

Feature for Digital Television Supplement/Daily Telegraph

By David Scott, Chief Executive, Digital UK

No one reading this supplement can be in any doubt about the scale and pace of change in television today. Forty years on from the advent of colour pictures, the medium has been revolutionised by new technologies which offer ever increasing choice, quality and flexibility for viewers.

A key driver of this change has been the astonishing demand for digital television over the last decade. Latest research suggests that around nine out of ten people reading this will have left behind the world of four or five channels in favour of dozens, if not hundreds, of services, interactivity and one-touch recording.

Digital television switchover will complete this revolution and pave the way for the next wave of developments. Over the next four years, the old analogue terrestrial broadcasts in use since the 1930s will be switched off, region by region, and replaced with digital signals. Once complete, all parts of the UK will have access to Freeview channels, digital radio and interactive services available through an aerial. The efficiency gains of switching to digital will also free up airwaves for further innovations, such as mobile television and high-speed wireless broadband.

To co-ordinate this process, the BBC and other broadcasters established Digital UK. Our role is to co-ordinate the upgrade of more than a thousand television transmitters to digital and to make the public's experience of the process as simple as possible by providing clear and impartial information about how to prepare for switchover. We also work closely with the Switchover Help Scheme, a subsidiary of the BBC set up to offer extra support for those aged 75 and over, registered blind or partially sighted, or eligible for certain disability benefits.

Switched on

Since the start of our campaign three years ago, the demand for digital television and public awareness of plans for switchover have increased significantly. By the end of 2007, nearly 90% of adults knew about switchover and we find near-universal awareness in the lead regions where our information campaigns are well underway.

Despite the high take up of digital television, there are still more than two million homes which have yet to make the switch to digital and some thirty million analogue televisions out there – many of them secondary sets used in bedrooms and kitchens.

The good news is that it's never been easier to get digital television. Nearly all analogue TVs can be converted to digital, whether by taking out a subscription from a supplier such as Sky or Virgin, or by simply plugging in a Freeview digital box which typically cost about £25. We've recently heard from one viewer who has just brought his faithful set from the 1950s right up to date with the addition of a digital receiver.

For 25,000 households in Whitehaven in Cumbria, switchover has already happened. They were the first area in the country to go through the process late last year. Thanks to the work of our local team, the Help Scheme and the support of many local organisations, switchover went smoothly and thousands of people were able to access digital television for the first time.

The next switchover at the Selkirk transmitter group, serving Scottish Borders, takes place in November of this year, and there are then more than 70 regional switchovers through to the end of the programme in 2012. We are looking forward to the journey ahead and to 2012 when every home in the UK will be able to enjoy all that digital television has to offer.

*People can find out more about digital television switchover and when it's happening in their region by calling our helpline on 08456 505050, or visiting our website at digitaluk.co.uk.

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