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WHAT CAN SOUTH AFRICANS EXPECT FOLLOWING TODAY'S DTT SOFT-LAUNCH?

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Following our [critical summary](#) of the Department of Communications' (DoC) Digital Terrestrial Television (DTT) readiness report, a number of developments have since come up. The SOS Coalition spoke with Wandor Ndlangamandla who heads up all technical aspects of DTT for the Department for more details.

Digital switch-on

As we'll remember from the Minister of Communications' readiness report, the Department was set to have its DTT "soft-launch" in Kimberley over the 27 and 28 September 2012. The purpose of this soft launch was to prove the technical concept and showcase to South Africans that the long-anticipated digital migration is, at last, ready to take off in earnest with the commercial switch-on date happening in late November.

Things have changed since then. Ndlangamandla confirmed to SOS that the soft-launch date would, again, be postponed. This would be the third delay this year alone! Fortunately, the reasons for the postponement, this time, have less to do with the DoC's unpreparedness and more to do with a clash of Departmental and community diaries.

According to the Department, there being an international skateboarding competition in the area, and recognizing the hub of activity both events would bring to the area, the soft-launch has been postponed to 02 and 03 October 2012, that is, over Tomorrow and Wednesday. The commercial launch date was targeted to follow "some time in December."

In her August presentation, the Minister reported that the Department had planned to have set-top boxes, a kind of decoder which will interpret the new digital signals for people to be able to watch their TVs, distributed among 1000 households in the area. This would have not only have gone to prove the soundness of the technological concept in its real-life application, but would also have brought more stable and better quality TV signal into the homes of thousands of Northern Cape residents (as proxy for deep rural residents) who had, hitherto, been beleaguered by unreliable, and in some cases, a complete lack of [access to television](#).

Ndlangamandla reported to SOS that the launch model had changed somewhat since then. Set-top boxes would no longer be provided across household in the area. Instead, the Department would showcase the technology and its efficacy in community centers and public facilities to demonstrate to the locals and the country that the tech and concept works, as well as its imminence as the new national standard.

He further posited that with all eyes on the soft-launch in Kimberley, “the Department’s public awareness campaign would gain momentum from here” and inform the public on why it should make the migration as well as how.

But what does this mean for ordinary citizens?

Set-top box availability

At this stage, no more than the same message they’ve heard since 2007: to ready themselves for imminent change. While dated for an undetermined date in December, Ndlangamandla reports that the commercial launch date “will be set to coincide with set-top box availability.”

This comes as a rather concerning and non-committal response from the DoC. The tender process only just got underway with the request for proposals (RFP) period closing in mid-September, and the Department only just having begun evaluating proposals. And even if a preferred bidder might be identified by the end of the year, there's still the time it will take to set up the manufacturing plants, the actual manufacture of the set-top boxes as well as their conformance testing by the SABS. This, then, raises the very crucial question: will STB availability really coincide with the December launch date or should we brace ourselves for yet another postponement. Further, what will the implications of any further delays mean in the entire digital migration value chain?

Ndlangamandla expressed his and the Department’s confidence that all would run smoothly in this regard. He explained that the 3-month manufacture-period only really concerned new players in the set-top box manufacture industry as most of that time goes into product development. He further assured SOS that for established players, which the Department would prefer to contract with, it would only take up to a month to manufacture the set-top boxes, with SABS conformance testing taking anything between two to four additional weeks.

But with set-top boxes not yet manufactured, how will the Department prove that the technology actually works?

Ndlangamandla explains that up until the commercial launch date, any set-top box which conforms to the DVB-T2 technical standard – which South Africa & the other SADC countries have chosen to go with – will be able to receive and interpret the digital signal once it goes live. By commercial switch-on, and once the signal scramblers go live, only set-top boxes which also conform to the SA specific standards in addition to the technical standard will be able to receive and interpret the digital signal.

Another critical question that speaks to the availability and accessibility of set-top boxes is the cost and distribution factor. To date, the projected set-top box costs have been changing and lots of wild

speculation has been made as to whether the DoC's estimations are at all accurate. In January this year, the Minister announced that set-top box costs were to be about R700 until the ICT Indaba at which she announced that these could be reduced to about R400.

What the Department in the Minister had been unclear on is whether this price spoke to manufacture costs or the total cost-to-consumer, resulting in much and alarming public speculation. What has also been unclear and, alarmingly so, has been the degree of emphasis placed on set-top box costs and availability with little, if at all, being said about the second crucial component in the migration being the aerial.

Ndlangamandla explained that the cost estimates were for the total cost-to-consumer for an entire DTT home kit which includes both the set-top box and the aerial. He argued the soundness of the estimate on the basis of the increasing global ubiquity of the DVB-T2 standard and the effect of economies of scale on manufacturing and ultimate retail costs. Ndlangamandla was, nevertheless, reticent to fix a price to the kit, placing it between R400 and R700 which doesn't entirely match up to the Minister's cost-cutting announcement made in June, and is still significantly more expensive than many of the kits offered by pay-TV broadcasters.

The Department has also committed to rolling out the kits primarily through the South African Post Office (SAPO) as well as through the Universal Service Access Agency of South Africa (USAASA) for poor and indigent households who qualify for a subsidy – the criteria for which are still unclear. What comes as a particular concern is what seems to be the Department's divestment of itself of any responsibility concerning commercial manufacture and sale of DTT home kits. This has some real implications for retailers and consumers.

Ndlangamandla himself attested to the availability of set-top boxes which met the DVB-T2 but not the SA specific standards on the market. Because of the somewhat ironic opacity in the Department's communications to South Africans as well as the tardiness of the launch of the public awareness campaign, these non-compliant set-top boxes have been, are and continue to be sold to vulnerable and unsuspecting consumers who, come commercial switch-on, will be left out of pocket and in the dark.

In the face of this, what then, has the Department put in place to address these very real problems? Does the Department's public awareness strategy even speak to consumers to know what it is that they are buying? Or to retailers to know exactly what they are selling so as not to push non-compliant tech to consumers? Will it be actively policing this "dumping" of redundant tech on the retail market? And if not, how will these gaps be filled, if at all?

Pleased as we are to see digital switch-on finally happening and the first leg of the migration to DTT finally taking off, there still seem to be a number of gaps we need to look out for and fill before the program begins in earnest. We also hope that as the Department launches its public awareness campaign, tomorrow, that it be more transparent, more consistent and more regular in its communications to ensure that South Africans are able to go digital quickly, smoothly and cost-efficiently.