

House of Lords Communications Committee: Call for evidence: Digital switchover of television and radio

Channel 4 submission

Channel 4 is a publicly-owned, commercially-funded public service broadcaster. Its core public service channel, Channel 4, is a free-to-air service—broadcast across all digital platforms in the United Kingdom—funded predominantly by advertising. In recent years, Channel 4 has broadened its portfolio to offer a range of digital services, including the free-to-air digital television channels Channel 4+1, E4, E4+1, Film4, More4 and 4Music.

Channel 4 is a key stakeholder in digital broadcasting in the United Kingdom and in the switchover process. Channel 4 is a shareholder in Digital UK (“DUK”), and contributes 11% of its operational budget. Channel 4 was also issued a new broadcasting licence (its Digital Replacement Licence), which includes specific obligations for Channel 4 to roll-out the digital terrestrial network to substantially all of the 1,154 transmitter sites in the United Kingdom, in order to ensure that the coverage of its digital services “substantially replicates” the current coverage of analogue broadcasting.

Assessment of the switchover process to date

In 2009, Digital UK (“DUK”) continued to manage and co-ordinate the overall DSO programme.

The switchover process passed a significant milestone with the successful switchover of the Granada region in late 2009. This is the largest single switch that the programme will deal with other than Crystal Palace, which does not take place until 2012. In Channel 4’s view the Granada switch was successfully accomplished with a minimum of disruption. Granada is a diverse urban region of 3 million homes. It was always seen as the big test of the DSO programme and the approach to communications adopted by DUK. DUK handled a large volume of consumer calls during the process with no significant issues.

The principal strengths of the DSO programme to date are the ease with which switchover has taken place and the minimal disruption it has caused to consumers. There has been very little negative publicity or consumer concern about the need to upgrade to digital, which is done at the consumer’s expense. In all regions which have switched no more than 1–1.3% of households have called the DUK help line for assistance, which is remarkable given the scale of the programme. Many lessons have been learned as the process has progressed and the ease with which the Granada switchover was accomplished demonstrates the scalability of DUK’s overall approach. Much of this has been helped by the fact that so many households have already converted to digital as a result of the overall weight of publicity generated by the DSO programme.

DUK has also overcome a number of challenges through the process to date. For example, the issues raised by retuning for households who had already switched to digital were initially underestimated by DUK. This was, however, recognised very early in 2009 and communication messages were successfully adapted. In addition, the diversity of digital equipment available means that it is extremely challenging to tailor messages about retuning. However, in Channel 4’s view, DUK has done a very good job in researching consumer equipment and creating bespoke user guides for most boxes and integrated televisions.

As part of DSO there have also been a very small number of households who have been left with no terrestrial signal or who believe that their terrestrial reception is poorer now than it was before DSO. Because the numbers involved are very small, and the reasons behind any difficulty so diverse, it is hard for a national programme to deal with each case individually. However, DUK has addressed as many of these issues as it practically can, including commissioning research in affected areas to analyse causes and propose solutions.

Considering the scale of the task, we believe the DSO process has been well managed by DUK to date and that DUK's approach to DSO should be able to deal with the remaining regions which have still to switch.

Effectiveness of the Digital Switchover Help Scheme and the public communications campaign

Most of the communication process for switchover is led by DUK, to ensure a co-ordinated approach. DUK undertakes an extensive communications programme in each region prior to DSO. The communications work encompasses a range of media, such as direct marketing via leaflet drops, posters and on-air communications agreed with broadcasters. The communications programme is organised by date prior to switchover and is initially aimed at raising awareness of DSO before moving into specific messages about the dates of switchover and how to retune DTT equipment. As part of the communications programme Channel 4 and other broadcasters have inserted captions over its analogue service on a transmitter by transmitter basis to advise viewers of the need to convert to digital. The timing and weight of these captions are agreed in advance with DUK. Initial findings suggest that these captions have been very effective in driving awareness of switchover.

In addition to the main DSO programme a national re-tune event was co-ordinated by broadcasters and DUK to pave the way for the introduction of high definition services on DTT. This event took place on 30 September 2009. All public service broadcasters played a full and active role in promoting this national retuning campaign. As retuning is recognised as a critical element of DSO the lessons learned from the exercise will be applied to the main DSO programme in 2010. The principal communication method was interactive pop-up captions which delivered specific retune messages. Again, initial findings suggest that these were very effective and these will be used more extensively in future DSO regions.

Channel 4 believes that the public communications campaign has been well handled in the regions which have already switched, as demonstrated by the relative ease of switchover and lack of complaints or negative publicity surrounding DSO.

Channel 4 has no comments on the effectiveness of the Digital Switchover Help Scheme, which it has no part in managing.

5 February 2010