

SWITCH IN TIME

The digital switchover is still hard for some regions such as the Caribbean, where there are many issues to be resolved, as **SONIA GILL** explains

As a region, the Caribbean often defies superficial attempts at definition, encompassing as it does continental and island territories, home to multiple language groups and population sizes ranging from 5,000 to 11 million, comprising indigenous and migrant peoples, and descendants of slaves.

Even in the face of this diversity, for Caribbean broadcast media there are many commonalities, social, economic and political. And a poll of the sector would likely find that the transition from analogue to digital is the most important issue for the past decade.

Digital switchover (DSO) has long been a high priority for the Caribbean Broadcasting Union (CBU), a 47 year old body, grouping media entities in 24 countries and territories in the Dutch, English, French and Spanish-speaking Caribbean. Our mandate includes facilitating indigenous programme production and sharing; capacity-building of media institutions and professionals; joint negotiation of rights for programming; and advocacy in regional and international forums on policy and technology issues.

Despite the existence of established supra-national institutions whose main purpose is to allow these tiny states and dependent territories to enjoy the benefits of integrated action, there has been no regional consensus on the best way to achieve DSO. The 2010 announcement by the ITU of a 2015 analogue switch-off date for Region 1, in which the Caribbean is located, was immediately noted by the CBU, and we directed our lobbying efforts to the most prominent of the regional political institutions, the Caribbean Community (CARICOM). As stated in our DSO policy position paper of 2013, in light of the lack of preparedness of the region, we advocated for the region to be treated as an exception, and therefore benefit from the extended deadline of June 2020.

CRITICAL DECISIONS

For the Caribbean the critical decisions include:

- The digital and compression standards and distribution (multiplexing) methodology to be adopted
- Financial and regulatory cost
- Effective switchover date.

On the last point, we have continued to urge: “Caribbean regulators, policymakers and broadcasters ... not to rush into aggressive digital switchover timelines that could place broadcasters in debt [or] at the risk of profitability thereby potentially jeopardising the jobs of hundreds of media workers.”

And we have repeatedly highlighted the lack of preparedness of audiences and the wider public. In the resolution passed at our 2009 general assembly, and in similar resolutions at every assembly since, we have continued to appeal to policymakers to “commence dissemination of educational programmes aimed at instructing the public in the region on the implications for them and their households of the digital switchover”.

An aspect of DSO that has special importance for Caribbean countries and territories is environmental. In a 2015 study,¹ supported by the Caribbean office of the ITU, we expressed serious concern about the weak policy and regulatory framework throughout the region in relation to e-waste, including that expected from the transition to digital broadcast systems. Research carried out in 15 of our countries highlighted the glaring absence of policies to deal with e-waste from electronics, including cellphones and TVs.

MULTIPLE STANDARDS

Even though there have not been final answers on many of these questions, the process has begun around the region, driven by the availability of state resources, which is why the Bahamas selected the North American standard (ATSC), Cuba accepted a soft loan from China and adopted DTMB, and the former Dutch territory of Curaçao went with DVB-T2. There is even an extreme situation in Suriname, which sits on the South American mainland – it has mixed the North American and European standards.

All eyes are on the two largest English-speaking media markets, Jamaica and Trinidad and Tobago, where broadcasters and regulators continue intense discussions on the critical question of a feasible post-switchover business model in markets dominated by privately-owned media.

At the CBU, we will examine the lessons from those that have already moved into the digital era, and support stakeholder consultation for those yet to make the digital jump. And we will move from the current focus on real challenges, to identifying the opportunities and benefits inherent in the digital transition, so that the broadcast sector can continue to support the development of the region.

REFERENCE

¹ Review of international practices relating to the control of imports/production of TV devices and e-waste management practices and standards in the Caribbean. Project ITU-SSA No. 6964.



SONIA GILL is secretary general of the Caribbean Broadcasting Union. The CBU will be addressing recent developments in digital terrestrial television (DTT) at its 48th annual general assembly in Nassau, Bahamas, 21-24 August, 2017.