

Making sense of traditional, new TV content platforms

 By [Alan Smith](#)

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There are so many different options for viewing TV content and when combined with the latest technology makes for a very confusing space. Normally you just watch television to get access to your favourite soaps and shows. Now you hear people talking about fibre to the home and streaming services with acronyms, such as PVR, VOD, SVOD, IPTV, OTT, and this is all linked to your modem and the internet, which goes through another 'set top box' (STB) or your TV and is shown on all sorts of devices. Confused?

What TV content is available in South Africa?

Firstly, let's take the simple television. In South Africa broadcasts on television started in 1976, around 26 years after the rest of the world. SABC was the go-to broadcaster and it was a simple matter of pressing one of three channels to get the content you wanted. More channels were added, and then 10 years later came Multichoice or DStv decoders, as they are commonly known.

To get this service you need a special STB with a satellite dish and that has been the extent of most of the SA population's television viewing experience – even today. But Multichoice has allowed us to get an understanding of what subscriber TV is all about. We know that this is called Pay TV or Cable TV in other parts of the world, and we also now know how this works. Either via satellite dish on your roof as it is in SA, or via a cable (a physical line, such as copper or fibre) brought to your house, as is an option in other parts of the world. Easy.

If you just want more traditional TV content like DStv with a satellite dish and STB, lots of companies are selling STBs in SA. OVHD (Open View HD) is the first and still only 'free to air' broadcaster in SA and is powered by eTV. It works just like DSTV without the subscription fees. StarSat (the old TopTV) also works just like DStv, but the fees are arguably and comparatively less. However, for all this content you need more satellite dishes (because they point at different satellites) and more STBs linked to your TV. When SABC finally migrates to digital, you will need another STB and satellite dish to get these broadcasts too. Sounds like a lot of boxes connected to your TV and a lot of satellite dishes on your roof. But these are all closed systems, which means you can only access the content the broadcaster provides. The main advantage is that the content is easy to access and use and is still competitively priced. The main disadvantage, generally speaking, is that you cannot access any Internet Protocol television (IPTV) content. This is basically content you want to access using the internet.

We know that we can watch this content on our phones, tablets and computers as they are directly connected via the internet. But how do we get all this stuff onto our televisions at home? Broadband connectivity has also arrived in our homes, and this is where all the confusion comes in.



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Connection to these services could be via a traditional cellular provider (wirelessly) or via a telephone/data cable from Telkom (ADSL/VDSL or Fibre) or via Fibre from other suppliers direct to your door. These internet and data services connect to a modem or router, which most modern suburban houses now have as standard features. This means that you can connect all your electronics to the internet, and it also means you can now watch TV this way as well. However, a typical suburban family home may have up to four different generations all trying to watch different programmes. The older grandparents (pre-Baby Boomers), our mothers and fathers (Baby Boomers and Gen X) and the younger children (GenY and Z) all want access to content. Typically, the older generations access content via traditional TV and younger generations, which have less say in what gets put on TV, would use mobile devices and computers to access some other content, including social media. All this creates confusion for the older generations being used to television. Younger generations would like to watch IPTV content via television. So how does this modern connectivity all work?

What solutions are available in South Africa?

You may have heard of Apple TV. It's also a little black box, and it also connects to your TV just like a DStv decoder, but instead of using a satellite to get your favourite TV show, it uses the modem in your house – which means it connects directly to the internet. Which also means it uses data, which means it costs money. On Apple TV you have a number of channels, some are free and some you will need to pay extra for. But this also means you can access Facebook, YouTube and a whole host of other content you could only get on your phone or computer before, and now you can watch it on your TV. In fact, any content on your Apple computer or your iPhone can also be watched via Apple TV on your TV. There are many other providers of IPTV services and online STBs (also called media streamers) such as Roku and others now available in SA. All of these can access the internet and come preloaded with different options and channels to view, as well as options to view any content you wish and that is available on that platform.

But what if you don't have any IPTV media streamers like Apple TV and Roku. Well, if you own a smart TV, it also comes pre-loaded with additional channels, links, apps and content you can easily find or access. This will use your internet connection and will use subsequent data for your cost. Some of this content is free to access and some you will need a subscription for, but you will be able to see Facebook and other social media sites too. There are content menus and browser applications just like both your STB and your computer and you can search for any content anywhere in the world and watch it on your TV. This will allow you to connect to over-the-top (OTT) movie and content services such as Netflix, ShowMax and Digital Entertainment on Demand (DEOD).

But what if you don't own a smart TV. How do you get IPTV content on your TV then? If your TV has an HDMI connection, you could connect your laptop or computer directly to your TV and access online content that way. Some people copy and

download pirate shows onto USB and connect that via a TV or DVD player with a USB slot – but that is illegal. Interestingly this service is being offered in Cuba, due to a lack of infrastructure and allows people cheap access to content they cannot get yet – also not entirely legal. Another option if you are technically proficient means you could invest in an open-ended media/TV streamer device that will access the internet (radio and TV) and various other content providers, but that's perhaps another article.

Interestingly some traditional TV broadcasters, such as DSTV with 'Explora', allow you to access OTT content such as ShowMax by connecting it to your internet at home. They also offer online access to their content via different devices. This will then use your data connection to get more content. It also highlights the fact that broadcasters are aware of the changes technology can bring to the traditional broadcast model. A model that survives by keeping viewers subscribed to services so it can also collect advertising revenue.

The question around all of this technology, for both broadcasters and all of us is of course money. How much does watching TV content cost with all these options now available? We are all familiar with the costs of the equipment installations and viewing subscriptions, but less familiar with the cost of data to run additional online content. Just one average movie or TV episode will consume around 500 megabytes (MG) – 3 gigabytes (GB) of data, plus all the other data your devices will use in a month. A typical suburban household could easily use 100 GB of data per month to run additional online content and depending on your service provider could cost around R500-R1000 or more per month. Excluding any online gaming of course. Add to this the cost of your modem/router which can be between R500-R5000 as well as traditional TV or any other subscriptions costs, and watching content can become an expensive undertaking.

The other issue affecting the data cost is also what data or line speed is the best. This can be confusing because line speed is measured in megabits per second (Mbps) and data size is measured in megabytes and gigabytes. So, for example, you could have a line speed of 4 Mbps with a data cap (capacity) of 20 GB. It's also difficult to understand that a speed of 20 Mbps is not twice as fast as 10 Mbps – as speeds are not linear. The answer in deciding which data package to buy is quite simple. Basically, buy the fastest line speed and the most amounts of data you can afford to use. Anything upwards from 20 Mbps line speed will give you good viewing and Internet surfing speeds and below that average to poor depending on what quality content (SD or HD) you are watching and how many devices are connected. 50-100 Mbps are what most developed countries have available, and it's also available in some areas in SA. Also remember that generally speaking download speeds are much higher than upload speeds – which is why it takes longer to send content than to download it. It's also worth mentioning that you should check to see if your service provider guarantees your line speed or not. It can become congested at peak times which means your 20 Mbps line could only work at a lesser speed which then determines how long it takes to download content.

But connected services are where the world is heading and with rapid urbanisation all these systems will form part of our daily lives. To the point we will be able to order products we see on TV and even the popcorn to go with the show. So it will best serve all of us to familiarise ourselves with this technology if we want to take full advantage of international content platforms.

ABOUT ALAN SMITH

Alan Smith is the owner and executive producer at Produsa, which specialises in developing advertiser funded programming and broadcasting local content in the Lifestyle, Entertainment and Sport genre's, and has a keen interest in documentaries. His main role is developing the business partnerships and sponsorships to develop local content.

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