

Digitisation - ZTV blackout looms

Zimbabwe will likely miss the June 17 International Telecommunications Union (ITU) deadline to migrate from analogue to digital television broadcasting, media analysts have warned.

With only about three weeks left before the deadline, there are frantic efforts to partially comply by digitising the three transmitter stations at the border areas.

According to the Broadcasting Authority of Zimbabwe (BAZ), putting together the digitisation programme will cost over \$125m.

Digitisation is generally defined as broadcasting in digital format rather than the analogue which Zimbabwe has been using. The migration enables signals not to go across borders as spill overs or interfere with reception in neighbouring countries.



Image via [123RF](#)

Digitisation will also result in the opening of the airwaves as digital broadcasting allows signals to be compressed and that potentially could give Zimbabwe up to 80 broadcasting channels, according to the ministry.

Misa-Zimbabwe broadcasting and ICT officer Koliwe Nyoni said digitisation would mean that families with old television sets that are not digital compliant will not be able to watch television unless they get set top boxes (decoders) specifically made to decode ZBC signals or channels.

"In simple terms, those with older television sets will not be able to access the reception unless they get set top boxes," Nyoni said.

In the past week the Information, Media and Broadcasting Services ministry told parliament that ZBC and Transmedia were working on immediately making three transmitter sites in Mutare, Kamativi and Nyanga digital compliant and households in the areas would receive set top boxes to allow them to watch Ztv.

Zimbabwe has a total of 24 transmitter sites across the country.

Nyoni said the development would result in Zimbabwe having two concurrent types of broadcasting - analogue and digital.

"The ministry is speaking of dual illumination, which means that some households will continue to receive analogue frequency while the three transmitter sites of Mutare, Kamativi and Nyanga will be digital," she said.

The Broadcasting Authority of Zimbabwe chief executive officer Obert Magunyura has since made it public that they have entered into an agreement with a Chinese company, Huawei, for the sourcing of the digital broadcasting equipment and supply of top set boxes.

Media, Information Communication and Technology Parliamentary Portfolio Committee member Kindness Paradza said government confirmed the acquisition of the top set boxes.

"The government has acquired 400,000 top set boxes from Huawei which will be sold to households at \$20 apiece for them to be able to receive ZBC signal," Paradza said.

However, it remains unclear how the licence fee regime will be implemented now that there would be two classes of the audience, those with digital reception and those who will remain on analogue until the whole country is digitised.

Nyoni said the government should come out clearly on these matters to the members of the public.

"The country remains in the dark as to what will happen. Will those remaining on analogue still be forced to pay for ZBC licences or will those who migrate to digital be asked to pay a monthly subscription, and if so, how much?" she asked.

The KMPG audit report on ZBC that also looked into digitisation says: "Conditional access will only allow pay TV for both Z and private broadcasters and the spectrum manager will collect subscriptions and remit them to the various broadcasters at the pre-agreed rates."

It then suggested: "The \$3 dollars [monthly] is a basic viewers' fee for all viewers that entitles them to watch two basic ZBC channels."

Nyoni however criticised the government for implementing the digitisation project without informing the general public on the processes.

"In other countries like Mozambique, it had massive publicity and awareness campaigns to inform the public about the processes and what they should do if they have to continue receiving signals," she said.

With slightly over three weeks before the migration, the Zimbabwean public has no idea what is happening as the government plods along without caring to communicate. It remains to be seen how smooth the crossover will be.

According to BAZ, the digitisation process will see the setting up of High Definition (HD) television studios, five radio transmission studios, six digital content production facilities, satellite signal distribution, six national FM transmission networks, as well as a conditional access system and subscriber management receiver control.

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