

Megabucks China Coming To A TV Screen Near You

African countries are looking to China to bankroll their migration to digital television but there are concerns that it could control the screen.

BY WILHELMINA MABOJA

In the next three years, China will spend close to \$1 billion buying a share of Africa's digital satellite television market.

It is big business that is not welcomed by everyone.

As dozens of African countries migrate from analogue to digital television, China has already purchased its way into a strong position that is likely to get stronger.

Since 2000, China has invested in Africa's broadcast networks. This firm hand has seen China shift from technical support to supplying what is on the screen.

"China has been in Africa for a lot longer than most people think. If you remember most liberation movements, Africa got assistance from China as well as Russia. Back then in the 1950s, 60s, 70s and 80s, it was more of cooperation in the struggle for liberation," says Wellington Radu, head of programs at Media Monitoring Africa, a non-profit media watchdog.

Chinese media group StarTimes is at the heart of Africa's digital terrestrial migration, with roughly 2.5 million subscribers on the continent.

"We can only speculate as to why China is increasingly investing in Africa's media space. It is about how African governments choose to handle China's investments so that they work to their advantage," Radu says.

So far, a mere handful of African countries have launched digital terrestrial television (DTT), and it is expected that 100 million homes in the continent will switch by 2015.

DTT migration on a national level is a relatively new venture for the continent, and in many cases a number of countries do not have the policy or the strategy to switch to a fully-digital landscape.

African countries are looking to companies like StarTimes, already present in eight of the continent's countries, to bankroll the migration.

One of the issues is that this could put most of Africa's pay television market in the hands of a foreign player.

"To me it represents a serious question around how [this] will impact democratic processes and spaces. On the one hand it empowers you. At the same time it scares me if I think about the fact that if I allow the Chinese to do this,

how much power does my government have over what they know I'm accessing on the net, what I'm writing, who I'm talking to?" says Sanusha Naidu from the Open Society Foundation of South Africa.

Meanwhile, StarTimes has spent \$127 million in Nigeria to make sure that 16 of the country's states will receive its digital signals.

"I think what's interesting as well is the Chinese don't want to go to the media partner, they want to go to the state. They understand where the power to release licenses lies, who has the power to make the decision," says Naidu.

Earlier this year, the Pan African Network group, a part of StarTimes, won a controversial signal distribution license tender in Kenya.

The license provides the group with ownership of the platform on which broadcasters will have to grant transmission of their content, giving StarTimes a large portion of Kenya's television market.

The company has however been accused of attempting to heavily monopolize the continent's DTT space even before its birth, which has drawn criticism of China.

"In an infrastructure sense, it's providing that platform, but I think it's the next step, the content. What's interesting is [African countries] are earning a name for themselves but not actually creating their own content," says Yu-Shan Wu, a researcher at the South African Institute of International Affairs.

Naidu nevertheless believes that China's role in Africa's DTT migration could provide the possibility of a number of countries turning into Big Brother states.

"It does empower African countries, which can be positive and negative at the same time. It can actually be a paradox within itself. What happens with enabling African countries to launch, or helping them with the digital [migration], is that you run the risk of actually using the way in which China interprets its own technology, its use of its own digital space and capabilities to spy on its own people," Wu explains.

The fear is that Africa is going to lose control of what people watch, and countries will have to be cautious of what China could do once in the continent's digital space. 