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What the loss of Falcon 9 and Amos-6 means for African connectivity

On 1 September 2016, international space exploration company SpaceX suffered a failure during the static test fire of the Falcon 9 rocket. Designed to transport satellites, Falcon 9 was scheduled to haul the Amos-6 satellite into geostationary orbit. The rocket suffered an unspecified failure in the second stage's LOX tank during the test, and both rocket and satelli were destroyed.

By Dawie de Wet 21 Sep 2016

It takes pioneers and brave entrepreneurs to open new markets, to push new limits and reach new frontier These individuals are responsible for innovations that change the world for the better and offer long term benefits to humanity. Dave Pollock, CEO of Spacecom, and Elon Musk, CEO of SpaceX, are two example and must be commended for their visionary work and steadfast execution.

Narrowing Africa's digital divide

Today's hyper-connected world has ignited the satellite industry, which is changing and adapting to meet tl ever increasing demand for connectivity which will exceed the collective capabilities of fibre, satellite, Wi-F and all other technologies. Current satellite technology is already capable of delivering impressive 100GB payloads through high-throughput satellite (HTS) services, and many operators are invested in bringing satellite connectivity to the public.

Different space operators are following different architectures. Spacecom designed the Amos-6 satellite specifically to empower Africa with broadband connectivity. The value of this strategy was quickly realised Facebook who has secured dominant access to this satellite in order to further Facebook's drive to close the digital divide.

Now with the loss of Amos-6, all industry parties will have to reconsider and reposition. Replacing satellites is a not quick job and takes typically three to five years, subject to any other plans that can be leveraged ar

repurposed. Amos-6 included a particularly strong focus on South Africa and had the potential to deliver broadband at an impressive R0,05c/MB (current LTE services are typically 18c/MB). That's satellite connectivity at 30% of LTE pricing. It is possible and it will be a reality in the near future.

> *Here's picture of Falcon 9 with Spacecom's Amos-6 telecommunications satellite on Cape Canaveral Air Force Station. pic.twitter.com/EuHGlGQYqy— Peter B. de Selding (@pbdes) September 1, 2016*

Need for collective support

However, the effective delivery and successful market development of such inexpensive satellite connectivity services will require more than the most advanced satellite technologies. It will require the collective understanding and support by all role players including regulators, service providers, distributors and end-users. It will require service providers experienced in taking niche technologies to the market, who can provide on-site customer support and service delivery for large-scale deployments.

In the short term, the loss of Amos-6 leaves a very really gap in the market and will definitely result in some delay in the market growth for broadband satellite services. Without Amos 6, the market demand will have be serviced from the current spectrum of available satellites and those planned for deployment in the near future. However, none of the current or upcoming satellite can really step into the gap and execute on the vision of Dave Pollack. It will take some time for the industry to fill this gap.

The good news is that Africa is innovative and Africa has tenacity. I have no doubt that collectively as an industry we will work harder toward meeting market and technology demands and use the time to improve service delivery capabilities on all fronts. In future, HTS services will undoubtedly shift the horizon for connectivity services. HTS services have real potential to meet the promise of anywhere, anytime connectivity' and will change our perspective on what can be done, and at what possible costs. HTS will do for IP what DStv did for broadcast.

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