



Issue 12: Book Reviews

Switching to Digital Television: UK Public Policy and the Market

By Michael Starks

Bristol: Intellect, 2007. ISBN: 978-1-84150-172-7. xii + 251pp. £19.95 (pbk)

A Review by David Hutchison, Glasgow Caledonian University, UK

Michael Starks spent many years working with the BBC, and in 2001 he led the launch of what was to become the BBC's Freeview service. Thereafter he managed the UK Digital TV Project for the British government. This book therefore is not simply an observer's account, nor even the account of a participating observer, but that of a leading actor in what Starks compares to "a dance in which, while the dancers may make up the steps as they go along, they know, and respect, their positions in relation to one another" (216).

The book starts from the premise that the move to digital is a good thing since it ensures better off-air reception, and, because it is possible to fit in at least four digital channels where previously a single analogue one occupied a particular part of the spectrum, more services can be offered to the public. Starks does not make too much of the view that governments across the globe see the resulting spectrum auction as a means of raising revenue. He charts the course of events to date, and reminds us of such important factors as the desire of terrestrial broadcasters to ensure that Rupert Murdoch's Sky, which dominates the satellite market, was not allowed to do the same in the digital one, into which it has moved with alacrity, as have the cable companies. Not all of the terrestrials have been successful in that endeavour. ITV's ONdigital collapsed into bankruptcy, contributing mightily to the decline of its parent financially and culturally. However the BBC, led aggressively by the then Director General Greg Dyke, took advantage of the opportunity and offered to merge the BBC's own package of digital channels with the ITV venture. The resulting Freeview service came as something of a relief to grateful government and regulator, and it made rapid progress in signing up customers, not least because once a set top box has been purchased no further payment is required to satellite or cable company.

Starks is fascinating on the difficulties, complexities and anxieties of what is in effect a compulsory, no exceptions, switch-off of the analogue signal. The risks to politicians facing voters, who demand to know why they are now no longer able to view their favourite programmes without forking out several hundred pounds, are explored, and it is clear that the gradualist approach to switchover which has emerged owes not a little to these risks and to the need to ensure that manufacturers provide the necessary hardware at the right time at affordable -- and profitable -- prices. The British strategy is to manage switchover, so that digital refuseniks are a very small minority who command

little public support. It remains to be seen whether the strategy will work.

As an account of how we got to where we are now the book is exemplary, and the chapter on what is happening elsewhere in the world provides a useful comparative perspective. Where the book is less satisfactory is in its discussion of the wider implications of the shift to digital. At one point Starks notes that there was some concern that the proposed BBC4 would become a channel to which programmes previously screened on BBC 2 -- and perhaps even BBC1 -- would be relegated. Given that the new channel could be perceived as 'elitist' or 'highbrow' (ghastly word!), fewer people might then watch more demanding programmes. That is exactly what seems to have happened, and it is hardly a plus.

The transformation of ITV from a public service broadcaster financed by advertising, but willing to take risks politically and culturally, into a commercial channel desperate to make money however it can (and in some very dubious ways indeed) cannot of course be blamed on the digital switchover. Cack-handed management made a substantial contribution to ITV's decline, but the proliferation of channels initiated by cable and satellite -- a proliferation enthusiastically backed by both governments and regulators, and which digital is exacerbating -- has undermined ITV's financial base by diminishing its audiences and hence what it can charge advertisers. It is far from obvious that the disappearance of the ITV which existed twenty years ago is compensated for by, for example, the umpteen gambling and dating channels and fifty plus pornographic ones which are available on the Freeview service currently relayed to me by Sky (I should explain that I live outside the current terrestrial reception area and have availed myself of a not over-publicized offer from Sky to provide Freeview for a one-off payment.).

Starks does explore the relationship between HDTV and digital, which is much more tangled in the UK than it is in some other countries, and discusses the growing convergence between the television screen and the computer one. It is no fault of his that the minute his book went to press events moved on, so that, for example, the success of the BBC's new iPlayer service has demonstrated that the computer option may not be so attractive as a means of delivery of programmes if the capacity of the telephone system is exceeded. In the early 1980s, following the Hunt Report on cable systems, we were told that the UK was a leader in fibre optic technology and that if the country could be cabled using that technology it would bring into being the world's first 'wired society'; furthermore, the export opportunities for British manufacturers were deemed to be very significant. However the Thatcher government felt that it was up to the private sector to take the lead in the introduction of this technology, which that sector was reluctant to do. As a result copper cable has yet to be eliminated from the UK telecommunications system, in particular from the so-called last mile which connects networks and domestic dwellings. With the digital switchover there has been rather more government involvement, but, as Starks points out, there has been only limited government expenditure. Nevertheless, until Gordon Brown's final year as chancellor, the BBC enjoyed successive increases in the licence fee to take account of the development of its digital services, and Ofcom has been very sympathetic to the cries of woe emanating from the other terrestrial broadcasters about the cost of their broadcasting licences.

The book is lucidly written and very readable, although it could have been more tightly edited -- for example, we are told twice about Tessa Jowell being caught in a traffic jam en route to deliver an

important speech, and at least twice that David Elstein was a leading opponent of the switchover.
Minor blemishes, however, in a most useful book.

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