

Digital Switchover Guru Reflects on London's Big Day

Michael Starks, of the Oxford Programme in Comparative Media Law and Policy, played a key role in the digital switchover project for the BBC and then for the UK government. He went on to write a leading book and found an [academic journal](#) on the topic. As London enters the post analogue age, he reflects on the process in this guest blog.

Analogue terrestrial television switch-off in the London area isn't the end of the process but it's a very tall milestone — and congratulations to Digital UK and all who've been involved in the work and can take pride. And it's been a big day too for me, at a safe distance in Oxford.

I came into digital television 'on the ground-floor', back in the mid-1990s, when I headed a feasibility study for the BBC. This led to the decision to pursue free-to-view digital terrestrial television by the BBC (joined by ITV and Channel Four, with Channel 5 also accepting multiplex capacity) and to the BBC's wise adoption of a multi-platform strategy — which in turn led me into negotiations with Astra for BBC satellite capacity. Meanwhile ONdigital (later rechristened ITV Digital) won the franchise for digital terrestrial pay-TV services, enabling a six multiplex digital terrestrial venture to launch in 1998. In 2002, for a variety of technical and commercial reasons, ITV Digital collapsed and by that time I was in charge of the BBC's free-to-view digital TV project. Under Greg Dyke's leadership, the BBC and its privatised former transmission arm won the vacant multiplex licences for a free-to-view proposition, marketed in partnership with BSkyB (and later with ITV, Channel Four and Channel 5) as Freeview. After that, before retiring in 2004, I worked for the government, managing the UK's Digital TV Project which mapped out the route to full switchover. One of our main recommendations was the formation of the organisation which became Digital UK and which, together with Ofcom, government and industry colleagues, has done such an excellent job to date. So watching the switchover implementation, transmitter group by transmitter group, from 2008 onwards has been a great source of job satisfaction.

From 2005 onwards, based in Oxford, I've had a life of academic writing about digital television, coupled with some consultancy work advising other countries about switchover. I've become an associate of the University's Programme in Comparative Media Law and Policy and the founding Editor of the International Journal of Digital Television. So I've built up an understanding of how the experience of digital switchover in the UK compares with experience in other countries. The UK process has two key distinguishing characteristics. First, it is based on very high voluntary take-up of digital TV across all platforms, driven by the complementary appeal to different sections of the public of pay-TV and Freeview. Second, (and this is a connected point) it is taking quite a lot longer — 14 years if you count from 1998. Many other countries which started digital television after us have completed analogue terrestrial switch-off before us, especially heavily cabled countries where a smaller proportion of households risked 'losing their telly'. However, there's no shame in taking the amount of time needed to do the job well and going with the grain of viewer interest. When analogue terrestrial is fully switched off next October, I hope the UK will be able to look back on a very successful major project — but fingers crossed until then.

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