

Insights Broadcasting Digital Migration

SYNCHRONICITIES

A convergence of strands

For digital television to be a success, a series of developments will have to unfold and fit together

The last few years have seen much activity in the Digital Terrestrial Television (DTT) arena, particularly at the level of government policy and the successful switch-on of the country's digital broadcasting signal for testing purposes.

However, it is now imperative that SA focuses on the practical implementation of DTT, beginning with the market launch of services to television viewers, says Lara Kantor, chairperson of the Digital Dzonza Advisory Council (Digital Dzonza), which has been appointed by the minister of communications to advise on and monitor the migration of terrestrial television from analogue to digital.

She says that though the digital signal was switched on in selected areas in November last year, to facilitate DTT trials, the market

launch has yet to take place. "In general, our progress has been good. However, this is a long process."

She says there are a number of issues that must still be addressed, such as the market launch of DTT — the date on which digital terrestrial television services are available to the public.

"The successful launch of DTT services aims to kick-start the smooth transition from analogue to digital. As a Dzonza we have identified a likely timeframe for the launch as between September 2009 and April 2010.

"This market launch of DTT marks the effective beginning of the dual illumination period from the perspective of television viewers. Efforts in SA over this period will have to focus on encouraging all television households that currently have access to an analogue signal to purchase the necessary equipment, such as set top boxes (STBs), to ensure they continue to have access to television after switch-off," Kantor says.

She says for a comprehensive launch to take place as planned, subsidised STBs must be available and in retail stores, a fully fledged help scheme in place, and a multitude of new channels and e-government services provided.

She says cabinet has set ambitious timeframes for migration, and the market launch plays a big role in the overall success of the process.

Given that DTT involves a number of different stakeholders throughout the broadcasting value chain, many different success factors are essential to facilitate an effective market launch. It is the responsibility of a multitude of role-players to ensure these success factors are put in place, and an effective launch will depend on good co-ordination among these role-players.

One of the issues to be resolved



JIGSAW: Lara Kantorblah, chair of the Digital Dzonza Advisory Council.

is the SABS finalisation of STB specifications, for which the closing date for comment has closed. Manufacturing can begin after the issue is finalised and recommendations are adopted.

Kantor says manufacturers at the Digital Dzonza were under the impression that the government will select those tasked with developing STBs. In submissions to the Digital Dzonza the Consumer Electronics Association says they are awaiting a decision by the government on this. She says the government should clarify its position.

Another of the issues to be resolved is the clarification between government and broadcasters on the funding of the costs related to the dual illumination period.

Broadcasters have indicated that they cannot bear the costs of both analogue and digital transmission over this period.

Talks are in progress and should be finalised shortly.

The frequency plan, for which Icasa is responsible, also needs finalisation. Icasa is also making progress on finalisation of the regulations on DTT, which will stipulate how many channels will be awarded to the different broadcasters and outline regulatory requirements for such additional services. The finalisation of the regulations is crucial to kick start the awarding of licences," she says.

Icasa says a driver for consumer take-up of digital technology will be access to other compelling channels and content. Broadcasters should make sure their content enhances viewer experiences. However, broadcasters cannot launch more channels without licences.

She says an invitation to apply for licences can only be issued once regulations have been

Set top boxes vary in price depending on the functionality. With the level of functionality proposed by the Department of Communications, it is estimated that the retail cost of the free-to-air STB is in the region of R600 to R700

finalised. After the issue of such

invitation, broadcasters should have sufficient time to develop and submit applications, stakeholders would need an opportunity to make submissions on different proposals and Icasa would need time to consider applications and submissions before awarding licences and issuing licence conditions. "Final planning by broadcasters of their different channel offerings will only be possible after the award of licences," she says.

Icasa says the publication of the Ministerial Policy in September last year was followed by the release of draft DTT regulations in October for public comment, in terms of the Electronic Communications Act. Public hearings on the draft regulations took place in November last year and the authority is working on the final regulations with a target to

publish them before the end of March 2009.

Icasa spokesperson Sekgoela Sekgoela says these regulations will provide for the allocation of DTT multiplexes and the authorisation of new channels to television broadcasters in line with the allocated capacity in each multiplex. "The finalisation of these regulations will also inform the conclusion of the discussion on the broadcasting frequency plan."

On March 11 and 12, Icasa held a workshop attended by industry players with a view to establishing consensus on the frequency plan.

Sekgoela says the authority is still waiting for conclusion of discussions at the Bureau of Standards on technical standards of STBs, before developing the regulatory framework. "It is therefore conceivable that the entire regulatory framework for DTT will be concluded well before the end of the first half of 2009."

Other important factors for the successful migration process include consumer awareness about the process and the benefits of digital migration, as well as facilitating an easy transition by audiences to the new technology.

All stakeholders that the Digital Dzonza has engaged with (both local and international) have emphasised that the success of migration requires a focus on consumers' needs, and ensuring they are both aware of what is required and incentivised to purchase the equipment needed.

Through consultation with the different players, it is furthermore evident that there is currently limited awareness amongst the South African public about digital television requirements and benefits — and that there are already what have been dubbed "urban legends" about, for example, what equipment is necessary.

The Consumer Electronics Association (CEA) says there is currently limited knowledge not only among the public, but also among television retailers and manufacturers and importers of TV equipment.

Who serves on the Digital Dzonza?

THE government has taken the inclusive approach and has established the Digital Dzonza Advisory Council to ensure the migration of South Africa's analogue broadcasting services to digital is in line with the government's Broadcasting Digital Migration (BDM) Policy.

The body involves all stakeholders in the process including the government itself, regulators such as Icasa, broadcasters (SABC, e.tv, M-Net), manufacturers, consumer interests and those responsible for infrastructure and transmission such as Sentech.

The need to establish the advisory council is motivated by the complexity and the magnitude of the digital migration process, which requires a dedicated body that is solely tasked with the responsibilities of:

- Providing a forum for discussion and decisions by digital migration stakeholders on all matters related to the migration;
- Giving strategic guidance to the minister and the department regarding the migration to digital;
- Making recommendations regarding the implementation of the BDM Policy;
- Developing an implementation plan for migration to digital broadcasting systems by SA's terrestrial television services;
- Co-ordinating and monitoring the implementation plan;
- Communicating with the public on BDM;
- Providing oversight of the Digital Dzonza project office.

The advisory council constitutes an association of representatives from the government, the regulator, industry, consumer groups and members of the general public. The council is appointed by and makes recommendations to the minister of communications. In executing its functions, the advisory council interacts with Icasa, role-players and the communications department on digital migration matters

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Accolades for Dzonza and the SABC

THE South African government's efforts in driving the migration from analogue to digital television was for the first time acknowledged in London last month, during the inaugural Informa's Digital Switchover awards.

Minister of Communications Ivy Matsepe-Casaburri congratulated the Digital Dzonza, a body she established to oversee and monitor the implementation of broadcasting digital migration in SA, for being a runner-up in the category of "Best Digital Switchover Plan" at the Digital Switchover Strategies event.

SA was one of three countries nominated in the category of "Best Digital Switchover Plan". The other two countries were Finland and Sweden. The award went to Finland, which has

already completed analogue switch-off.

Speaking after the award ceremony, chairperson of Digital Dzonza Lara Kantor said: "It is significant that SA was the only developing country shortlisted among those that have already completed the switchover process. I am confident that the acknowledgement will act as an additional impetus for all those working hard on digital migration in SA."

The Digital Switchover awards bring together high-level industry executives, who debate the move to digital-only broadcasting.

In a separate category, the SABC was shortlisted for the "Best Contribution by a Broadcaster to Digital Switchover".

Analogue Africa to be a thing of the past

Three-day event addresses major issues about the transition

THE recent three-day Digital Broadcasting Switchover Forum 2009 (DBSF09) took place in February — while SA is conducting trials for Digital Terrestrial Television (DTT).

Organised by the Commonwealth Telecommunications Organisation (CTO), this fourth edition of the DBSF09 highlighted common problems experienced by African broadcasters on the route to digital migration.

As the Southern African Digital Broadcasting Association noted, Africa is not alone in finding a challenge in the switchover from analogue broadcasting to digital.

"The American senate is currently considering delaying the deadline for the analogue switch-off, which was supposed to happen on February 17 this year. Whereas the bulk of Americans rely on cable and satellite, Africa is very dependent on terrestrial broadcasting. The South African DTT trials are presently taking place in Johannesburg, Pretoria and Durban, with M-Net also conducting a trial in Cape Town."

Lara Kantor, chairperson of the Digital Dzonza (the digital migration office created by the Department of Communications to ensure the smooth implementation of DTT, says that the commercial launch might well happen at the end of 2009, and not in the middle of the year as predicted last year by Parliament.

Representatives from Ghana, Tanzania, Kenya, Uganda, Botswana, Mauritius and South



SWITCHED ON: Delegates at the Digital Broadcasting Switchover Forum 2008 held in SA last year. Africa is not alone in finding a challenge in the switchover from analogue broadcasting to digital, delegates were told. The US is considering delaying the deadline for the analogue switch-off, which was supposed to happen on 17 February.

African countries face a special challenge in proceeding with, among others, policy, legislative, operational and technological implications of the digital revolution in the broadcast industry

Africa presented updates on the progress of digital migration in their countries.

Mauritius has already successfully implemented DTT, using set top boxes manufactured in China.

The three-day event addressed major issues about the transition from analogue to digital broadcasting including: the impact and implications of dual illumination (the process whereby countries broadcast on both analogue and digital systems); practical insights into the ongoing implementation; understanding

the Pan African policy; the regulatory and operational context for digital broadcasting; and the special regulatory challenges within a transformational broadcasting environment.

Part of the deliberations also centred on creating an enabling, innovative environment for the broadcasting industry; the developmental impact of digitisation; defining the digital future for African broadcasting; and a special focus day on digital content production and distribution.

CEO of the CTO, Dr Ekwo

Garbrah, said the event has been used by the CTO to create an enabling platform over the years to help bring stakeholders in the industry together to exchange ideas and benchmark strategies for an effective switchover.

"During a global economic crisis which is dampening investment in innovation and new technology adoption, African countries face a special challenge in proceeding with the necessary policy, legislative, legal, operational, technological, managerial, editorial and creativity implications of the

digital revolution in the broadcast industry. With technological convergence, the entry of telephone and IT companies into the broadcast space and the growing access to mobile communications of Africans, there are also tremendous opportunities for discerning investors in this field."

Spio-Garbrah indicated the CTO's commitment and determination to continue to play a leading role in ensuring that Africa is not left behind in the global technological revolution.

'Set top boxes a huge opportunity for manufacturers'

DIGITAL Terrestrial Television (DTT) represents the biggest electronics opportunity in SA's history, says Anton Lan, member of the Digital Dzonza.

He says the South African government has committed to digital migration with targets set at 70% penetration of the roughly 9-million TV households by 2010, and 90% by 2011. The need to ensure there are sufficient numbers of easily accessible set top boxes (STBs) available to meet consumer demand prior to the market launch of DTT is fundamental for a successful and comprehensive launch.

Lan says there is a requirement for at least 9-million STBs in SA and an estimated African STB requirement of 100-million.

The STB specifications include return path capability and will have a strong conformance methodology. Government has committed to a 70% subsidy for some 5-million of the poorest households of R2,45-billion.

A key objective of government is to support local industry by building a first class STB manufacturing industry that would grow the electronics manufacturing sector in an inclusive, win-win manner, and that would see many newcomers enter these markets, Lan says.

The government is currently considering a draft manufacturing and distribution strategy that should be finalised in the third quarter of 2009. This will determine, where and how STBs will be distributed — for example, whether or not manufacturers will await orders from retailers or produce prior to this, if alternative distribution outlets (such as post offices) will also be used to ensure widespread availability of STBs, and how and by who boxes will be distributed to retail outlets.

The government also wants to encourage ICT sector growth and innovation; maximise BEE

initiatives; and build a model for African digitisation.

The South African STB, says Lan, will be a world first MPEG-4 DTT deployment and will have the DVB-T standard.

MPEG-4 is the latest broadcasting compression standard and allows for more channels over the same infrastructure, which lowers costs of transmitters and allows the licensing of more operators to supply additional services.

"The government's good intention to use the STBs as a means of helping bridge the digital divide is dependent on the fact that every STB deployed has the capability, which meets the specifications," Lan says.

He says conformance is vital for the government's vision of the BDM programme to be realised.

Lan advises a phased approach to value added services on the STB, which could eventually introduce a browser in every home, universal access to email, and tools that enable non-technical resources to deliver services like education and government information services.

Another challenge is that initial price targets for the retail price of an STB were about R700. The depreciating rand over the past 18 months and going forward has a significant impact on the price of an STB as many of the electrical components are priced in dollars.

Lan believes the government's commitment to a bold vision for DTT that extends beyond the delivery of audio and video services is laudable.

He contends that it also represents the biggest single ICT opportunity in SA's history with the ability to stimulate investment, increase jobs, improve and develop key skills in the economy and create production sectors.

He says the rest of Africa is looking towards SA to establish this DTT programme successfully as an example they can follow.