

Sentech to test digital radio pilot

The state-owned broadcasting signal distributor Sentech will test digital radio technologies from October, a move that will open the airwaves to more radio stations and improved audio quality, it said last week. The current analogue FM signal is already crowded, especially in Gauteng, while quality on AM or medium wave is often poor in many areas.



Moreover, digital radio will enable complementary data services such as weather, traffic and news to be displayed on radio screens, especially in cars.

The digital radio pilot comes as SA migrates from analogue TV broadcasting to digital.

The digital radio trials will run for a year in Gauteng using the digital audio broadcasting (DAB+) standard for FM. The trials will also be done in partnership with the National Association of Broadcasters and the SABC.

In parallel with the DAB+ trial for FM radio, Sentech will also test digital radio mondiale (DRM - the digital system for medium wave/AM). The DRM testing will be done with Radio Pulpit.

'Huge benefits'

"The benefits are huge. There will be more services and more radio stations. Complementary data services will come naturally on the digital platform," said Sentech CEO Setumo Mohapi.

He said that one of the key factors for the migration from analogue radio to digital would be partnerships between car manufacturers, broadcasters and manufacturers of radio sets. "We are looking at trends around the world," Mohapi said.

SA's move to digital radio will be in line with developed markets such as Denmark, Norway, the UK and Australia. Some countries are said to be in the process of switching off their analogue radio signal as there has been a drop in listenership on that platform as more people listen to digital radio. Mohapi said the migration to digital radio was unlikely to be as complete as the move to digital TV.

Sentech will fund the trial from its cash resources. It has upgraded most of the analogue transmission sites to digital and will build four new TV broadcasting signal transmitters. SA has until June next year to switch off the analogue signal. The migration has been badly delayed due to, among other things, the impasse between the government and broadcasters over encryption technology for the set-top boxes to be used to receive the digital signal.

Source: *Business Day*, via I-Net Bridge