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Digitization of Broadcasting in Nigeria: A Mirage or a Possibility

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Abstract:

The recent trend is digitization in broadcasting in Nigeria. The Regional Radio Communications Conference, held in 2006 helped all over the world to go digital. The International Telecommunication Union (ITU) had been established in 2015 to transition from analogue to digital broadcasting. Within 2020 digitization of all VHF channels will be done. Nigeria had planned to digitize all its stations before deadline. This has been although started but not achieved fully. This country is also working to find out challenges and benefits of digitization. Nigeria is also working hardest to implement digitalization.

Keywords: *Digitization, broadcasting, analogue, digital, switchover, transition*

1. Introduction

The UN International Telecommunications Union (ITU) initially started the movement from analogue to digital broadcasting before the 90's. Prior to being addressed as International Telecommunications Union, the telecommunications body existed as International Telegraph Union formed in 1865 and turned into a specific office of the United Nations (UN) in 1947, left in charge of issues that concern data and communication technology. It also coordinates the use of radio range and doles out satellite circles all over the world. In addition to these, it creates policies and standards that guide the broadcast communications framework.

Nigeria is among member states of the ITU, situated in Geneva, Switzerland. Alongside other 193 member states, Nigeria signed a resolution on June 16, 2006, at a worldwide ITU meeting in Geneva to move from analogue to digital broadcasting. Along these lines and because of this convention, the scene of broadcasting in Nigeria has perpetually changed, leaving giant implications on the business models of media houses.

Ihechu, I., & Uche, U. (2012) posit that digitization is a technological innovation that will change the scope of radio and television broadcasting in Nigeria and beyond. For others, 'Nigeria's digital broadcast migration a mirage' without actual intervention of shareholders. (Oshodin 2009, p.1)

1.1. Conceptual Framework

Robinson (2004) called digital as a process that operates by processing information. As a form of binary digit it is being stored. For Hanson (2005, pg. 241), it is conversion of analogue formats to digital formats. Two different digital formats have been highlighted by him.

In digital television broadcasting, the signal can be transmitted in four distinct ways namely (i) cable, (ii) satellite, (iii) digital terrestrial television and (iv) telephone connection (DSL). Cable transmission is very versatile and accommodating. This has capacity of transmitting over 200 digital television channels. In contrast to this Satellite transmission has a transmission power of 100 channels. For improving signal quality, High definition (HD) format is being widely used in radio. It also helps to improve AM station sounds.

Moreover, digitization improves sound quality of radio broadcast by reducing noises. Rodman (2015) also highlighted many positive sides of digital format compared to analogue radio like transmitted sounds are assigned numbers (digits) that take up less air space than analogue waves, crisper, clear signal etc. It is also very important to considers steps of Nigerian government to ensure the digitization.

1.2. Theoretical Framework

Media Convergence theory is the main focused area for this study in which mass media unifies to a point. New forms of media expression can be emerged from this theory (Chakaveh and Bogen, 2007). This theory helps companies to maximize the profit. Role of convergence journalism can be tested through new media tools provided by digital technologies.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Digital Migration in Nigeria: Where are we?

Digital audio broadcasting (DAB) commenced development in Germany, in 1981. BBC, however, started broadcasting digital radio in 1995, thereby becoming the first organization to transition to digital network in the UK. Currently, the United States has fully transitioned to digital broadcasting. Many countries are currently observing the digital trend to avoid being left behind. Ocholi (2009, p.1) highlighted December 2007 as the starting of digitization process. This notwithstanding, most of the broadcasting stations in the country started making efforts to meet the deadline. Worthy of note is the fact that many countries responded to the 2015/2020 deadlines fixed by International Telecommunication Union, ITU, (Aibe 2008, p.2).

Endong (2015) holds that earlier on, Nigeria set June 17, 2012, as her date to transition from analogue to digital broadcasting, and later on, postponed this date till January 1st, 2015, and of recent, to December 2017.

Over the years, a number of scholars have expressed scepticism regarding Nigeria's 'efforts' towards digitization. This movement has been called as a 'mirage' by Oshodin (2009). Several years of unsuccessful moves of digitization had been highlighted by Ikemintang S.

According to Onwubiko of the *Daily Post*, the NTA has another strategic arm of the DSO through its forward-looking entity known as Integrated Television Service (ITS).

Adaramola Z. (2016) as cited in a Nigerian newspaper known as The Daily trust sheds more light saying that the 30 channels operators on the Abuja rollout have been trained and sensitized on the management of the channels, according to NBC.

With respect to African Countries, as it concerns digitization of the broadcast media, Akinreti (2012, p.13) notes that the Kenyan government has raised the bar for other African Countries. Obam Daniel, National Communications Secretariat, Kenya, stipulates that Kenya had adopted a phased migration, which would see 10 cities switching over between January 2013 and June 2014.

Later in 2007, the pay TV market monopoly by Tele10 was broken by Star Africa Media (popularly known as Star Times). In 2008, the government announced plans to digitalize the Rwanda Broadcasting Agency (RBA) network following the June 17, 2015, deadline set by the International Telecommunication Union for analogue TV switch-over. According to Rura statistics, in 2014 there were over 192,000 users who have acquired decoders and digital coverage is now at 95 percent. Decoders cost between Rwf23,500 and Rwf32,000, depending on the vendor. The switch to digital broadcasting has boosted the industry, with a number of local TV stations set up shop. Rwanda now has seven TV stations. They are Family TV, TV One, TV10, CNBC Africa, Lemigo TV, Contact TV, Yego TV and Rwanda Television.

2.2. Transitions Completed in Africa

Algeria	:	10 November 2014.
Gabon	:	17 June 2016.
Ghana	:	June 2015, switching to DVB-T.
Kenya	:	Analogue switch off was supposed to take place in 2013, however media houses challenged the move in court and the switch off was moved to 31 December 2014 for the metropolitan areas and their surroundings while in the rest of the country switched to DVB-T2 in March 2015.
Mauritius	:	17 June 2014. Switched to DVB-T.
Morocco	:	17 June 2015.
Namibia	:	13 September 2014.
Rwanda	:	March 2014. Switched to DVB-T, with plans to upgrade to DVB-T2 in the future.
Tanzania	:	July 2014. Switched to DVB-T2
Zambia	:	31 December 2014. Switched to DVB-T2

2.3. Challenges of Digitization in Nigeria

2.3.1. Deadline

Ibulubo (2008), highlighted that till 2015 not such a strict movement has been taken by all the communication stations to meet the deadline.

2.3.2. Knowledge Gap

A major challenge confronting the digitization processes is the obvious knowledge gap present as a result of the illiterate population in the country. The greater part of this population dwell in the rural areas, making it difficult to get information concerning the process. There is an obvious knowledge gap between those that are aware of the process and those that are not.

2.3.3. Power Supply

Uninterrupted power supply is one of the major criteria of Digitization. Standby generators are not a solution for Digitization. But, unfortunately standby generators are most common in Nigeria. Moreover, cost of generator is very high and need to be collected from consumers. This is another crucial reason why continuous power supply is so much important.

2.3.4. Manpower

As digital equipment come in, it is imperative that coordinating labour is made available. In other words, matching manpower who have the technical skills to operate the equipment have to be available. The task of preparing and retraining staff to fit into the computerized procedure poses a huge challenge.

2.3.5. Technical and Financial Challenges

Large amount of capital is being required to transit analogue to digital broadcasting. Procurement of new instruments require huge amount of capital. Many broadcasting authorities like Nigerian Television Authority, NTA, and Federal Radio Corporation of Nigeria, FRCN need huge amount of money.

2.4. Benefits of Digitization

2.4.1. National Interest

Mishkind (2009) as cited in Ihechu, I., & Uche, U. (2012, p.38) posit that that American Congress wanted to generate more funds by 'auctioning spectrum space.' Ocholi (2009, p. 1) says therefore that this implies a massive range accessible for radio and TV slots in Nigeria. According to Uzor (2008), limited spectrum use is the main reason behind this. As per Baran (2010), if broadcasters choose to give up the whole range of their spectrum space they will lose target audience.

2.4.2. Viewers' Interest

Udeorah (2009) mentioned that digital broadcasting will give a large variety of choices. It plays a key role for broadcasting information with high accessibility, vast treatment and competence (Bunshak 2006, p. 9). As per Rodman (2006), due to digitization viewers will receive clearer pictures because television pictures/images with enabled telephones, computers and other ICT related technology.

2.4.3. Broadcasters' Interest

Upto four channels can be carried by stations on the same frequency. This step also creates cost-effectiveness. It also helps to eliminate capital which aims to spend on maintenance of infrastructure. Cost behind personnel can be reduced to a great extend. Ekeh (2009, p. 2,3).

2.4.4. Content Providers' Interest

Through digitization content providers can exploit 'legitimate avenues for airing programmes, but also increased demand for all genres of programmes to fill the additional programming demands. As broadcast stations start increasing the number of channels resulting from the digitization process, the demand for the programme will increase simultaneously.

2.4.5. Regulator's Interest

From additional licenses, the – the National Broadcasting Corporation, NBC, will be acquiring increased revenue. On the long run, specialized areas of broadcasting will be encouraged and this will address areas that were hitherto neglected by commercial broadcasters.

2.4.6. Other Interests

More coverage to media will create a path to market their products. Opportunity to advertisers has been set through this. With 2.4 billion online population, internet has launched first port-of-call for finding information. People can be connected with internet through computers.

2.5. A Mirage Still Achievable

Ben Egbuna, Veteran broadcast manager, and former Director-General of the Federal Radio Corporation of Nigeria (FRCN) has said the date for the switchover from analogue to digital broadcasting in Nigeria may be amirage if certain steps are not immediately taken by the government and key stakeholders in the country's fledgling broadcast industry Other scholars like Oshodin (2009, p.1) have equally described Nigeria's digital broadcast migration a mirage if the government does not take certain steps to ensure its actualization.

In addition, the Nigerian Voice newspaper, on the 14th of June 2016, published a feature article titled: 'Nigeria has tangentially missed the digitization deadline; we can still achieve it if we have the political commitment so to do.' Below are the reasons why this transition might remain a mirage:

2.5.1. Misconception in Official Quarters

There exists a misguided judgment in official quarters which sees digitization just from a TV point of view and uses a similar method of reasoning for both radio and TV transition. Also, most Nigerians are not in the know about the progressions and cost expense required to keep on receiving broadcast signals after the transition.

2.5.2. Poor Preparation, without Visible Steps towards Actualization

As it stands, preparation towards digital broadcasting migration is quite slow. Also, there are no visible practical steps towards actualization. Egbuna (2016) therefore urges the Nigerian government to learn from Australia. Australia had originally planned a switch-off in 2008 but has had to delay to a date to be determined between 2010 or 2012.

2.5.3. Passivity on the Part of BON

The Broadcasting Organisation of Nigeria (BON) has erstwhile been too passive about the transition process. Failure to do this might result in digitization becoming a mirage. To buttress this point, Emmanuel Onwubiko adds that 'the Nigerian Broadcasting Commission seems complicit in the lack of progress in achieving full digital switchover of broadcasting in Nigeria.'

2.6. Conclusion

The importance and benefits offered by digitization cannot be overemphasized, particularly with respect to ensuring a vast improvement in the broadcasting sector. This study shows that although Nigeria has made plans over time to transition from analogue to digital broadcasting, it is constantly faced with so many challenges, leaving the task as a 'mirage' in the minds of many, and this owing to challenges such as poor funding, inadequate manpower, amidst a host of others. Thus, it is imperative that the government of the day rises up to the challenge, taking the bull by the horn and performing to the best of its ability in ensuring that digitization does become actualized in the Nigerian broadcasting sphere.

Based on the numerous observations made in this paper, it may be recommended that:

- A framework needs to be implemented from the content distributors. A new licensing structure also needs to be started.
- Government policymakers, stakeholders and officials should be more sensitive. Government should ensure about removing all tariffs on digital broadcast equipment to make it affordable and easy to acquire.
- The StarTimes model has been upgraded to allow already existing infrastructure.
- Proper monetary benefits also need to be provided.
- Hence, it can be concluded that all the main actors of the digitization scheme should work together to make this scheme successful.

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