
Gregory Taylor’s book, Shut Off: The Canadian Digital Television Transition, provides a comprehensive analysis of the dramatic changes that have impacted Canadian television broadcasting over the past two decades. Placing the largely market-driven and industry-led digitization of channels under scrutiny, the author questions if we can still refer to the current situation as “broadcasting,” since the traditional sender-receiver model and mass dissemination of content via analogue systems is now nearly obsolete. Startlingly, the changeover from analogue to digital services has occurred with little or no public consultation, or any form of dialogue between key players in government, industry, and Canadian society. This is especially surprising since digital broadcasting changes the way Canadians “view” television: while it seemingly offers more content choices through on-demand services, digital broadcasting also saddles consumers with a technological lock-in and a media landscape marked by convergence—not to mention greater surveillance and data-mining by media corporations.

The transition from an analogue “push” medium to a digital “pull” service (reflected predominantly by video-on-demand and greater audience interactivity), presents a missed opportunity to steer Canadian broadcasting toward becoming a public service marked by greater equality, engaged citizenship, and media democracy. The author stresses that public policy and effective regulatory mechanisms remain highly relevant in the “emerging digital world” (p. 17). According to Taylor, this is especially the case for a “national project” (p. 18) that paves the way for additional digital services, and brings Canada into an international marketplace where standardization in technology and its impact on trade relations could have far-ranging consequences for national sovereignty.

The strength of Taylor’s fine-grained analysis lies in combining historical developments in Canadian broadcasting with comparisons of policy initiatives and technological advancements (explained in lay terms) around the world, with a special focus on the U.S. and the U.K. Presented from a critical political economic perspective, Taylor’s work places great emphasis on the wider social and economic repercussions of a broadcasting system in transition that, in spite of initial task forces and advisory committees, has been rudderless due to “government detachment from the digital transition process” (p. 152) and a “democratic disconnect” (p. 56) stemming from a lack of public consultation. Moreover, this “poorly executed move to digital” (p. 151) has resulted in placing Canada at a disadvantage where new technological developments are concerned and presents a missed economic opportunity to generate revenue from a strategically timed spectrum auction.

Structurally, the book offers a well-written overview of Canada’s broadcasting system in transition. Starting with a comprehensive introduction to the topic, the book’s
five chapters each highlight a particular phase of Canada’s digital television evolution. Chapters one to three create a solid foundation by outlining technical concepts, government initiatives (or lack thereof), and international case studies (e.g., Australia, U.K., France, Brazil, South Africa, and China). This entails explaining technological advancements and standardization, offering comparative analysis of Canadian and American digital television policies—surprisingly, the U.S. government has pursued a more transparent and consistent path than Canada’s “largely disjointed and dysfunctional digital television transition” (p. 11)—and placing the Canadian experience within a global context. The remaining chapters focus exclusively on Canada: how its distribution channels—from broadcasting distribution undertaking (BDU) to over-the-air (OTA) broadcasting, including new digital services such as Internet protocol television (IPTV)—largely remain under the control of powerful conglomerates in spite of new opportunities for small-scale enterprises to use the Internet as a novel broadcasting platform. There is also the promise of citizen-initiated changes emerging from the fringes, in particular the call for greater transparency in official regulatory mechanisms and universal access to television services. Taylor concludes that the digital transition of Canada’s broadcasting system represents a missed opportunity to develop an infrastructure that serves all Canadian interests, from increased Canadian programming to closing the persistent digital divide in rural areas.

The book is predominantly focused on broadcasting, but could have benefitted from discussing digital convergence through a multimedia paradigm. Granted, placing investigations within the context of the digital convergence of “media” in general could have easily gone beyond the scope of the study. Yet, at the same time, a discussion on “digital screens,” increasing interoperability between systems (from stationary/fixed to mobile), and the emergence of “transmedia” (including second-screen viewing) could have shown why Canada’s digital convergence tends to be largely met with disinterest, or even apathy, from the wider public. For one, the transition between analogue and digital systems has been less dramatic—on the surface, at least—than the changeover from black and white images to colour. On the contrary, beyond the availability of higher picture and sound quality (as in HD for a surcharge), the Canadian television landscape “appears” to be largely the same. Thus, Taylor rightly points out that after the switch from OTA services to cable and satellite, the transition to digital was hardly noticeable. Yet, other developments have to be taken into account. “Traditional” television viewing, once described as the “hearth” around which the family gathers, is on the decline, for example, while on-demand delivery via Internet and mobile devices is on the rise (CRTC, 2013; Morley, 1999). It is therefore not surprising that what is happening to the “old brown box” in the living room appears to be less of importance to Canadians (especially younger generations) than debates about country-wide online services such as Netflix, more affordable mobile phone rates, and Internet neutrality.

Similarly, the transition from analogue to digital cinema has transpired without being noticed or widely discussed by the public or the press—unless higher frame
rates and other more “visible” factors are taken into account. Yet, this transition also has dramatic consequences, ranging from job losses to closures of neighbourhood theatres. These “stealth” transitions into digital media landscapes therefore point to a larger phenomenon: namely, that in spite of accessibility to a vast amount of information, critical discourse about media digitization (apart from specialized publications and media activist groups) appears to be nearly absent from news broadcasts and wider public dialogue and consultations. This, in turn, requires a call for “digital literacy,” which goes beyond the basic understanding of the Canadian media landscape today, to be taught in schools and postsecondary institutions.

Taylor’s Shut Off: The Canadian Digital Television Transition is a timely and critical contribution to a growing collection of scholarly works on digital media transitions. The book is especially important, considering that most transitions from analogue to digital media appear to be “seamless” and occur “under the radar” of public scrutiny, in spite of the fact that their repercussions on society are massive—from persistent digital divides to job losses and increased surveillance.

References

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