the switchover a reality in their various stations. A visit to some stations in the country showed that analogue broadcast equipment are still very visible in the stations. Accordingly, a qualitative study by Ilesanmi (2015) showed that Ondo State Radio vision Corporation (OSRC) does not have sufficient digital equipment for digital broadcasting. Another study conducted by Oka for (2015) revealed that most television stations in South-East and South-South Nigeria do not have adequate digital broadcast equipment in their stations. More so, interviews with some broadcasters in North-Central Nigeria revealed that many television stations in the geopolitical zone do not have sufficient digital broadcast equipment.

3.3 Challenge of Scarcity of Qualified Manpower: Apart from the challenge of unavailability/inadequate digital broadcast equipment, the inability of many television stations to get the needed manpower to operate digital equipment is a serious challenge to the stations. Many technical staff of the television stations do not possess the requisite technical knowledge to operate crucial digital equipment. Some of them are not well trained to man the equipment for maximal performance. In line with this, Ihechu and Uche, (2012, p.42) stated thus “as the complex and fragile equipment are coming in, there is need for matching manpower. The task of training and retraining personnel to fit into the digital process pose a challenge to the race. The existing broadcast personnel who may likely fit in may not be enough to fill the spaces and as such, pose an initial challenge. However, some of the existing personnel may be adversely affected too. Those who may not be able to understand the flexibility and, or, cope with the fragility of the new technology may be thrown to the labour market.” Ogbuoshi and Efetobor (2014) conducted a study entitled “Towards Digitization of Broadcasting in Nigeria: Deadline, Challenges and Realities” with the aim of determining the possibility of Nigeria meeting up with the ITU deadline. The findings revealed that presently, Nigeria is largely unprepared for the digital switchover. In terms of infrastructure, and manpower needed to drive the digitalization process, Nigeria is still miles away from getting close to achieving the ITU’s digitalization benchmark. An interview with the general managers of television syations in the South-West geopolitical zone of Nigeria, revealed that

manpower to operate equipment is a challenge to the match towards complying with the ITU mandate of switchover to digital broadcasting in Nigeria.

3.4 Inadequate/Elliptic power supply: This issue of inadequate power supply has continued to bedevil Nigeria unabated. The necessary power supply needed by the televisions to operate relevant digital broadcast equipment is often times inadequate. Stations are left with no choice than to resort to buying fuel and diesel (with limited resources) to power their equipment. This no doubt has affected the effective match towards migration to digital broadcasting. Accordingly, Ihechu and Uche, (2012, p.42) averred that “the power sector in the country is nothing to write home about. The country has spent huge sums of money, though not accountably, to revive the power supply to no avail. Consequently, the sound of generators at every corner of a Nigerian street calls for alarm. But the people have to use these generators to at least, “live life”. Also, all the companies in the country – petrol stations, telecom, banks, manufacturers, broadcast organizations, etc – rely on standby generators to carry on their businesses. In the long run, it impacts on the cost of production or service rendering costs. The charges are later transferred to the consumers. It would be apt to point here, that the epileptic power supply and the invariable dependence on generators pose big challenges to the digitization process. It would create high cost of programme production and presentation.” Ogbuoshi and Efetobor (2014) in their study also revealed that physical infrastructures like power that are largely unavailable are major threats to the actualization of the digitalization in Nigeria. Interviews with broadcasters in selected states in Nigeria affirmed the fact that lack of adequate supply is a major impediment to the quest for a successful switchover to digital broadcasting.

3.5 The challenge of Poverty: Many broadcast audience in Nigeria reside in the rural areas and are bedeviled with high level of poverty. So affording digital television/the relevant facilities such as set top boxes to access digital contents is a fundamental challenge to them. This obviously affects the way and manner they respond to the digital switchover. This has no doubt affected their compliance to the demands of the switchover. A visit to many homes revealed that the analogue television sets are still much around in their homes without the recommended box to empower the television to receive digital contents. Hassan (2015) found in his study that many broadcast audience in Northern Nigeria lack the needed financial muscle to comply with the move to digital broadcasting. In a related study, Ebimini (2015) found that majority of residents in rural communities in South-South Nigeria cannot afford the digital facilities to enable them watch digital contents from digital television. More so, in depth interviews with some rural dwellers in South-East Nigeria showed that they lack the financial capacity to comply with the digital switchover.

4. Conclusion

From the explication above, it is obvious that Nigeria's inability to fully comply with the ITU demand of digital migration was as a result of a number of factors such as unawareness, scarcity of qualified manpower, poverty, inadequate power supply, and inadequate digital equipment. Until these and other relevant issues are addressed, a successful migration may be unattainable in Nigeria.

5. Recommendations

Sequel to the challenges identified, the following recommendations are advanced

1. A massive awareness campaign should be launched in Nigeria to properly inform the people about the digital switchover. The Nigerian Broadcast Commission should champion the campaign.
2. Television stations in Nigeria should start the process of acquiring relevant and current digital equipment to enable them fully migrate to digital broadcasting.
3. All television stations in Nigeria should as a matter of urgency commence the training and retraining of their staff to herald enhanced skills in the operations of digital equipment.
4. The Nigerian government must as a function of necessity address and restore normalcy in power supply. The government must ensure there is regular power supply in the country. This will enable the broadcast stations to maximally utilize the digital equipment to transmit digital contents to the audience.
5. The Nigerian government and other donor agencies should assist the audience in providing digital facilities either by giving them free of charge or by giving them at a highly subsidized rate. This will enable the people to comply with the demands of the digital switchover.

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