

Digital TV distress

Communications department director-general Mamodupi Mohlala has made it clear: South Africa may reverse an agreement with the International Telecommunication Union (ITU) to adopt the digital video broadcasting (DVB-T) standard for terrestrial television. SA and other countries in the Southern African Development Community (SADC) agreed in 2006 that they would implement DVB-T as they switched away from analogue terrestrial broadcasts.

 By [Duncan McLeod](#) 10 May 2010

Government's decision to consider other standards, including Japan's integrated services digital broadcasting (ISDB-T) standard, could set back the switch to digital television by years, say industry executives. This could mean SA having to wait much longer to enjoy the benefits of moving to digital.

These benefits include more competition in terrestrial services and therefore more choice for consumers. Digital technology also makes more efficient use of spectrum, so bandwidth previously used for analogue signals can be freed up for wireless broadband services.

Few countries have adopted the ISDB-T standard; Brazil is the largest market where it's used outside Japan. Curiously, Brazilian president Lula da Silva wrote in a recent column published by the *Sunday Times* that he looked forward to "a common digital TV standard and to joint development of advanced defence equipment."

"We want our armaments industry to be a partner of our industrial and technological development strategy" wrote Da Silva, who plans a state visit to SA soon.

Some broadcasting industry executives have already taken this to mean that SA has decided to ditch DVB in favour of ISDB-T — that some backroom deal has been agreed between SA and Brazil and that last week's standards symposium was a sham.

Ahead of the symposium, Gerhard Petrick of the Southern African Digital Broadcasting Association described the event as "clearly biased against the adopted DVB-T standard" and said it "signals that the department of communications has bought into the sales talk of Japanese and Brazilian lobbyists."

Mohlala says the department of communications will forward a report and recommendation to communications minister Sphiwe Nyanda, who will make the final decision.

But moving to a different standard could prove problematic for many reasons. It could delay digital migration and add costs to the process, though Mohlala says state-owned signal distributor Sentech has assured him that ditching DVB-T for another standard would not require a write-off of investments already made. Small companies that have invested in the technology might not be so fortunate.

Then there's the need to get the entire SADC region to agree to switch to a new standard. This has to be done to avoid cross border radio spectrum interference.

And, if SA chooses ISDB-T, it could prove prohibitively expensive for consumers. ISDB T-based set-top boxes cost substantially more than DVB-T boxes. That must surely be a key consideration for a developin

country.

Mohlala has strongly denied that government has signed a deal with the Brazilians over ISDB-T. She says government's decision to review its commitment to DVB-T is based purely on the needs of SA consumers.

But serious concerns linger among broadcasters. Until the department of communications releases its findings, and until Nyanda pronounces on the subject, it's unlikely that speculation over backroom deals will go away.

Source: Financial Mail

ABOUT DUNCAN MCLEOD

Award-winning Duncan McLeod is the founder and editor of TechCentral (www.TechCentral.co.za, @TechCentral]), South Africa's latest technology news site offering breaking news, depth analysis and opinion that launched in September 2009. Before that, he was associate editor at the *Financial Mail/FM*. Contact Duncan on email duncan@techcentral.co.za and follow him on Twitter at @mcleodd. View my profile and articles...

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