Digital TV, another step towards 'homo digitalis'

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Analogical blackout has started, although for users it will be a gradual, almost transparent, fade out. It will be similar to the way that over the last few years, we have been unconsciously replacing our analogical mobile telephones for those with a digital signal. Or just like the way we are jumping, little by little, on the high speed Internet bandwagon through digital technologies like ADSL. By 2012 all Spanish television broadcasts will be digital... or they won't exist.

The official launch comes at a time when there still isn't an installed base of receivers prepared for the new media. However, this isn't very important because the equipment production problem will be solved as users replace their current television sets with new ones. What's more, the problem could easily be overcome initially thanks to signal converters working as communal antennas.

From the technical point of view, the really important issue is that we already have the first versions of communications protocols (MHP) and the receiver prototypes. With them, we will be able to display digital television content and to use their implicit interactive functions. In the first phase we won't see any major changes. We will keep on having unidirectional content as we do at present, though enhanced by the superior quality of the digital signal. Gradually we will incorporate value added services, such as e-commerce or online banking (t-commerce), interactive participation systems, and the possibility that users contribute content to the medium.

In a second phase we will see the so-called "à la carte television" and the home communication networks convergence, which will enable us to access communications from the telephone, the PC, the television or other domestic appliances. Before this can happen, we should find a digital TV killer app, an application able to totally bury the past. What will be the 'Big Brother' or 'Operación Triunfo' that will be able to do so? We still don't know, but we are certain that content will be what will drive the advent of digital television.

Another determining factor will be the Internet. Traditional TV is normally associated with leisure content, but digital TV will also be able to serve Internet enriched content for educational and professional aims. The "silly box", linked to the living-room sofa, will be replaced by an intelligent television with many different applications, which will be used in different contexts, even within the enterprise.

On the way to full television interactivity, the audiovisual sector seeks a business model to pay off the high costs of digital television production and broadcasting and most importantly, to generate revenues. Subscription fees, pay-per-view and interactive advertising look like the most probable sources of income. But the new medium will only be viable if it guarantees a certain margin for each player in the value network. That is from device vendors to content owners, signal carrier networks and the myriad
of advertising players.
In the diffused monitor of digital television there are still many images to define, but its arrival means a new and important step towards the "homo digitalis" so brilliantly predicted by Nicholas Negroponte.