

Minister mum on digital migration

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National policy seems to be at a standstill in the Department of Communications, with little information coming from the minister's office.



(Image: GCIS)

This is problematic for the broadcasting industry, which is facing a raft of urgent deadlines.

The continued delay on the policy front has put a spanner in the works of technology developments in the country.

"Every month that spectrum allocation is delayed is another month of lost opportunity for rolling out new technologies, consumer and business options, and experimentation with what the technologies make possible," Arthur Goldstuck, MD of World Wide Worx, said.

Spiwe Chireka, of international research company IDC, said: "They are delaying technology development. It is likely Kenya will beat SA on technology, especially on 4G."

Top of the list of issues that have been put on hold are the digital-TV switchover guidelines. The country has to migrate to digital television by 2015.

The process has been postponed a number of times, and now Communications Minister Dina Pule is said to have sidelined crucial meetings and cancelled engagements with the press giving no reasons or updates on whether SA will meet the deadline.

Media briefing cancelled

Last week, Pule cancelled a media briefing an hour before it was to begin, allegedly to avoid the media asking her questions about her personal life. The delays on policy are now said to be slowing implementation of the digital terrestrial television (DTT) plans.

Pule has yet to announce the manufacturer of the subsidised set-top boxes necessary for the migration, and explain how the project will be implemented.

Avhasei Mukhoma, chairman of Mukhoma Attorneys, said: "The industry needs to know from the ministry what is going on, to proceed. The biggest challenge is with set-top box manufacturers and the delay is not good."

Pule's spokesman, Siyabulela Qoza, refused to answer any direct questions. "The briefing was postponed, not cancelled. We are rescheduling it."

Gerhard Patrick, of the Southern African Digital Broadcasting Association, said: "The most critical aspect of DTT is the set-top box manufacturing. There have been extensive delays on the key issues and without regulation no one wants to do anything."

Early this year, the Cabinet approved a manufacturing strategy for set-top boxes as well as support for poor households.

The Independent Communications Authority of SA (Icasa) cannot go ahead with plans outlined last year on licensing spectrum in the 800MHz and 2600MHz bands until there is a proper policy directive from the department. Icasa says the licensing process should have been finalised by April 30 last year.

Source: *Business Day* via I-Net Bridge

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