

Hlaudi: SABC will now start DTT with five TV channels

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The SABC's chief operating officer (COO) Hlaudi Motsoeneng says the public broadcaster will now launch with only five TV channels once the long-delayed commercial start of South Africa's switch from analogue to digital broadcasting begins.

When South Africa's TV industry switches from analogue to digital broadcasting, terrestrial TV broadcasters like the SABC, e.tv and M-Net are each supposed to grow their own existing analogue channels to bouquets of multiple digital TV channels - just like DStv and StarSat - to entice TV viewers to make the switch and buy a set-top box (STB) to get access to more channels and content.

The SABC's initial DTT offering will now however only consist of SABC1, SABC2, SABC3 as well as the SABC News (DStv 404) and the repeat channel SABC Encore (DStv 156) - the last two of which are already available on DStv. It's far from the 18 SABC TV channels the broadcaster promised parliament just a few years ago.

'We'll be having five channels'

"We are preparing ourselves for [digital television] migration. When minister [Faith Muthambi] announces the date of migration, switching on, SABC will be ready," said Motsoeneng.

"We'll be having five channels. For the first time in the history of South Africa. But if we don't pilot these channels on that bouquet of MultiChoice, we will still have three channels. What will be the use of migrating if we don't have more channels?" asked Motsoeneng.



Image via [Fotolia.com](#)

It echoes what Lynn Mansfield, the SABC's DTT advisor, said in March on SABC2's *Morning Live*, saying the SABC will start off with just five DTT channels.

In September 2011 SABC executives and the SABC board told parliament that the SABC's DTT offering will consist of 18 TV channels - 17 TV channels (which includes SABC1, SABC2, SABC3) and one interactive video service channel - as well as 18 SABC radio stations plus Channel Africa.

Out of the SABC's envisioned DTT plans, only SABC News and SABC Encore (originally called SABC Entertainment) so far materialised.

The SABC won't launch DTT with SABC Sport, a health channel, SABC Education, an SMME and children's channel or the two regional channels, a regional north (SABC4) and regional south (SABC5) channel which is what it told parliament.

For DTT the SABC also promised parliament new services like closed captioning (on-screen subtitles) in multiple languages that can be accessed by the set top box's remote control, multiple language soundtracks with up to four different audio tracks per programme for certain shows, audio description to provide contextual information in programmes, as well as some interactive applications. With the down scaled DTT plans, all of these now look very unlikely to be available at launch.

Digital TV will have to offer viewers more

According to experts, broadcasters will have to offer ordinary terrestrial viewers more with digital TV - more TV channels and services and a better viewing experience and image quality - than what they're currently receiving, in order for the millions of free-to-air TV households in South Africa to feel the need to pay R700 to R800 for a STB.

Embarrassingly, South Africa will miss next month's global deadline of 17 June of the International Telecommunication Union (ITU) the country agreed to, to fully complete the expensive DTT switch and digital migration process which takes about five years - and when all analogue TV signals are supposed to be switched off.

With several failed dates announced by the South African government which all came and went, the country hasn't even started the commercial switch-on period which will take a few years - a period known as "dual illumination".

Under "dual illumination" the new and additional digital TV signals are supposed to be broadcast in conjunction with the existing analogue signals to give consumers and viewers time to make the TV transition.

SA DTT: Delayed, mired in controversy

While other African countries have already successfully completed the switch, South Africa's DTT process which will cost billions of rands has been mired in controversy for years, with ongoing embarrassing delays, in-fighting and protracted court cases.

South Africa's DTT process has largely lost sight of who it's really intended to be for and supposed to serve - the ordinary viewer who has been left out of the discussion with basically no public viewer participation.

Instead government has shifted DTT's focus to a "job creation" mechanism instead of a "viewing and content improvement" mechanism - one which has largely been hijacked by local manufacturers - themselves fractured with backstage squabbling over conflicting encryption issues and fighting for slices of the billion rand government tenders to produce digital TV boxes.

Government inaction and ministerial bungling, multiple ill-informed communications ministers, an ill-equipped and slow-moving broadcasting regulator, the multiple re-issue of constantly changing digital broadcasting regulations and in-fighting over broadcasting standards and conditional access all contributed to the DTT derailment.

Source: Channel24 - [Hladi: SABC will now start DTT with 5 TV channels.](#)

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