



SOS: Support Public Broadcasting Coalition

Suite 1, Art Centre, 22 4th Ave, Cnr 4th Ave & 6th Street,
Parkhurst, 2193, Johannesburg

Phone +27 11 788 1278

+27 76 084 8077; +27 74 690 1023

Email info@soscoalition.org.za

Website www.soscoalition.org.za

Cabinet's Set-Top Box Control Compromise Must Promote Universal Access and Media Diversity

27 December 2013

The SOS Coalition notes Cabinet's decision of 20 December 2013 on set-top box (STB) control for digital terrestrial television (DTT). While we acknowledge the complexity of the issue both from legal and technical perspectives, we remain concerned by what this decision will mean for end users: we the people of South Africa.

Whether and how we approach STB control in South Africa has, for multiple reasons been an opaque and largely inaccessible process for the vast majority of people and yet whatever decision is taken is set to have a profound impact on our access to information and a truly rich and diverse media.

In the face of the threat to public and community broadcasting by commercial media conglomerates, the information needs of the people of South Africa have consistently remained at the bottom of the lists of interests to be preserved and promoted in favour of the narrow interests of commercial operators and what government routinely pitches to us as more important national economic imperatives.

Our public broadcaster, the SABC, has yet to explain why and in whose interest it made a complete about turn on its original position regarding STB control and entered into a contract with Multichoice which expressly required it to oppose any such control. Previously the SABC and eTV were in accordance that STB control via signal scrambling was the only option that would effectively meet all government's policy objectives for DTT.

The SOS Coalition believes that Cabinet's decision on STB control was a valiant compromise aimed at settling the legal and economic challenges this issue has raised so that we may finally proceed with launching a digital migration which is now, alarmingly, five years behind schedule. The decision means that STBs would have the capacity to have a control mechanism through encrypted television signals, but that this potential would only be implemented if broadcasters wish to do so.

The consequences of implementing STB control via signal scrambling for pay TV operators is that they will have to carry the cost of encrypting the free-to-air channels at their head end to enable their subscribers to view these broadcasts.

The consequences of not implementing STB control include:

- The objectives of government's Broadcast Digital Migration Policy cannot be achieved;
- There is no in-built mechanism to prevent non-conformant STBs from working in SA;
- Managing user support is difficult because there is no control over who is on the network.
- Subsidised STBs are not protected from theft and unlawful sale;
- Government or broadcasters will be unable to message individual STBs; and
- There is no secure means to upgrade STBs;

In the light of these factors we call on the SABC to clarify its thinking with regard to its opposition to cabinet's decision, together with throwing in its lot with Multichoice and its commercial agenda.

The SOS Coalition has consistently campaigned for a technological solution that places people's access to quality and diverse media first. We have routinely called on government to prioritise STB interoperability which was struck off the 2007 Digital Migration Policy or, at the very least, promote a system through which all sectors of society can have real and equal access to the most diverse and quality range of services and content to participate fully in an information society.

Against the backdrop of Cabinet's decision announced last Friday, we call on government and broadcasters alike to set out their clear plan on promoting media and information access and diversity for all in the digital broadcasting environment without the creation of class-based information division or broadcast media monopolies. We further call on all stakeholders to put forward their views on a way forward that includes how government and ICASA should address the lack of competition in the TV sector and ways to strengthen free-to-air, public and community broadcasting

The SOS Coalition represents a broad spectrum of civil society stakeholders committed to the broadcasting of quality, diverse, citizen-orientated public-interest programming aligned to the goals of the SA Constitution. The Coalition includes a number of trade union federations including COSATU and FEDUSA, a number of independent unions including BEMAWU and MWASA; independent film and TV production sector organisations including the South African Screen Federation (SASFED); a host of NGOs and CBOs including the Freedom of Expression Institute (FXI) and Media Monitoring Africa (MMA), and a number of academics and freedom of expression activists.

For more information contact:

Sekoetlane Jacob Phamodi

Coordinator (Acting)

076 084 8077