The example of the United Kingdom in the switch-over to digital

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Right in the middle of switching over to terrestrial digital television (TDT), there are also a lot of specific studies of this process. However, there are few that stand out from the abundant bibliography invading bookshops and this is undoubtedly one of them.

Read from a Catalan and Spanish perspective, moreover, it has arrived at a very opportune time: the rich British experience can provide useful tools to apply to our own, still incomplete and difficult transition process.

The author of the text, Michael Starks, explains the process of switching over to TDT in the United Kingdom from within, as someone who has played an important role in this story, given his position as director of the original TDT broadcasting project of the BBC in the nineties, subsequently managing the Digital TV Project that planned the digital switchover, as well as being founder chairman of the Digital TV Group, leading British industry in its adaptation to the new environment. No less important in his curriculum is his position as lecturer on the prestigious Programme in Comparative Media Law and Policy at Oxford University. Moreover, the publisher that has provided us with this book is the British firm Intellect, which in recent years has been approaching the reputation already held by other large publishers in the British Isles in the field of media studies, such as Sage and Taylor & Francis.

Switching to Digital Television is divided into ten chapters. The first five are in chronological order, hugely facilitating comprehension of the complex evolution of the market and regulation of TDT in the United Kingdom, especially for those who have not been able to follow such a dynamic market, as few have been. The other five chapters tackle specific issues related to the process: political strategy, the public communication of the process (without doubt a 'must' to read), the international perspective, the possibilities of reusing the electromagnetic spectrum and the keys to the switchover process per se.

Of particular note in this book is the balance achieved in approaching the digitalisation of television in the United Kingdom, based on public policies but also on the industrial strategies of the actors involved. The subtitle explains this: the book is primarily concerned with communication policies but those related to issues of technology, to the broadcasting system and consumption. In other words, what the policy is like beyond theory.

We should clarify that this is not simply a chronicle of the facts but also an in-depth analysis of a process in which the United Kingdom, like Spain, was a pioneer with a failed model, that of subscriber viewing. The difference between both countries was their response: rapid public intervention and a leading role for the BBC which has meant that, today, the country has one of the highest rates of digital technology penetration in Europe. Vital to understanding this is the chapter in the book that explains how the renewal of the BBC's *Royal Charter* included, among its public service duties, this task of driving technological change, the umpteenth example of a public service that is more questioned but also more appreciated. The text constantly displays the strong public service culture and awareness existing in British society. The situation of Spain, on the other hand, is well-known, both in terms of the four-year stoppage of TDT (2002-2005) as well as the lack of a public service culture regarding the broadcasting media. Just one example: in the United Kingdom, in spite of lobbying by the different interested parties, it is completely clear that, once the government and the regulator have taken a decision, this is carried out. This is far removed from our own case, where the schedules for implementing TDT and the obligations assumed by licence holders are not worth the paper they're written on.

Another reflection that is continually evident is the strong consideration of the public as citizen, beyond their position as purchaser. This notion of citizenry can be seen in the observation, during the design of the switchover process, of their rights and the protection of more disadvantaged segments of society. But this is not an obstacle to taking political influence into account as well, in an electoral system that is quite different from our own, as highlighted in chapter seven: "consumers are voters".

What is noticeable throughout the book is the intense detail of the switchover process to TDT in the United Kingdom. As an example: even the possible increases in energy consumption were examined, and how these might affect climate change. The book dedicates several pages to the policies related to this issue by the British government and the regulator, Ofcom.

Unlike most of the literature on the subject, this book refuses to resort to technological determinism or the usual equation of "digital television = better television", whose failure to conform we can clearly see in the impoverished TDT content in Catalonia and Spain. In this respect, one of the most interesting parts of this book is to see how, in the United Kingdom, the strategies have been coordinated and, no less importantly, how they have been communicated among all those involved, from legislators and regulators to television and network operators, including aerial manufacturers and commercial establishments that, as they are in direct contact with the consumer, have played a highly relevant role. Moreover, this coordination has involved all television bodies, not only those on the Hertz wavelength, In this way, both the satellite operator BSkyB and also cable operators have played a part that, in spite of the reservations shown in the book, has been combined with that of public service.

However, we can make two reservations concerning this book. Firstly, the lack of references to academic texts, when TDT has been a central issue in media research in Europe over the last decade. Secondly, the very political bureaucratisation of the United Kingdom leads to a succession of bodies with their respective acronyms that are in charge of very specific aspects but are sometimes difficult to place. This, however, does not detract from the merit of a book that has been written with accessible language and that only employs technical terms when strictly necessary.

In short, these are over 200 pages of beneficial text that, in the Catalan and Spanish context, have the merit of providing us with many lessons from a more advanced country than our own in the digitalisation process and of realising, in passing, that we still have a lot to learn.