

New pay TV channel for Africa awaits approval

Black Earth Communications has applied for a commercial broadcasting license with the Botswana National Broadcasting Board and is awaiting the outcome of its application for a new subscription pay TV service to Africa that will operate out of Gaborone.

Andrew Jones, spokesperson for the venture, says the new service, which will be called Black Entertainment Satellite Television or BEStv, will initially offer viewers between five and ten channels and cost less than R100 a month.

Once in place, the company plans to scale very quickly to a service that will offer viewers a sampling of between 100 and 300 new channels not currently available on DStv - with no significant rate increase.

"How we will do it and what exactly we will offer remains of course a trade secret. However, we are 100% confident that what we want to do can be done," says Jones.

"Nowhere on Earth, except here in Africa, do you see one company which has so completely dominated the pay TV satellite market. The result has been a service that looks slick enough but in fact offers little in the way of what's really out there.

"It is also very expensive, far more so than similar services offered in either the USA or Europe. Look at the US where there is competition. In some markets consumers get 500 channels and pay half of what they do here."

Jones says that the current venture, ironically enough, was born out of a failed effort to gain a channel on the DStv bouquet: "We tried for several years to gain an independent foothold on the platform and even though we had the backing of some major players, we were turned away.

"So we thought: Multichoice pulls in about R600 million each month in subscriptions and another R700 million a year in advertising. All of this is based on a relatively small but very valuable LSM 7, 8, 9 and 10 subscriber base, which Multichoice controls completely. What they really need is some competition. We want a piece of that pie."

Jones says the new service will be available around the middle of this year: "Current owners of decoders under the PAS-7 and PAS-10 satellite footprint will simply have to buy a new smart card and the service will be theirs."