



## The digital switchover and the role of SVT

### Background

In May 2003 the Swedish Parliament decided that Sweden was to make the transition to digital terrestrial TV broadcasts. The switch-over was to take place in all of Sweden before February 1, 2008. As it was it was completed by late autumn 2007 (October 15).

A digital TV commission was appointed by the Government to implement the procedure. It was a non-partisan and independent authority. Their assignment was planning, coordinating, providing information and reporting on the switchover. It consisted of two parts; the Commission with five boardmembers and six experts as well as an operative part of five people.

The commission started its work in 2004 and the switch-over started in late summer 2005. It was to be executed in a region by region fashion. The regions/phases were decided in co-operation with Teracom, SVT and TV4. The first region out was the island Gotland in the Baltic.

The switch-over meant the need of a massive effort of information. It was an operation only to be compared to the switchover from left to right hand driving in Sweden 1967. And it was not just one message that should be conveyed but several.

A very big complication was that the digital switch-over did not apply to all Swedes; only the ones that live in their own house and receive the signal from the terrestrial net by their own TV antenna.

Big cable operators have decided to so far keep their nets analogue for their customers. They convert the signal. This meant that most of the cable customers, approx. 60 % of the Swedish households, were one big exception. They did not have to get a converter if they did not own a summer house, a caravan or a boat with a TV set that receives the signal straight from the terrestrial net. Or until they decide to upgrade their subscription to more channels. Special channels require a digital box.

Satellite and broadband were of course already digital but as Swedish households usually contain more than one television set there might be sets that were not linked to a subscription. They required a digital box of some sort. The choice stood between extending their subscription to the operator they already had or an operator in the terrestrial net or a box for free-to-air channels only.

The Swedish must carry-law states that SVT1, SVT2 and commercial TV4 are mandatory in analogue cable nets in Sweden. New legislation states that the must carry-channels in digital cable nets are all five SVT channels and commercial TV4.

This should be fairly simple and straight forward but is complicated by the commercial cable operator decision to keep their standard offer analogue by converting the digital signal to analogue before distribution in the net. The distribution becomes digital only when the customers want to upgrade their channel package.

This meant that 60% of the Swedish households risked being without the new public service channels. The new law could do nothing to help the citizens to get the SVT channels that are generally considered paid for with the license fee even if it is not so. You pay for owning a set.

SVT had to start negotiations with the cable operators. We were successful when it comes to big operators but there are still small operators that strictly follow the new law.

### **Many questions were asked by the Swedes**

First the political ones. Why do we have to do this? All other transitions of a TV-technical kind had been the customer's own choice – colour television, more than one channel etc. You upgraded your household when you could afford it. The digital switch over was *forced* on you and even if most households in Sweden can afford it, it was an important principal question. There was a big debate and demands of free boxes.

There were also local political questions. On the small island in Baltic where the switch-over started people wanted to know why the start took place in a small region with few customers and no pressure on the box-producers? That would mean little choice and expensive boxes...

Then the innumerable hands on-questions: What kind of antenna? Do I need a new set? What kind of box? How many channels? A separate box to the video as well? To the DVD? Why separate boxes and not a digital TV-set? Why not boxes with several tuners? Which transmitter is closest to my summer house?

### **SVT reaction**

As a public broadcaster SVT felt obligated to respond to the vast need of information that a national digital transition of TV broadcasting would mean. SVT has been the Swedish public service television for more than fifty years and even if the switchover was decided by the Swedish Parliament we knew that the public would turn to us. The idea that we would not respond to this was fairly unthinkable. We willingly took the part of the active objective informer but it was important that the SVT role in the digitization process was clear. This was a parliamentary decision!

SVT would synchronize with and support the work of the Commission as well as with Teracom and TV4 but we would not take any economical responsibilities for national ad campaigns, brochures etc. We did financially support a public call center for the audience though and we took responsibility for updating its' agents.

The SVT "currency" was mainly man power and many, many hours. We did of course cover the costs for our own travels, productions etc.

So did the other parties that are involved – the terrestrial net operator Teracom, the commercial (terrestrial) TV4, producers of digital boxes, big TV-store chains, satellite operators (offering a satellite choice), antenna installers etc. All with a vested interest in the switchover. SVT was the only party apart from the Commission that stressed the (almost) non commercial choice of free-to-air-channels. You did still have to *buy* a box.

### **What did SVT think?**

We had worked for digital distribution and digital production for many years and have made it clear that we support the digital technique where ever and however it is offered to the audience. The advantages are many more than the disadvantages.

### **SVT information efforts**

At the very start SVT produced a series of TV-programs explaining the switch-over and different solutions how to receive digital television.

SVT produced a short and comfortably slow information trailer for the elderly that was run mostly in the afternoons and also several 30 seconds trailers. The pay off was always “get more information on [svt.se/digitaltv](http://svt.se/digitaltv), tele text page 670 or call 0771-10 11 00!”

We produced a special digital TV site on [svt.se](http://svt.se) to inform the public. This consisted of sheer information but also current news about the switch-over. The information was graded into three categories – one for the ones “who wanted to know as little as possible”, one for the willing readers and the last for professionals.

We also arranged chats on [svt.se](http://svt.se) with digital experts approx. two weeks before every switch-over.

The regional news played a major part in informing the audience. They announced when it was time for the switch-over in that region (also streaming video on the web). SVT broadcast regional trailers as well as crawlers over regional news programmes: *If you see this and receive television straight from the terrestrial net to your own antenna, you need to act if you want to go on watching TV. Get more information on [svt.se/digitaltv](http://svt.se/digitaltv), tele-text page 670 or call 0771-10 11 00.*

All parties travelled the country usually six months ahead to inform local councils, other authorities and professionals in the TV business.

We took part in “road shows” in every region approx. one month before the switch-over. These usually took place in local malls and were announced by ads in local papers and posters in the mall.

The PR-work, calling local papers, setting up local chat rooms and radio talk shows was the responsibility of the Commission but all parties joined in.

When we planned the rather difficult task of informing the inhabitants of Stockholm we came up with the idea of a shocking pink bus. This proved so successful that we kept the bus for the rest of the time and it became the centre and our symbol for our information efforts.

The main bus tour participants were experts from the Commission, Teracom, SVT and TV4. The satellite and cable operators are asked to join and do so frequently. The “show” was fairly modest most of the time. We did not want to be so imposing that we scared people away. To attract an audience we asked the SVT and TV4 regional and local news presenters to join.

The information was very person to person and sometimes exhausting. It was most important to keep up a cheerful attitude even if you got the same question over and over again. Every conversation took between 10 or 15 minutes and as people did not really know how they received TV it started with an interview. How many channels do you have? Do you pay a fee to an operator that you know the name of? Etc.

Apart from a new digital picture the Swedish audience also got a real education in how TV is transmitted. Suddenly they had to make all sorts of decisions regarding operators, boxes, formats and flat screens. They learnt all about transmitters and antennas. TV distribution had been a gray zone in the life of the Swedes but that is not so any longer.

As the report from the Commission will show the digitization of Sweden went smoothly. Teracom that performed the hands on work managed to close 54 large broadcasting stations and 600 smaller ones without any disasters. They were always on time. The information worked.

We met and talked to our audience, solved problems together and got really close. The SVT presence was much appreciated and long, sometimes very tiring hours in the pink bus got a rosy glow that we all will miss.

