

Digital broadcast deadline concerns

Parliament's communications portfolio committee earlier this week expressed concern over whether the deadline to migrate from analogue to digital broadcasting would be met, saying it had been "sceptical" about the "timeframes" from the outset.



(Image: GCIS)

Earlier this year, Communications Minister Dina Pule said SA would switch on digital terrestrial television services sometime in September, starting a period of "dual illumination" of both analogue and digital signals.

She said her department was "committed" to meeting this deadline.

The final deadline to switch off the analogue signal is set for June 2015.

However, with many deadlines having been missed previously, there have been doubts in the industry that the final deadline would be met.

In February, the SABC - one of the strategic entities in the rollout of digital terrestrial television - told Parliament it needed more time to review its digital terrestrial television strategy, which raised further doubts about whether the deadlines were achievable. Also earlier this year, the Department of Communications said it had a R6.7bn funding shortfall for digital terrestrial television infrastructure projects, thus placing the migration process at risk of failing.

What exactly is going on?

In an interview on the sidelines of a portfolio committee meeting this week, chairman Sikhumbuzo Kholwane said that in the next "few weeks" the committee would request each entity responsible for facilitating some aspect of the project to deliver a presentation to clarify what "exactly was happening with the migration process".

"The committee was sceptical from the onset about the timeframes; we thought they were too tight. We indicated that they should go back and rethink the timeframes when they (the department) came with (the September deadline)," Kholwane said.

"There are growing concerns that we will not meet the deadlines...."

"We do not want to speculate about the delays, so we will call them to Parliament. It is only fair for us to call them (the department and its entities) to brief us and take us through the timelines," he said.

Kholwane said the state-owned signal distributor Sentech was likely to meet its deadline for the rollout of transmitters and other related signalling infrastructure by the time the switch from analogue to digital is finally made.

Pule announced earlier this year that the Sentech had rolled out the digital broadcasting network to 61% of the population.

"I think what (deadline) we can probably meet is the readiness of transmitters ... the question we now have to ask is whether

we have the necessary scheme (for the set-top boxes) up and running ... those are the issues we are worried about," Kholwane said.

The jobs myth

An estimated 11-million households will have to buy a set-top box when the digital migration takes effect, to enable their television sets to receive the new digital signal.

Democratic Alliance MP and communications spokeswoman Marian Shinn echoed Kholwane's concerns, saying it was not clear what was causing the delays.

"We have been asking the minister what exactly is going on with the set-top boxes, there is a lot of confusion ... there is a lack of decision making.

"Why manufacture them locally when you can import them for a lot cheaper ... it is a myth that the set-top box industry will actually create a lot of jobs," Shinn said.

Meanwhile, the Independent Communications Authority of SA has proposed establishing a Digital Television Content Advisory Group to advise on the most effective ways to ensure the supply of digital television content, and to encourage consumers to acquire the set-top boxes needed to receive digital broadcast signals.

The SABC, e.tv and M-Net are racing to complete the migration from analogue to digital broadcasting by June 2015. The move to a digital platform will result in more channels, as well as improved picture quality.

Source: *Business Day* via I-Net Bridge

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