THE TORTOISE THAT LAPPED THE HARE: HOW AMAZON BEAT STARLINK INTO SOUTH AFRICA

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Elon Musk has more than 10,000 satellites in space and millions of paying customers in dozens of countries. His Starlink service works almost everywhere in Southern Africa, from Mozambique to Lesotho. Amazon's rival service, Amazon Leo, has just 390 satellites and not one paying customer anywhere in the world. Yet it is Leo, not Starlink, that just found a way into South Africa. South Africa is the most developed broadband market on the continent. Somehow, the tortoise has beaten the hare.

On 15 July, Herotel signed a deal to bring Amazon Leo's internet to South African homes and small businesses. Herotel is an internet and fibre company owned by Maziv. The new service will be called Evry. It is set to launch in 2027, and you can already sign up at evry.co.za. Here is the clever part: Amazon will not hold a single licence. It doesn't need one. "Herotel will acquire all the necessary licensing to launch the service," said Trevor Vieweg, who runs Amazon Leo's global business. When reporters asked him straight up whether Amazon needed a licence from the regulator, ICASA, his answer was simple: "Herotel will be holding the licences in this agreement". Eliminating the fight over ownership.

Both companies faced the same rule. To hold a network licence in South Africa, a company must be 30% owned by historically disadvantaged groups. That one line has split the two giants apart. Musk read it and went to war. SpaceX refused to give up any ownership of its local business. Musk spent years fighting the rule in public. He called it racist and even claimed he couldn't launch Starlink here "because I'm not black." What started as a simple licence question turned into a political fight. This also caused tension between South Africa and the United States. Amazon read the very same rule and looked for another door. Just last month, ICASA said satellite companies can't get their own network licences right now. They also said that the only real way in, is through a company that already has one. So, Amazon went and found one.

Evry promises download speeds of up to 300Mbit/s using Amazon's Nano and Pro antennas. The home antenna, the Pro, can reach 400Mbit/s. The wait time on the connection will be 50ms or less, because the satellites fly at about 590km above Earth. This is far closer than the old ones at 35,000km. They are linked together by a high-speed network in space. Amazon hasn't announced prices yet, but Vieweg pointed to the company's reputation: "We are very focused on making sure that these services are affordable." Herotel's CEO, Van Zyl Botha, said it plainly: "We wouldn't be

sitting here if we didn’t think the product would be suitable for the local market.”

The contrasting approaches taken by Amazon and Starlink demonstrate that success in regulated markets depends not only on technological capability but also on regulatory strategy. While Starlink’s global dominance and extensive satellite network have not yet translated into access to the South African market. Amazon’s decision to partner with a licensed local operator has enabled it to establish a foothold. This was done without directly confronting South Africa’s licensing framework. The launch of Evry in 2027 highlights how collaboration and regulatory compliance can create commercial opportunities. This is especially true where direct market entry has proven challenging. Ultimately, the race for South Africa’s satellite broadband market suggests that understanding and adapting to local legal and regulatory requirements may be as important as innovation itself.