

The Flemish Community's plans for the switchover from analogue to digital television

In reply to the European Commission's request for the publication of plans for the switchover from analogue to digital television, we hereby send the Commission the Flemish Community's current plans in this regard.

Specific to Flanders is the very high penetration of cable, with more than 95% of families having access to the cable network, offering 30 or so analogue TV programmes on payment of a cable subscription. The digital programmes of a pay-TV channel are also available via cable.

The only broadcaster transmitting analogue over the air in the Flemish Community is the public channel VRT with two programmes, 'Een' and 'Ketnet/Canvas'. These are free-to-air broadcasts.

Various projects have been launched in the Flemish Community for promoting and studying (interactive) digital TV.

In September 2002 a research project was started up, the 'Digital Home Platform' (DHP). Partners in the project were the Flemish Community, the public broadcaster VRT and Belgium's telecom provider Belgacom. Via DVB-T transmitters new interactive services and traditional programmes were transmitted in the Antwerp region. The return channel selected was ADSL. About 100 families received a powerful set-top box and the project focused on user acceptance of new technology. This project finished in June 2003.

The experience gained in the DHP project is now being put to use in a similar cable project, 'Flanders Interactive'. This project was launched in September 2003 by the cable companies and the public and private broadcasters with the support of the Flemish Government. Flanders Interactive is intended to study the technical and social aspects of interactive digital television, and will also look into how an iDTV platform, easily accessible to consumers and suppliers, can be developed in Flanders. The partnership opted for the open Multimedia Home Platform standard. Via a set-top box the test families have access to interactive TV applications and also, amongst other things, films, news, electronic programme guides, video on demand and public service information. The results of Flanders Interactive are expected shortly. As regards transmissions via cable, a market-driven switchover from analogue to digital is expected.

On 5 May 2004 a Decree was passed amending some of the provisions of the radio and television decrees. This Decree transposes the EU's so-called communications directives into Flemish law and therefore lays the foundation for further digitisation of broadcasting in Flanders. The amending Decree of 5 May 2004 introduced the concepts of 'television broadcasting networks' and 'radio broadcasting networks'. Once the Flemish Government has put together a digital frequency plan it will be possible to allocate frequency channels or frequency blocks to the radio and television broadcasting network service providers. The implementing decrees are still to be enacted.

As regards spectrum management, the Flemish Government is currently drafting a frequency plan for digital terrestrial broadcasting (T-DAB/DVB-T) for the 'all-digital' future, in the framework of the Regional Radiocommunications Conference (RRC) to be held in 2006. Planning for portable/mobile reception is under way.

In anticipation of the second session of the RRC, discussions are in progress with the neighbouring countries with a view to setting up compatible 'all-digital' plans. The Flemish Community took part in the first session of the RRC, and during the 'intersessional period' which has started will also be participating in various meetings at CEPT and ITU level to prepare the second session of the Regional Radiocommunications Conference.

In principle, the frequency plan which Flanders will have at its disposal for digital broadcasting in bands III, IV and V – as well as, therefore, the number of multiplexes - will be known after the second session of the RRC, due to take place in Geneva from 15 May to 16 June 2006. The conditions for implementing the plan should be available by then as well. There may well be additional multilateral talks with the neighbouring countries after the second session in cases where no satisfactory solutions emerged during the planning conference.

In 2003 Agoria, the Belgian multisector federation for the technology industry, set up a working group made up of representatives of broadcasters, cable companies and industry to develop a strategy for the analogue switch-off. The Flemish Government also received Agoria's opinion on digital switch-on.

The present management agreement between VRT and the Flemish Community stipulates that before the management agreement expires (at the end of 2006) the Flemish Community must determine the conditions for dismantling the analogue television transmitter networks and that a concrete plan must be drawn up. Before the end of 2006 the Flemish Community will therefore decide on the switch-off of the analogue (VRT) television networks and draw up a plan for it. In the meantime the public broadcaster is already transmitting programmes digitally via DVB-T. It looks as though the gradual switching-off of the analogue terrestrial frequencies in Flanders can start in 2010 for completion by the end of 2012.

We see possible areas for EU coordinated actions in the exchange of information between the Member States on the analogue-to-digital switchover and the standardisation of equipment with a view to achieving economies of scale on the EU level.