

Digital TV chaos shows government lack of interest

A journalist has to take obscure matters and turn them into engaging and understandable stories, showing people why they should care about them. Sometimes it seems impossible.



By [Anton Harber](#) 21 Mar 2014

This week - tired of the Oscar Pistorius trial - I decided to write about the dispute between broadcasters over how the country switches over to digital terrestrial TV, a squabble that has gone on for years, spilling over last week into full-page advertisements and which very few people understand or care about. It is a technical discussion, and understanding the finer points of encryption, standardisation and other obscurities does not answer the crucial question: does it matter to us?

It comes down to the adage about what happens when elephants fight: the ants are trampled. What we are seeing is a battle among the major existing broadcasters - MultiChoice, e.tv, the South African Broadcasting Corporation (SABC) - each determined to protect their territory from each other and from other possible competition. None is acting in the public interest. The referee here should be the state, in the form of the communications minister and/or the Independent Communications Authority of South Africa, but a succession of hopeless ministers and the weakness of the regulator have left us without anyone driving the process to conclusion.

Why it matters

It matters for a number of reasons. The first is that it will affect what broadcasting and internet services we will have in the future. The move to digital opens up much more space for many more diverse TV channels, so that we can think about dedicated language, regional or more specialist channels - not just in pay-TV but also free-to-air TV. In the long run, it should also free up bandwidth to be used for e-government services and more broadband for wireless data, which will assist in the desperate need for wider, faster internet access.

There have been many blockages along the way. The government set a standard for digital set-top boxes, then - as part of a dodgy BRICs deal - changed its mind, and it had to be changed back again. When the government ruled that the boxes had to have encryption, e.tv went to court to oppose this, causing a further delay. It was ruled that the decision be left to the broadcasters, but they could not agree and had no real interest in settling the matter as delay allows them to continue growing without more competition.

Late last year, the new, seemingly more engaged and active minister, Yunus Carrim, came up with a compromise: those who wanted encryption could have it, those who did not would not. MultiChoice did not want it, partly because it had a whole lot of unencrypted boxes ready to roll out, and encryption would open the door to other competitive pay-TV services. e.tv wanted it because it might want to introduce a pay service, and it was better for its free services. Government policy was in favour of encryption for a number of reasons, a major one being that it was going to subsidise boxes for the indigent and did not want subsidised boxes that could be stolen and exported. The compromise would mean that the subsidised boxes could be encrypted and MultiChoice could sell its unencrypted ones. Both of these private broadcasters are aggressive in defence of their own interests, and as neither got quite what they wanted, they are still squabbling and the minister is getting irritated, calling MultiChoice a bullying monopoly.

The SABC, under the extraordinary chief operations officer Hlaudi Motsoeneng, did a surprise deal with MultiChoice. The pay-TV giant funded SABC's 24/7 news channel in exchange for the public broadcaster changing its line on encryption - in direct conflict with government policy. All of this goes to the way we make decisions in this country and where public interest lines up in a battle between powerful corporate interests. It is about the government failing to see the importance of communications in the economy and leaving it in the hands of a succession of weak and short-term ministers. It is about whether the SABC serves the public interest. And, finally, it is about having a modern communication system that gives us diversity of programming.

ABOUT ANTON HARBER

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