



Ms. Pumela Cokie
Independent Communications Authority of South Africa
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By Email: PCokie@icasa.org.za

9 October 2025

Dear Ms Cokie,

Response to ICASA's questions on the Act-SA Oral Presentation

1. Can ACT-SA provide a basis for the proposal of increasing allocation for community broadcasters? Has there been any or are there current plans for HD broadcasting as proposed in the submission?

1.1 All of the community TV stations are either ready or almost ready for HD transmission. MultiChoice has accepted our proposal to transmit community TV channels in HD on DStv and we expect this to be implemented in 2026. The SABC has accepted our proposal to carry the community channels in HD on SABC-Plus. Consequently there is no significant barrier to community channels transmitting HD in terms of their own capacity to do so and the only impediment is the limitations of the current DTT architecture.

1.2 In section 3.4 of our initial submission we argued for a reconfiguration of MUX capacity allocated to community TV broadcasting in order to allow for HD channels. We contend that broadcasting policy must determine MUX bandwidth allocation to sustain community broadcasting, rather than technical constraints of the multiplex architecture. Based on our experience of operating in the economic environment of community broadcasting we believe that no more than two community TV channels per province are feasible due to competition for scarce economic resources, and so the multiplex architecture should be adjusted accordingly, along with the licensing regulations for community television.

1.3 We support the suggestion from Sentech that community TV be allocated a MUX of its own. Should such a MUX be implemented, it should thus cater for only two community channels per province if the MUX is to be provincial in scope. We are unsure of the suggestion contained in Sentech's presentation that MUX 6 would accommodate only four community channels in terms of whether this pertains to a provincial MUX footprint or a national one and we hope for further clarification from Sentech in this regard.

2. Considering the cost to maintain a full MUX, does ACT-SA have any reservations with sharing a MUX or would they prefer a full MUX be allocated to community broadcasters?

2.1 Our reservations concerning MUX sharing have to do with the capacity of the allocated bandwidth MUX to carry our channels in HD to ensure the competitiveness and sustainability of the community TV sector.

2.2 We have consistently raised the issue of transmission costs in the DTT environment as being an impediment to the carriage of community TV channels and furthermore we have suggested a mechanism to support these costs, that being the use of the Universal Services Access Fund (USAF) for this purpose.

2.3 We have also problematized DTT itself as a transmission mechanism and suggested that DTH will be a better medium because it is far cheaper and more efficient than DTT. This is one of the reasons why we call for a national dialogue on the future of television broadcasting in South Africa, where these issues can be discussed by all stakeholders rather than blindly following in a technology path set back in the early years of the Twenty-first Century, which relies on now-obsolete DTT technology.

2.4 Should DTT be phased out to be replaced by DTH transmission, spectrum under 694MHz which was allocated to DTT MUXes could be auctioned off and the profits used to fund public service TV transmission costs.

3. What percentage of allocation of capacity in the MUXes is ACT-SA proposing?

3.1 In section 3.4 of our initial submission we argued for a reconfiguration of MUX capacity allocated to community TV broadcasting in order to allow for HD channels. We contend that broadcasting policy must determine MUX bandwidth allocation to sustain community broadcasting, rather than technical constraints of the multiplex architecture. Based on our experience of operating in the economic environment of community broadcasting we believe that no more than two community TV channels per province are feasible due to competition for scarce economic resources, and so the multiplex architecture should be adjusted accordingly, along with the licensing regulations for community television.

3.2 We support the suggestion from Sentech that community TV be allocated a MUX of its own. Should such a MUX be implemented, it should thus cater for only two community channels per province if the MUX is to be provincial in scope. We are unsure of the suggestion contained in Sentech's presentation that MUX 6 would accommodate only four community channels in terms of whether this pertains to a provincial MUX footprint or a national one and we hope for further clarification from Sentech in this regard.

3.3 We request an increase in multiplex (MUX) capacity allocation for community television broadcasters on Sentech's DTT/DTH platform, in order to enable High Definition (HD) broadcasting and promote equitable digital growth for the sector.

4.2 Technical Capacity Context

ICASA's 2025 Findings Document indicates that 15% of MUX 1 equals approximately 4.9 Mbps, which implies a full multiplex throughput of about 32.7 Mbps. At this capacity, a single HD (H.264/AVC) service typically requires 8–10 Mbps (depending on content type and encoder), meaning one HD service consumes roughly 25–30% of a multiplex. Under the

current 15% (~4.9 Mbps) ceiling for Community TV under the current allocation for Multiplex 1, HD broadcasting is technically not feasible.

4.3 Sectoral Implications

- The current allocation on MUX 2 restricts community TV to Standard Definition (SD), despite over 85% of South African households owning HD-capable TVs.
- The SABC has been allocated two full multiplexes, while all community TV channels together remain confined to a small fraction of one MUX, creating structural inequality.
- With no room for expansion, Community TV cannot add new services such as multiple language audio, education sub-channels, inclusion of local radio stations or datacasting.

4.4 Request

We respectfully request that ICASA revisits the current MUX allocation framework and increases the capacity for community TV to at least 20–30% of a multiplex, or alternatively assigns a dedicated community MUX as suggested by Sentech. This will enable:

- One HD service (~8–10 Mbps) per Community TV broadcaster.
- Expansion into supplementary services (e.g. datacasting, multi-language audio, local radio stations).
- Improved sustainability and competitiveness of the community TV sector.

4. The draft Regulations introduce a Multiplex Operator — Can ACT-SA explain their understanding of a Multiplex Operator and its role? What are the benefits (if any) of having a multiplex operator?

4.1 A signal distributor receives contribution feeds from various broadcasters and forwards them to a multiplex. A multiplex operator would build and maintain the physical infrastructure of the multiplex and receive the signal feeds from the signal distributor.

4.2 It may be beneficial to have separate organisations responsible for each of these roles because the costs of building and maintaining the MUX would then not be borne by the signal distributor and use of the MUX would be billed to broadcasters by the multiplex operator.

4.3 While such an arrangement might be of benefit to Sentech in relieving it of the obligation of building and maintaining several multiplexes, it would add to the financial burden of broadcasters who would have to bear the costs of maintaining two separate organisations with regard to signal distribution.

4.4 Another factor could be that there may be a number of multiplex operators, each with one or more multiplexes under their control. This may or may not result in cost savings for broadcasters.

5. Should there be a differentiation between a Multiplex Operator and Signal Distributor or should this be the same operator/licensee?

5.1 We strongly recommend that ICASA conduct a feasibility study to examine all of the implications of separating the signal provider from the multiplex operator and that the results of this be shared with and debated by the broadcast sector.

6. With the introduction of the Multiplex Operator, who should hold the Radio Frequency spectrum licence? Please have regard to the relevant provisions of the Electronic Communications Act, including, but not limited to sections 31 and 63.

6.1 Since multiple broadcasters share one frequency in the single-frequency network MUX architecture it makes sense that the Multiplex Operator be granted the RF license. Even in a multi-frequency network it is the Multiplex Operator which controls the frequency. It has never been suggested that individual broadcasters set up their own multiplexes and operate them - this is substantially different from an analogue environment where broadcasters could set up their own transmitter masts and transmission equipment and hence would require an RF license for this purpose. Consequently we are of the opinion that it is the Multiplex Operator which should be granted the RF license for the frequencies it controls on the MUX.

6.2 To effect the change from requiring RF licenses for broadcasters to licensing an ECNS provider, section 31(2) of the ECA would have to be amended.

7. Can ACT-SA confirm if their reading of these draft regulations comes across as if the Authority is excluding broadcasters from broadcasting using DTH? Also, elaborate on constraints faced by broadcasters on using DTH. As per submission 3.8. what is the request for the Authority in this regard?

7.1 No, we do not see the regulations as attempting to exclude broadcasters from using DTH. On the contrary, we see them as excluding broadcasters from using analogue transmissions as the government attempts to switch-off all analogue broadcasting and migrate viewers to digital TV reception. Since DTH is the transmission mechanism to distribute digital signals to the transmitter masts in the multiplexes, all broadcasters of necessity already make use of DTH.

7.2 The constraints for broadcasters using DTH include the following:

- Licensing issues - community broadcasters are licensed to serve local areas, but DTH covers the whole country. Should DTT be abandoned either as a national project or by individual community broadcasters, DTH offers a very cost-effective solution because the costs would only be for uplink to satellite and transponder bandwidth instead of having to pay for multiple transmitter sites of differing power outputs. This would mean that the broadcast footprint of community channels would be national rather than local, so the justification for licensing community channels according to their broadcast footprint would need to be changed. This does not mean that community channels would no longer serve local communities, but the nature of their community representation would focus on governance, community control and community involvement in operations rather than on the footprint. It is notable that

presently all of the licensed community TV channels are available nationally on DTH on Sentech's Freevision and DStv.

- The role of Sentech vis-a-vis DTH - Sentech does not market its Freevision service and Freevision-enabled decoders are only available from specialist retailers, so they are hard to come by. At the same time Sentech is rolling out DTH decoders to the public as part of its provision of STBs for the digital migration project. This means that those STB recipients using DTH will get a better content offering than others with DTT.
- The designation of DTH as being a "gap-filler" technology - while it might have been useful as part of planning the digital migration, it is in fact very misleading because anyone, anywhere, can use a (Freevision-enabled) DTH decoder and satellite dish to access television broadcasts. Viewers using such DTH decoders get many more channels than those using DTT decoders; all of the community TV channels are available on DTH, along with all of the other broadcasters using DTT. There are many additional free-to-view channels on DTH, most of them Christian channels. MUX 2 has a more limited terrestrial reach than MUX 1, but those out of range of MUX 2 will receive all of the available digital channels on DTH. Consequently DTH offers a much richer content mix for viewers than DTT.
- Satellite transponder capacity - the community TV channels have approached eMedia with a request for carriage on the company's OpenView DTH platform. This request has been turned down on the basis that eMedia does not have sufficient transponder capacity to carry them and the company claims that it cannot obtain more transponder capacity on the IS20 satellite since there is none available.
- Regarding section 3.8 in our submission, we request that ICASA do the following;
 - Cease to define DTH as being a gap-filler and focus on its role of providing a rich content offering to South Africans wherever they live.
 - In light of the above, examine the feasibility of abandoning DTT in favour of DTH transmission. This would significantly reduce transmission costs for all broadcasters - it is notable that the SABC is struggling to pay for terrestrial transmission costs and that these are prohibitive for the community TV sector. We question the viability of the business case for Sentech in building and maintaining future multiplexes in view of the costs involved and the low audience numbers on DTT.
 - Itself convene or work with the DCDT and other stakeholders to convene a national dialogue on the future of broadcasting in South Africa where questions such as this can be debated.

7.3 Because DTH provides broadcasters with a transmission mechanism that is far cheaper than DTT, there is an international trend where countries are ditching DTT in favour of DTH. It is often said that DTT is an obsolete technology. Consequently we question whether South Africa has the means to build and sustain the seven-mux plan originally envisaged in 2006 when it was first proposed in the National Frequency Plan. It is common knowledge that the SABC currently owes Sentech around R2 billion in unpaid transmission fees and the single-frequency network mux architecture forces community channels to be regional rather than local broadcasters and to ultimately pay transmitter hire costs that are completely unaffordable. With even the commercial broadcaster eMedia arguing that DTT costs are unaffordable, we have consistently requested the authorities to convene a national dialogue on the future of broadcasting in South Africa. Without such a dialogue, decisions on

multiplex development and allocation are moot, given the likely prohibitive costs of developing and sustaining such infrastructure.

7.4 Should DTT be retained and more multiplexes be initiated in the future, this will take considerable resources and time to implement. Consequently we urge that analogue broadcasting be retained in South Africa until such time as digital transmission is viable in terms of both infrastructure and audience capacity to receive the digital broadcast signal to provide broadcasters with sufficient audience size to justify the costs associated with this transmission mechanism. It was stated in the oral hearings that there is no ITU obligation on member states to abandon analogue broadcasting outside of trans-border signal spillage occurrences.

7.5 Decommissioning DTT in favour of DTH offers the possibility for spectrum under 694MHz to be sold off. The funds raised by such a sale could be directed to the Universal Services and Access Fund (USAF) in order to fund the costs of transmission for public service broadcasting, which we contend includes the community television sector. We also urge that there be transparency regarding the use of USAF funds and that immediate steps be taken to direct USAF to fund the costs of public service broadcasting in line with its mandate to fund broadcasting infrastructure.

8. On must carry, there are currently regulations as a result of what is contained in legislation, the ECA, and it is clear who must be carried by whom. How does ACT SA want the Authority to go around ensuring that community broadcasters are carried on commercial without infringing the rights protected by legislation?

8.1 We acknowledge the primacy of the Act in determining broadcast regulations and consequently the need for us to approach Parliament in order to enact enabling legislation for 'must-carry' rules to be imposed on pay-TV operators to carry community channels.

8.2 Notwithstanding the above, ICASA may be in a position to influence MultiChoice to carry the community channels under ECA section 8.(3) "The Authority may prescribe additional terms and conditions that may be applied to any individual licence or class licence taking into account the provisions of Chapter 10", where this chapter includes section 67 (1) and (7) (a) to (e), which pertain to pro-competitive behaviors such as the obligation to "act fairly and reasonably in the way in which the licensee responds to requests for access, provisioning of services, interconnection and facilities leasing".

9. ACTSA is suggesting that the Authority come up with an approach where a foreign broadcaster finances transmission costs, in which countries was it done successfully, and in SA, how many foreign broadcasters do we have that the Authority can engage with or make regulations for them to pay for community broadcasting?

9.1 Act-SA does not suggest that foreign broadcasters finance transmission costs. The point raised in our oral presentation related to the Content Fund proposed in the Draft White Paper on Audio and Audio-visual Services and Online Safety, where foreign online streaming providers such as Netflix could be encouraged to contribute finance to this fund.

9.2 We have suggested that USAF be tasked with subsidizing the transmission costs of public interest broadcasting. This is in line with its mandate to support the infrastructure costs of broadcasting. USAF must ensure transparency with regard to its allocation of funds for developing ICT infrastructure.