

SOUTH AFRICA'S TV REVOLUTION IS FINALLY HERE, AND IT'S GOING TO CHANGE EVERYTHING YOU WATCH

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The signal has been sent following years of false starts, delays, and regulatory back-and-forth. South Africa's broadcasting regulator ICASA has published South Africa's Digital TV Migration Regulations 2026, the rules that will govern the country's shift from analogue to digital TV, and the implications are bigger than most people realise.

Picture this: you're watching the news on a grainy, pixelated channel, fiddling with your aerial to get a decent signal. That experience familiar to millions of South Africans is about to become history. On 9 April 2026, , [the Independent Communications Authority of South Africa published the Digital Terrestrial Television Broadcasting \("DTTB"\) Regulations, 2026](#) , a sweeping set of rules that will define how television is delivered, who gets to broadcast it, what you'll be watching, and how clearly you'll be watching it in the years to come.

This isn't just bureaucratic paperwork. It's the blueprint for South Africa's digital TV future.

From Seven Frequencies, a New World

Furthermore, the regulations adopt a simple but significant approach by dividing South Africa's available broadcasting spectrum, operating within the 470-694 MHz frequency band, into seven multiplexes (or "muxes"). Think of a multiplex as a highway with multiple lanes: instead of one channel occupying a single frequency, a multiplex can carry dozens of channels simultaneously while delivering content in high-quality digital format.

The regulations assign each of the seven highways to a specific category of broadcaster and design

each one to serve a different segment of South Africa.

The regulations divide the lanes as follows:

Mux 1 & 5 — The SABC's Space

The SABC gets two full multiplexes all to itself. That's enough room for dozens of channels, which makes sense for a broadcaster that needs to serve communities speaking all 11 official languages across the whole country.

Mux 2 — eTV and Community TV

Sharing the Space eTV gets 80% of this multiplex. The other 20% goes to community TV stations like Soweto TV, Cape Community Television, Tshwane Community Television, and a few others. These are the local channels that speak directly to your neighbourhood, and they now have a guaranteed spot in the digital era.

Mux 3 — Room for More Free Channels.

The regulations reserve this multiplex for free-to-air broadcaster channels that viewers can access without paying a subscription fee. The framework also preserves space for new television channels that may enter the South African market in the future.

Mux 4 — Pay TV

This one is for subscription broadcasters, your pay-TV operators. No one gets it automatically; companies have to apply competitively. The framework creates an opportunity for new pay-TV operators to enter the market, particularly following MultiChoice's decision to relinquish its terrestrial slot.

Mux 6 — Community TV's Future Home.

Community broadcasters currently share a multiplex with eTV, which limits available capacity. The regulations set aside Mux 6 to provide community broadcasters with dedicated capacity and greater opportunities for future growth and expansion.

Mux 7 — The Testing Ground.

This multiplex is purely for experiments and pilots. The regulations use this multiplex to test new broadcasting technologies and formats before introducing them to the public.

The HD Standard Is Coming

Forget the old blurry pictures. The regulations mandate that all DTTB transmissions use the DVB-T2 standard, which is the most advanced terrestrial broadcasting technology currently available globally, combined with MPEG-4 compression or any superior future standard.

What does this mean? Each multiplex can carry either:

- 6 HD channels (at 5 Mb/s each), or
- Up to 22 standard-definition channels (at 1.5 Mb/s each), or
- Any combination of the two within the available bitrate of 30-33 Mb/s.

The regulations define HD as a minimum resolution of 1280×720 pixels in progressive format. The kind of quality you'd expect from a modern streaming service, now delivered over the air, for free, with just a compatible set-top box or TV.

For viewers who've been watching their favourite shows in SD since the analogue era, this is a genuine upgrade. For poorer households that can't afford streaming subscriptions, it's a lifeline to quality content.

The “Use It or Lose It” Rule

One of the most significant and contentious provisions in the regulations is the 36-month utilisation rule. The regulations require broadcasters to use the capacity allocated to them on a multiplex within three years; otherwise, ICASA may reclaim and reallocate any unused portion.

Meanwhile, during public consultations, this clause generated fierce debate. Some stakeholders wanted it shortened to 18 or 24 months to prevent spectrum “warehousing” where powerful incumbents sit on frequencies to block competitors. But, others including the SABC, argued that 36 months isn't enough given the financial and logistical realities of public broadcasting.

ICASA held firm. The 36-month window stands, applying equally to all broadcasters. The message is clear: the spectrum is a public resource, not a private reserve.

You Can't Broadcast Without Permission

In addition, a key feature of the new framework is the channel authorisation procedure. Any broadcaster that has been allocated multiplex capacity, except community broadcasters, must apply in writing to ICASA before launching a new digital channel. Applications must include the channel name, primary languages, programming plan, local content commitments, and the country where the channel was packaged.

ICASA has 60 days to approve or reject an application. In complex cases where a proposed channel raises public interest concerns or content compliance questions, ICASA can convene a public hearing. This means that access to South Africa's digital airwaves isn't a free-for-all. Every channel that goes live on DTT will have been vetted by the regulator.

Who Flips the Switch? The New Multiplex Operator

Furthermore, the regulations introduce a formal role for a Multiplex Operator, an entity holding an Electronic Communications Network Services (“ECNS”) licence that is responsible for building and running the transmission infrastructure for a multiplex and bundling together the various broadcaster streams into the outgoing digital signal.

Currently, Sentech performs this function. The new framework formally defines and opens the role to operators. Operators must obtain a separate spectrum licence to operate a multiplex and submit applications in accordance with the Radio Frequency Spectrum Regulations. The rules for getting the broadcast signal from the studio to the transmitter towers for signal distribution are equally clear.

Broadcasters who can't self-provide must negotiate commercial agreements with a licensed ECNS provider. ICASA requires parties to submit those agreements within six months of the regulations taking effect, together with a rollout plan, a technical plan, and a tariff structure.

If a broadcaster fails to secure a signal distribution agreement, ICASA can step in and invite competing ECNS providers to apply for the job. The regulator is not going to let a broadcaster go dark because it couldn't get its infrastructure in order.

What About the Channels You're Watching Right Now?

Here's the reassuring part: the regulations don't wipe the slate clean overnight. In fact, the Regulations will come into force on a future date that ICASA will publish in the Government Gazette, and ICASA may bring different provisions into effect on different dates. Meanwhile, the existing Digital Migration Regulations, 2012 and the Promotion of Diversity and Competition on DTT Regulations, 2014 will remain in force until ICASA officially announces the Analogue Switch-Off ("ASO").

Historically, South Africa was expected to switch off analogue broadcasting in 2015, but authorities have repeatedly delayed the Analogue Switch-Off ("ASO") date. Notably, the new regulations don't set that date, but they do make clear that the regulatory framework will be ready when it comes. The infrastructure, the allocation rules, the technical standards, and the penalties are all now codified.

Ultimately, when the switch finally flips, South Africa will be ready.

Penalties

The regulations are not merely advisory. Broadcasters that violate the channel authorisation rules or fail to provide Electronic Programme Guides face fines of up to R500,000 per day of non-compliance. ECNS licensees that pocket government subsidies intended to reduce signal distribution costs without passing those savings on to broadcasters face the same daily maximum.

These are not small numbers. They are designed to make compliance the only rational business decision.

The Bigger Picture

South Africa has been slower than many African peers to complete its digital migration. The 2026 DTTB Regulations make a serious and well-considered effort to establish a comprehensive framework through an extensive consultation process, rather than prioritising speed over effective implementation.

Importantly, what the framework gets right is balance. The SABC, as the public broadcaster, gets generous spectrum. Commercial broadcasters get room to grow and compete. Community broadcasters, long squeezed to the margins, get a dedicated future home on Mux 6. Subscription TV gets a fair shot through a competitive process. And Mux 7 ensures that South Africa has a space to experiment with whatever comes next in broadcast technology.

From the viewer's perspective, the promise is simple: more channels, better picture quality, and no subscription required, just a set-top box and a signal from the sky. Ultimately, South Africa's TV revolution has been a long time coming. The regulations are written. The multiplexes are mapped. The only thing left is the switch.