

What is DTT?

Digital terrestrial television is the replacement for analogue terrestrial broadcasts. It makes more efficient use of radio frequency spectrum, allowing more television channels to be licensed.

Does DTT use satellite?

No, it is unrelated to satellite TV. However, people who want to receive DTT signals will need to buy a set-top box that looks similar to a satellite decoder.

When do I have to buy a set-top box?

If you subscribe to M-Net's terrestrial service, you will need to upgrade within 12 months. If not, you have until November 2011, when government wants to switch off the analogue signal. However, many broadcasting experts say this is an unrealistic deadline that will have to be extended.

Do I have to buy a set-top box?

No. If you have DSTv, you already receive all of SA's terrestrial channels. However, you may not receive all of the new channels that will be launched on the DTT platform. The choice is yours.

How much will the set-top box cost?

It depends on the feature set, but the decoders should start at about R700. Lower-income households will be able to buy subsidised set-top boxes.

Do I need a TV licence to get DTT?

Yes. You will be required to show your TV licence when buying a set-top box.

Do I need a flat-panel TV to watch DTT?

No. Flat-panel technologies will replace older cathode-ray tube (CRT) TVs, but you don't need to throw away your CRT just yet. Flat-panel displays are recommended if you want to watch high-definition (HD) channels, and none of the channels on DTT will be HD at launch.

DIGITAL TERRESTRIAL TELEVISION

The antennas are out

Consumers will be able to purchase a digital set-top box as early as April next year as SA gears up to switch from analogue to digital terrestrial broadcasting. By then, SA should have as many as 16 free-to-air television channels.

That's the word from Lara Kantor, chair of the Digital Dzonga, a council of 15 members established by government to oversee the switch to digital terrestrial television.

Despite scepticism from broadcasters, and a warning from the Independent Communications Authority of SA (Icasa) that the deadline to move to digital TV is too ambitious, communications minister Siphwe Nyanda says the initial target to switch off the old analogue signal by November 2011 is still in place. If SA meets this deadline, it will be one of the shortest periods of "dual illumination" — where both the digital and analogue signals are broadcast simultaneously.

Government wants the period to be short to reduce the risk of technology dumping by other countries, and to cut transmission costs associated with broadcasting two separate signals. "Until cabinet makes new pronouncements, that date remains," Nyanda says. "We must work with the Digital Dzonga to ensure that the set targets are met."

The International Telecommunication Union (ITU), a UN agency, has set a deadline for countries to complete the move to digital TV by 2015, after which the ITU will no longer protect the analogue frequencies from interference.

Government wants the process expedited because of the benefits digital TV brings. It removes the cost of maintaining legacy analogue equipment. Some of the equipment state-owned broadcast signal distributor Sentech uses to provide the analogue signal was acquired at the time of the launch of television in SA in 1976.

Also, because digital broadcasting makes more efficient use of radio frequency spectrum, some of the spectrum that was used for analogue broadcasts can be made available to telecommunications operators to provide wireless broadband and related services. The frequency that will be made available from

the switchover is the 790-862 MHz band.

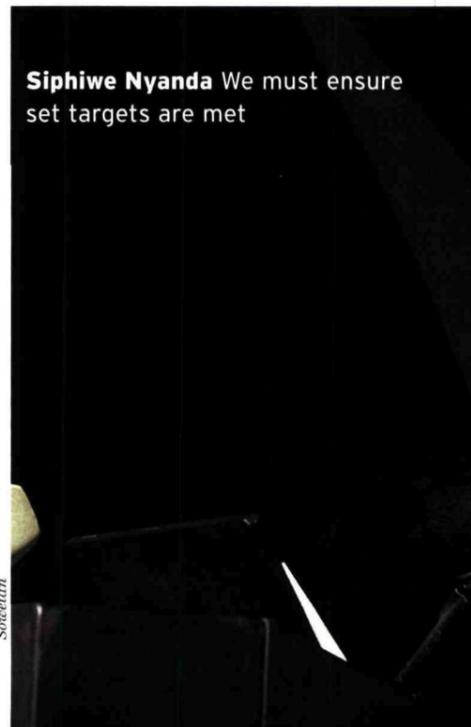
Lastly, because it is more efficient, digital TV allows Icasa to license a raft of new channels, providing more choice to consumers. Kantor wants 16 free-to-air channels available in time for digital TV's commercial availability in April. She says 60% of SA's population will be covered by a digital TV signal by then.

Kantor admits that much work must be done to educate the public about digital TV. Some people confuse high-definition television and digital TV, thinking they'll have to upgrade their television sets to flat-panel displays to view the new signal. Others think it works via satellite, not realising it's simply an upgrade to the conventional terrestrial service.

SA has 9,1m television households. Government has allocated R400m from the Universal Service & Access Fund — into which licensed telecom operators pay a regular contribution — to subsidise the cost of set-top boxes for anyone who is paid a social welfare grant. It estimates that about 5m households will qualify for the subsidy, which has still to be finalised.

The SA Bureau of Standards has developed specifications for the hardware

Siphwe Nyanda We must ensure set targets are met



to be used in the set-top boxes, to which manufacturers must conform. Government plans to issue a tender to local manufacturers for the production of the 5m-odd subsidised decoders. For the other 4,1m, any manufacturer, local or foreign, and whose equipment conforms to the SABS specification, may build and sell set-top-boxes.

Local manufacturers that look set to benefit from the switchover include electronics groups Altech and Reunert. Both are expected to bid for the state tender. Established broadcasters, including e.tv and Naspers-controlled MultiChoice, are also set to benefit. Icasa has said to MultiChoice that if it switches all of M-Net's analogue terrestrial customers over to digital TV within the next 12 months, it will be awarded enough spectrum to offer a bouquet of up to eight channels. At the moment, M-Net subscribers receive only the M-Net channel and CSN.

MultiChoice may benefit by being able to launch new channels. But there's a catch. Icasa plans to license a new pay-TV player using the frequency that will be freed up by M-Net's move to digital. That operator should launch in the second half of next year. The SABC, meanwhile, has been given sufficient spectrum to offer up to eight channels, and free-to-air e.tv has been granted enough to offer four or five channels. E.tv may apply for additional spectrum later. **Duncan McLeod**

