

Books Review

Digital Terrestrial Television in Europe

BROWN, A.; PICARD, R., eds. 1st edition New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum Associated Publishers 2005. ISBN 0-8058-5387-1

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The rollout of digital terrestrial television (DTTV) has acquired a noticeable relevance in the policies of public communication and the information society of European countries. Diverse elements intervene in this process: technology, market, economy, public service and social aspects. Digitalising TV is another variable for the broadcast sector to consider in its already long trajectory in the search for an identity, its *raison d'être* and a relational structure and model that meet its dual nature, somewhere between culture and industry.

We could say that the digitalisation of broadcasting, in this case terrestrial broadcasting, should be considered as just another phase in the evolutionary processes of the media, like the opening up of monopoly markets, the development of the multichannel and pay offer and the appearance of other technical distribution platforms like cable and satellite.

In the face of this process of change, what will become necessary is the availability of analysis tools that enable us to: identify the main elements and implementation phases of digital TV; set boundaries to the functions and possibilities of the DTTV platform within the overall number of transmission options; and establish the role of the different public and private, national and international agents that intervene in this natural, although complex, evolution of television as we know it.

That is exactly what the authors aim for and achieve in this

book edited by Allan Brown and Robert Picard. Here is a text that goes beyond the purely technological and trade-based arguments that have until now characterised the many articles, speeches and press releases trying to sell us DTTV as a fantastic technological device that we won't be able to resist. The quality of the text lies in the work done by the editors, who have managed to combine the efforts of probably the best European researchers in this field. There are also North Americans and Australians, guaranteeing that the book is not just a justification on the part of the Europeans of what is happening in Europe. The contributions by the different authors may already be known by people who have followed the work done in this field in detail. However, we can still find new and updated ideas and the combination of opinions and viewpoints provides the volume with an exceptional level of reflection.

The book is structured in two parts. The first identifies and analyses the main issues that define the process of digitalising television. It includes six chapters that give a clear and precise vision on DTTV. The second part of the book offers case studies on the rollout of the technology in different European countries. It is important to mention, as a further sign of the quality of the text, that it deals not only with the 'big' European markets (the UK, Spain, France, Germany and Italy) but also provides experiences from the Nordic countries, which can be true reference points in the question of digitalisation (Denmark, Sweden and Finland). Both parts can be read independently, although it is probably best to follow the chapters chronologically. This approach will increase our knowledge about the reality of DTTV and associated conflicts and allow us to obtain a richer perspective of the national cases analysed.

Digitalisation can be considered a process of convergence in which different sources of information acquire a same nature (binary code). This enables them to combine and

provides them with independence from the physical storage, distribution and transmission supports. One consequence of this is that the broadcast sector has overcome its work logic based on the media as the physical support/transmission channel of information and allowed it to evolve towards the network logic of resources with multiple points of access to information. As a result of this change, the value chains, market structures and operating cycles of audiovisual products are evolving and often criss-crossing each other. Digitalisation also encourages media globalisation.

Although these advantages are clear and have been very well identified and appropriately praised, Marsden and Ariño, the authors of the first chapter, think that digitalisation carries a price for the public which is not just economic, but also cultural. It also involves risks, with the possibly a different pace of digitalisation for different social groups, i.e., the 'digital divide'. They believe public intervention in the process is needed to ensure the information society is not just an attractive concept but a reality for everyone.

Once they have raised these arguments, Marsden and Ariño introduce the main obstacles and conflicts involving digitalisation, and situate television as a central element: firstly, they refer to the real perception the public has of it, closer to the desire to access a wider range of channels than choosing digital technology for its qualities. They also mention the asynchrony and asymmetry that characterise the implementation of digital TV on the three most common distribution platforms (cable, satellite and terrestrial), to which we should now add the internet (IPTV). Each of these networks presents physical characteristics, business determinants and their own objectives. The authors also suggest paying attention to how the dualities that characterise the broadcast sector impact the rollout of DTTV. One duality is the public or private nature of the agents involved, which determines their objectives and manners of proceeding. Another is the geographic duality, with national and supranational implementation processes at the same time, something which limits constant and coordinated progress. They then go on to analyse in detail the different possibilities and trends in public intervention. They support the renewal of concepts that are valid in the analogue field but insufficient in the digital context, which demands measures that combine technical, political, economic and social parameters in a more dynamic and flexible way.

Once the first chapter has introduced us into the debate around the digitalisation process and how it affects television, the book addresses one of the main points of conflict or difficulty: the actions of community public institutions. Pertti Näränen goes over the history of the milestones in European broadcasting policy that impact the rollout of digital TV. Of particular interest is his analysis and criticism of Directive 95/47 on technical regulations for the dissemination of TV. He says the fact that the directive does not precisely determine the need to use open public standards in the middleware sphere and conditional access has been one of the main causes behind the technological fragmentation of the European market and the subsequent delays in the rollout process of DTTV.

With a broader perspective, Näränen questions the attitude of non-intervention adopted by European institutions as a result of the failure of the process to implement a standard for high-definition television (HDTV) at the start of the 1990s. He also identifies the DVB (Digital Video Broadcasting) consortium as responsible for this shortage of interoperability in the sphere of interactive content and access to pay offers, because it developed its MHP (Multimedia Home Platform) standard with a certain delay with respect to market evolution.

Näränen considers that European policies have changed their justification, which throughout the 1980s was "to guarantee the enrichment of public wellbeing" to "increasing consumers' free choice". This completely limits the development of public intervention in the rollout of DTTV, which is initially produced just as a technological and commercial breakthrough, forgetting the social side.

Following this public perspective we find the contribution of Professor Hujanen. His chapter analyses the role of public service television in the digital context. It is interesting to see how he introduces the question from a very different perspective to the voices that say we are facing a complete process of change that will lead to the end of the public service. For Hujanen, the fact that people question the validity and functions of the public service is something within its nature. At least it should be borne in mind that this has happened whenever the broadcast sector has faced a technological leap or important transformation of its relational structure or model. He suggests a careful analysis of the situation, considering the premise that we could be fa-

cing a natural evolution of the public service as we know it.

First of all, Hujanen recalls the need for public institutions to act with technological neutrality. This not only avoids people questioning the role of terrestrial radio broadcasting on a multiplatform, free-competition digital market, but can also open the doors to other distribution systems at the public service. That is why the most important thing is to focus on the true essence of the public system of TV, i.e., the remit concept. This means we have to reformulate the objectives and functions of the public service to bring it into line with what we want from it. Public intervention has to be aimed at guaranteeing universal access to infrastructures, content and services in both senses of the value chain of the media. For Hujanen, DTTV has to be at least a public investment that ensures continuity for the people. From here we can begin to think about other, more ambitious objectives.

In terms of private operators, Allan Brown introduces us to their particular problems, detailing the difficulties and requirements that DTTV means to them. One feature of his argument concerns the growth of channels that enable digitalisation: although there is a market access opportunity for new operators, it could also become an element that noticeably reduces each channel's effectiveness in terms of audience levels and advertising income. This makes it necessary to re-establish the economic fundamentals of the sector. We can thus deduce the scarce interest and lack of action by analogue operators to migrate to the digital format. Brown carries out an interesting review of the situation of each of the dissemination platforms and also reflects on the proper intervention of public institutions and governments in each case. He emphasises their role as migration planners and as conditioners of private activity. The editor believes the management and awarding of broadcasting licences is a key point in the rollout of DTTV. Growth in numbers has not been questioned in Europe, unlike Australia, where Brown hails from, where digitalisation has been approached as a purely technological migration and does not involve a rise in the number of operators.

For Brown, public institutions and private operators have to be convinced that the digitalisation of TV is something other than what affects them directly, whether it be in organisation and control tasks or economic activity. In becoming digitalised, television, as Hujanen already said, loses its

technological peculiarity and becomes just another element in the 'binary stream'. That is why it might be the time not just to question the public service but the very social and cultural entity of the medium. However, rather than a revolution or catastrophic result, Brown considers that the parameters the rule sector activity should not change drastically.

In terms of content and interactivity, Jensen reviews the arguments that have been associated in these areas with digitalisation. He questions an automatic rise in viewer activity before the screen, whether motivated by the content or lure of the services or by a material incentive. He also analyses the migration process of an offer based on programming in flux towards a stage of self-programming on the part of the user.

Correctly, and in case it was necessary, Jensen scotches a close and exclusive link between digitalisation and interactivity. Even though digitalisation increases the interaction possibilities of the television medium, these possibilities already existed in the analogue version of the service and in other media. He also emphasises the following argument: interactivity will be subordinated to the personal abilities of the user more than to the medium itself. Whoever is able to use interactive services will use them unconsciously. People who don't use them because they do not have the right abilities could stop being interested. He indicates that the internet interaction model could be a reference point to take as an example, being aware of the noticeable differences between the uses of the net and of TV.

Jensen questions the real interest of interactivity: is it the creative possibilities? The social ones? Maybe the economic possibilities? He says it is easy to rationalise the arguments and so we have to ask questions about this issue in both senses if we want to be able to tell where the rollout process is heading.

Going deeper into this social side we also find the article by Robert Picard, which closes the first part of the book. The renowned researcher inspects the main social issues to consider when we talk about DTTV, without leaving aside the perspective of the media economy in which he specialises. His aim is to establish links between these research areas, which are often presented with considerable distance both in terms of study objects and

methodologies. For Picard, digitalisation makes it necessary to include social aspects and economic and business strategies, as it is the public, in the role of viewers, users or clients, according to the occasion, who validate the effort made over the length of the broadcast sector value chain.

He introduces and develops the concept of the costs that digitalisation demands from people; not just economic but also, as mentioned before, time and educational. He also emphasises the importance of knowing the aspirations and needs that viewers try to satisfy via TV. It is necessary to estimate the extent to which they are now met by the analogue offer; how more enriching options can be offered with the digital offer; and how to create new needs too. Picard believes it is essential to be very clear about what elements condition the demand for DTTV, i.e., terrestrial dissemination in this case: the quality/quantity/price relation of the offer, the investment in household infrastructure and equipment, the simplicity of the electronic gadgets and their interfaces, etc. In short, he proposes an analysis that makes it possible to situate DTTV in a differential manner from the other technology platforms and with its own arguments to become a useful option for users.

Picard considers that to date it has been governments and sector agents (manufacturers, operators, etc.) who have promoted the rollout of digital TV in Europe. It might be that now is the time for these agents to become aware that the social and economic success of the process lies in inverting this trend and getting the people to demand digital TV. For that reason, he believes it is important to continue with or even start up new lines of research that identify the true motives behind the digital migration from the different perspectives of the process (social, economic, political and technological).

These six chapters constitute the first part of the book, which, as I said before, aims to offer a systematic snapshot of the main questions and problems characterising and conforming the rollout process of DTTV. The second part of the book involves case studies from eight European markets.

For each state the authors offer a broad historical description which enables us to see how it has arrived at the current situation and to understand the features of its digital TV market, with special attention going to terrestrial transmission. They also set out both the public actions and

business movements and strategies. This is what makes this part of the book a very valuable tool for anyone desiring a general perspective on what is happening in Europe or for people interested in understanding the particular situation of the member states analysed. These chapters identify the main obstacles, errors and successes of national migration processes. They also mention the most important problems and future challenges for each case. The book ends with a number of general conclusions compiled by the editors.

The book is an indispensable reference tool for researchers interested in the field of television. It is also a useful document for sector professionals, clarifying concepts and including reflections on their work area and the digitalisation phenomenon. Finally, I should say it is hard to come across, even in specialised libraries, and so I would recommend resorting to the internet, where you might also be able to find it at a better price.