

# MEDIA POLICY

## BRIEFINGS

No. 2

### DIGITIZATION OF BROADCASTING IN NIGERIA



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**M**EDIA POLICY BRIEFINGS takes one more step forward in delivering strategic information and education to stakeholders in Nigeria and across the world on the key issues affecting the development of community radio and the entire radio sector in Nigeria.

This issue builds on the foundation laid by the first edition by focusing on Digitization of Broadcasting, one of the most current and prominent issues on the communication landscape. Nigeria is a participant in the global race to digitalise broadcasting. It is important that its key issues are highlighted and explained to strengthen public information and education.

It is our hope that readers will, as in the first edition, find in this a rich and useful working reference

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## FURTHER INFORMATION

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Nigeria is a major stakeholder in the global move towards broadcasting Digitization. With a population of 140 million, it is Africa's most populous country and the world's ninth. Its broadcasting sector - comprising 187 radio stations, 143 television stations, etc - is easily the largest on the African continent.

Nigeria has joined the global Digitization train. But the speed of decision and implementation has been less than inspiring.

The broadcasting regulatory body, National Broadcasting Commission (NBC) embarked on sensitization programmes for stakeholders and prepared position papers for the federal government between 2004 and 2006. A countryspecific switchover date was fixed at June 17, 2012, three years ahead of the global deadline.

But regulatory efforts have not received corresponding pace in the activities of higher government authorities. After much tardiness, the government finally approved December 2007 as the country's transition start off date. It took another year for it to take another significant step: Inaugurating a Presidential Advisory Committee (PAC) to design a roadmap for the Digitization programme. That was in October 2008. The 27 member PAC submitted its report to the government in June 2009.

The government has not made the contents of the report public nor announced its decisions on them. But at the report submission ceremony, the committee said it recommended, among other things:

- ❖ A new broadcast model which separates the function of the Broadcast Content Provider and the Broadcast signal Distributor.
- ❖ An ownership structure of the Broadcasting Signal Distributor, taking into consideration such factors as the requirements for a quick realization of the project; financial muscle; service efficiency and national security.
- ❖ Restructuring of the licencing framework in the broadcasting sector, leading to two categories of licences - Broadcasting Content Licence and Broadcasting Signal Distribution Licence.
- ❖ Re establishment of the Public Broadcaster as a social institution, in the face of commercialization
- ❖ Management of the Spectrum Dividend that will result from the transition in a manner that brings the greatest benefits to the greatest number of people.
- ❖ Suitable infrastructural digital broadcasting standards that would ensure compatibility on both national and international levels.
- ❖ Accessibility and affordability of the general public to the new programming regime, through the traditional Set Top Box.
- ❖ Development of the content industry in Nigeria, as well as the closely related training and capacity development in the industry.
- ❖ A relentless consumer awareness campaign as well as consumer protection, including controls on distribution of consumer equipment.

The committee argued that since the country was running late, a fast track approach was necessary. It suggested, among other things, that a Digital Transition Implementation Team (DigiTeam Nigeria) should be immediately set up and enabled to hit the ground running. But that has not happened.



The development of broadcasting moved to a new, higher level on June 16, 2006. Representatives of 104 countries adopted and signed in Geneva, Switzerland, a treaty agreement at the conclusion of a historic international conference organized by the International Union (ITU), a United Nations agency. The agreement was for a switchover of television from analogue to digital broadcasting. And it signalled the commitment of nations to replace such old analogue television broadcasting existing plans as the one in Europe since 1961 and in Africa since 1989.

The 2006 Agreement was the climax of years of consultation among states across various continents. Among the consultations was a conference in May 2004, called RRC-04, which established a solid, comprehensive and technical basis for the 2006 Agreement and led to the accelerated introduction of digital terrestrial broadcasting in many countries.

Drawing strength from over 1000 delegates and lasting about one month, the 2006 conference did, among other things, draw up a new frequency plan for digital terrestrial television broadcasting. It laid down principles for modification of the plan and procedures for coordination of frequency assignments within ITU.

It also put in place a time table: start date for transition from analogue to digital television broadcasting was 17 June 2006 while the deadline was 17 June 2015. Some Africans and Arab countries were granted an extension to protect their analogue stations till 17 June 2020 only in Band III, that is, in the 174-230 MHz frequency band.

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. Many others are almost there. Meanwhile new digital systems for sound broadcasting are being developed but no date has been set for the end of FM and AM radio.



**D**igital broadcasting carries many benefits over the analogue system. The digital revolution presents broadcasters and broadcasting with vast opportunities to do so many interesting and valuable things they have always wanted to do but constrained by technological, financial and other resources.

Among the dividends that modern society is expected to reap from broadcasting Digitization are:

- (a) Efficient use of available spectrum which will allow more channels to be carried across fewer airwaves, thus bringing more choice to the viewer. Digitization permits the broadcasting of four to six more television channels from only one in the current analogue system. This means that a substantial part of the broadcast spectrum will be freed up for other uses.
- (b) Higher quality audio (sound) and video (images), including the possible deployment of High Definition Television (HDTV).
- (c) Digital television signals can carry extra information such as electronic programme guides that can provide additional programme and schedule information.
- (d) Interactive programming (two-way data exchanges)
- (e) Mobile reception of video, internet and multi media data.



**D**igitization is accompanied by a baggage of challenges which could be economic, political, social and technological and which affect the entire gamut of stakeholders.

Consumers face mainly an economic challenge. They must either upgrade or replace their analogue receivers. Digital television broadcasts will only be received on integrated digital TV sets / receivers or set top boxes connected to the analogue TV set. But in a situation where two thirds of the population live below the poverty line, purchasing new receivers or set top boxes may be difficult for a large section of the population.

Operators and content providers will have to contend with challenges in at least three directions: upgrades and replacements of analogue transmission equipment with digital transmission systems, which are capital intensive; development of sufficient quality content to fill the multiplicity of channels that will be available in such a way that "content recycling" will be prevented; and training in the use of new digital production equipment for large numbers of personnel in the industry.

Regulator: The regulatory agency, NBC, is known to operate with inadequate facilities occasioned by insufficient budget. Though a regulatory body, it has no power to grant licences, it only processes applications. These hamstrings will not allow it to deliver fully in a digitalized landscape.

Government must face certain challenges, and it appears it is aware of several of them. For example, it said in a May 2006 statement: "We 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".

The country is already being used as a dumping ground of used broadcast reception facilities such as radio / TV sets, cassette / CD players, etc which have been imported from advanced countries which have advanced in Digitization. What should government do about this? More channels will become available for allocation. Which sections of the population are in dire need and have to be equitably accommodated in the allocation of the free frequencies?





There has been global acceptance of the benefits of digitalization of television broadcasting and rapid adoption of digital television standards. The digitalization of sound broadcasting is proceeding at a much slower pace. None of the competing digital sound broadcasting standards is yet to offer a full replacement technology for analogue FM and AM radio. Prominent among the models for digital sound broadcasting are:

- i. Digital Audio Broadcasting (DAB) also known as EUREKA 147 or Digital System A, is the baby of a collaboration of 12 partners. It has been recognised as an international standard by the ITU and is used in Europe, Canada, Australia and parts of Asia. Following advances in encoding technologies, DAB+ (an upgrade of DAB) was developed in 2007.

Reports claim the DAB series (DAB and DAB+) have many benefits: MPEG -4 audio capability and exceptional performance efficiency; DAB enabled sets capable of automatically tuning to all available stations, thereby offering a list of stations; it is bandwidth efficient due to its adaptability to single frequency networks (SFNs) which enables more stations to be placed into a smaller section of spectrum. However it is not well suited to small area coverage such as community radio and at the periphery of the reception area transmission degradation is more immediately noticeable than with an analogue FM signal. An analogue FM receiver will not receive a DAB signal and therefore a new receiver must be purchased.

- ii. The In-Band on-Channel (IBOC, HD Radio) was developed in the United States and has been adopted as the country standard for digital broadcasting. Among its reported attractions are: its ability for simultaneous broadcast of analogue and digital signals on the same channel while ensuring high audio quality; multicasting additional digital audio channels; and use of existing receivers to access digital broadcast signals.

The main effect of these is that HD Radio enhances smooth transition from analogue to digital broadcasting. But it is effective in a limited coverage area and it remains prone to multipath distortion..

- iii. Digital Radio Mondiale (DRM) has been designed for operation in the short wave (SW), Medium Wave (MW) and Long Wave (LW) bands. Its advantages over analogue includes: better reception and extensive reach. An extended version, known as DRM+ may eventually provide an alternative to FM analogue transmission.

Experts have warned that so much experimentation is still going on with digital sound broadcasting and convincing stability has not been achieved in the development of these competing technologies. They readily point out the enormous waste which accrues from listeners' purchase of models which are rapidly being revised and upgraded in various developed countries.

For a country like Nigeria, the adoption of any of these technology standards should be handled with caution. The regulatory body, NBC, and broadcasters should not rush into adoption of any particular one until critical studies are conducted, inclusive consultations done and a realistic national policy enacted.

Secondly, there should be no switch off time table for FM or AM sound broadcasting services until there is a proven and viable digital replacement technology.



At the signing of the treaty agreement on broadcasting Digitization in Geneva in June 2006, the International Telecommunication Union (ITU) captured the decision and spirit of the participant countries in a historically significant statement which said in part:

“The Digitization of broadcasting ..... by 2015 represents a major landmark towards establishing a more equitable, just and people centered Information Society. The Digital switch over will leap-frog existing technologies to connect the unconnected in underserved and remote communities and close the digital divide.”

Community people and other advocates of community broadcasting now know, among other things that digital technology:

- ❖ Has made radio and television production much cheaper such that it is now even possible to have a complete radio station in a suitcase and for a much lower price than before.
- ❖ Will free up a substantial part of the television broadcast spectrum for other users, among whom would be community broadcasters.
- ❖ Could enhance access of grassroots and other underserved communities to a large diversity of new channels and choices.

As Nigeria prepares to begin the licencing of community radio stations, the government will have to note in its Digitization implementation programme the following key issues:

1. An equitable proportion of the spectrum freed up by the switch from analogue to digital television broadcasting should be reserved for the future development of digital community broadcasting radio and television using whichever technologies prove suitable.
2. In the digital switchover process, some parts of the FM band should be retained for local and community radio for the foreseeable future. There should be no switch off timetable for FM or AM sound broadcasting services until there is proven and viable digital replacement technology.



It is significant that after some delay, the government of Nigeria has made some motion on the Digitization issue in the past one year. It set up a Working Group in October 2008 and received its report in June 2009.

But there has been no word from Government on the issue into the public domain since then. Yet there is still so much to do in implementation if the country must meet its own stipulated deadline of 2012 or the internationally adopted deadline of 2015.

Three key stages are crucial in moving the digital broadcasting implementation programme forward:

**Policy:** Nigeria has not projected an enviable profile in policy development, particularly in the media / information sector, in the past decade. The sector has shown a less than businesslike and inconsistent approach to policy making and implementation. A 2004 effort to review the 1990 National Mass Communication Policy and a design of a fresh National Community Radio Policy in 2006 have still to be taken to conclusion. Yet major decisions continue to be taken on the broadcasting sector.

Implementation of broadcasting Digitization provides one huge opportunity for government to handle policy reform and development with seriousness. It would make much sense, for example, to have an up-to-date media policy which incorporates broadcasting and Digitization.

**Legislation:** Nigerian broadcasting law is among the most obsolete in today's global environment. Digitization is delivering huge expansion of the broadcasting sector and extension of access to populations everywhere. It will be important for legislation in Nigeria to do away with restrictive provisions and bring inclusion, pluralism to the people. This is to say that urgent law reform to accommodate the letter and spirit of Digitization is essential and urgent.

**Regulation:** There has been relatively more dynamism in the regulatory than the policy and legislative levels of the broadcasting sector in the past decade.

Digitization will require more dynamism from the regulator in the years to come, starting from this transition stage. But it (the regulator) will be able to live up to expectation if only:

- a) It is granted administrative and operational independence, and allowed to perform the full gamut of a regulator's functions, including having the power to authorize broadcasting licences.
- b) It is adequately funded, better through direct allocation from the legislature.





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