Chapter 2
Digital Television Transition in South Africa:
Paradoxes and Dilemmas

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ABSTRACT

This chapter examines possible obstacles to the adoption of digital television in South Africa. A qualitative approach was followed by conducting in-depth interviews with key informants. The data was analyzed using open coding, where dominant themes from the discussions were identified and discussed in detail. This chapter intends to outline the importance of digital readiness from digital television perspective as a platform for universal disposal of digital information to both the citizenry and business entities. In order to do that, the chapter discusses digital migration with a focus to improving e-Government development of promoting global access to government information. The findings show that there are a few challenges in migrating from analogue to digital television in South Africa. From this study, it is evidently shown that the emerging digital television platforms have a lot of potential to be used as a vehicle for e-Government applications.

INTRODUCTION

The world is said to be in a new information age, and South Africa too is embracing digital television so that citizens and businesses can consume digital information content with ease. Mass communication has always required technology to broaden its reach and expand its influence. There is no denying that technology is growing at an astronomical pace, so much so that it is almost as if science fiction is being translated into reality, leaving very little time

for adoption of these innovations. It is important to note that from primitive to modern societies, the story of mass communication has been that of change wrought by improvements in technology (Mbatha, Ocholla, & Le Roux, 2011; Mbatha, 2012). For instance, the development of print was a key turning point by producing information or communication meant for mass audiences. But all incremental progress that followed technological advancement whether in printing, telecommunications, wireless communication, photography

or broadcasting was an additional boost to the reach and effectiveness of mass communication (Cortada, 2006; Brand, 2011).

The emerging electronic government (e-Government) conceptualization entails the provision of public services and information on Information and Communication Technology (ICTs) platforms. E-Government strives to provide information to citizens regardless of their socio-economic status, education levels, etc. The convergence of e-Government conceptualization and digital television transmission may unleash many opportunities in the digital realm. This chapter intends to discuss the endeavors done towards establishing digital television in South and outline opportunities for its potential use as an e-Government platform.

Although there has been this motivation to use digital broadcasting as a platform for e-Government services, the frontrunners in the race to make the transition to digital broadcasting are now facing a range of issues including the following: "Who runs the signal carrier?" "How will those who cannot afford a decoder pay for it?" "How unrealistic are deadlines and what about the absence of any public campaign to explain the process?" (Zettl, 2011; Balancing Act, 2011). The politicians seem afraid of a process that could affect their citizens' ability to watch television and are seeking to control the discussion about what's going to happen (Balancing Act, 2011). It is worth noting that making the transition to digital broadcasting was never going to be easy for any African country. Although the agreement to go digital was signed at an ITU meeting in 2006, most countries seem to be determined to avoid doing anything until the last minute (Balancing Act, 2011). In 2006, the International Telecommunication Union (ITU) held a regional radio-communication conference where a treaty dealing with among others digital migration of bands III, IV and V was concluded and South Africa became a signatory to the treaty. The conference resolved that all countries in Europe, Africa and the Middle East, as well as the Islamic Republic of Iran, migrate from analogue to digital broadcasting services by June 2015 (Balancing Act, 2011).

This study reports on the anticipated challenges to the adoption of digital television in South Africa. To achieve the stated aim, the following research questions were answered:

- What was the purpose of government introducing digital television?
- How will digital television improve service-delivery in South Africa?
- What technology and/or equipment does one need to access digital television?
- What are the challenges facing South Africans with regard to digital migration?
- What recommendations can be proposed to address the challenges?

Further, this chapter intends to understand the prospects that will be brought about as a result of digital migration and what digital broadcasting will contribute to the e-Government agenda. In order to do that, the next section presents the background that intends to articulate general issues surrounding digital broadcasting. Thereafter, the theoretical frameworks which provide the thinking around the investigation of issues of digital broadcasting are presented. Then, a methodology utilized in this study is presented. The chapter concludes with the discussion of concepts and issues surrounding digital television and its anticipated link to e-Government.

BACKGROUND

It is true that the world has gone digital. Haggard and Mclachlan (2008) describe digital television as an advanced broadcasting technology that has transformed the viewer's television-viewing experience. Ardizzon and Ferrari (2010) and Brand (2011) note that the purpose of digital terrestrial television, similar to digital versus analogue in other platforms such as cable, satellite and tele-

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