

Panel on Information Technology and Broadcasting

Extract from minutes of the meeting held on 12 November 2007

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IV. Progress in the implementation of digital terrestrial television broadcasting

(LC Paper No. CB(1)203/07-08(03) -- Paper provided by the Administration

LC Paper No. CB(1)230/07-08(01) -- Generic Code of Practice on Television Technical Standards (effective from 9 November 2007)

LC Paper No. CB(1)203/07-08(04) -- Background brief prepared by the Legislative Council Secretariat

LC Paper No. CB(1)242/07-08 -- Administration's paper on digital terrestrial television broadcasting (power-point presentation materials) (Chinese version only)
(tabled at the meeting and subsequently issued via e-mail on 13 November 2007)

Presentation by the Administration

4. Following a brief introduction by the Deputy Secretary for Commerce and Economic Development (Communications and Technology) (DS(CT)), Principal Assistant Secretary for Commerce and Economic Development (Communications and Technology) (PAS(CT)), gave a power-point presentation to update members on the implementation of digital terrestrial television (DTT) broadcasting in Hong Kong. He highlighted the major points as follows:

(a) *Background of DTT broadcasting*

- (i) The implementation of DTT was in good progress. Pursuant to the implementation framework for DTT broadcasting announced by the Government in 2004, the two domestic free television programmes service licensees, i.e. Asia Television Limited (ATV) and Television Broadcasts Limited (TVB), would launch DTT by end-2007 and expand the digital coverage to at least 75% of Hong Kong by end-2008. The two broadcasters would each be assigned a multiplex for launching the new digital services and would simulcast their four existing analogue programme channels in digital format by sharing a joint multiplex.

- (ii) Both ATV and TVB would adopt the commonly-used MPEG-2 compression and coding standard when using the shared multiplex for simulcast, and H.264 for the new services to be provided through their individual additional multiplex.

(b) *Rollout of transmission network*

ATV and TVB were building their DTT transmission network in stages. Under Phase I, the first DTT transmission station at Temple Hill would become operational later this year to serve around 50% of the total population of Hong Kong, covering the areas of Kowloon Peninsula, north of the Hong Kong Island, part of Shatin and east of Lantau Island. The construction of five other main transmission stations at Castle Peak, Cloudy Hill, Golden Hill, Kowloon Peak and Lamma Island under Phase II would be completed in stages by end-2008, expanding the coverage to at least 75% of the total population. The completion of the Phase III construction would provide a digital coverage comparable to the existing analogue one, i.e. 99% population coverage, by 2011.

(c) *In-building Coaxial Cable Distribution System (IBCCDS)*

Viewers would need to check with their respective building management to ascertain whether the existing IBCCDS was capable of DTT reception. Upgrading would be necessary if their existing system was not DTT-ready. The Housing Department had agreed to upgrade the IBCCDS for free at all public housing estates in phases for DTT reception. For private housing, the Administration would liaise with and provide relevant information to major property management regarding the upgrading works.

(d) *Supply of DTT receivers*

"Basic tier receivers" capable of receiving and decoding the four MPEG-2 coded programme channels simulcast by ATV and TVB were already available on the local market at a few hundred dollars. "Higher tier receivers" capable of receiving both standard definition television (SDTV) and high definition television (HDTV) programmes would soon come on to the market at a thousand dollars or more, subject to the features they offered. An electrical appliance chain store had started to accept advance booking since mid-October 2007.

(e) *Voluntary labeling scheme*

A labeling scheme to differentiate the two tiers of DTT receivers for voluntary participation by the suppliers of receivers for the Hong

Kong market was expected to be launched within November 2007 to enable consumers to make informed purchase choices according to their needs.

(f) *Promotion and publicity*

To disseminate DTT information and encourage DTT up-take, the Administration would launch a comprehensive publicity package targeting at all sectors of the community including property managers, technical professionals, District Councils and the general public. The channels of publicity and promotion would include a dedicated website, briefing sessions, announcements of public interest on television and radio, information leaflets, and education kits for schools. The Administration would coordinate the publicity efforts with that of ATV, TVB as well as the consumer electronic industry, and would also launch public education programmes jointly with the Consumer Council.

5. A demonstration was conducted at the meeting for members to appreciate the picture quality of both SDTV and HDTV programmes of ATV and TVB transmitted from the Temple Hill DTT station as well as the picture quality of live HDTV direct-feed shooting. Members noted that with the use of a typical terrestrial antenna and a DTT decoder, DTT programme channels could be received in good quality even when the propagation path from the Temple Hill station was blocked by the buildings in the vicinity.

Discussion

Expediting the roll-out of transmission network

6. Mr SIN Chung-kai noted with concern that the construction of five main transmission stations at Castle Peak, Cloudy Hill, Golden Hill, Kowloon Peak and Lamma Island would not be completed and ready for operation in time for the 2008 Beijing Olympics in August 2008. He urged the Administration to target at completing the five transmission stations by June/July 2008 at the latest, allowing time for the electronic manufacturers to produce sufficient DTT receivers for the Hong Kong market and for the public to purchase and install the set-top boxes.

7. In response, DS(CT) and Senior Telecommunications Engineer (Advisory & Support) (STE(AS)) said that the construction of the five transmission stations under Phase II would be completed in stages on or before end-2008, by which time the reception areas would cover at least 75% of the total population of Hong Kong. The construction of the stations at Castle Peak, Golden Hill and Kowloon Peak was progressing well and, depending on the subsequent construction progress and subject to weather conditions, there could be a good chance for the Phase II transmission network to be ready in time for the 2008 Beijing Olympics due to commence on 8 August 2008. PAS(CT) added that both ATV and TVB were keen on an early roll-out and the Administration would liaise closely with the two

broadcasters to achieve the greatest digital coverage possible before the start of the 2008 Beijing Olympics.

(Post-meeting note: ATV and TVB have committed to advance to 75% coverage target from end 2008 to early August 2008 so that more people will be able to watch Beijing Olympics with digital broadcast.)

8. Mr Albert CHAN expressed great disappointment that 25% of the local population would not be DTT-covered and could not enjoy HDTV viewing of the 2008 Beijing Olympics. He regarded it a shame of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region and a remiss of the Hong Kong Government that Hong Kong not only lagged behind most advanced economies such as Canada but was even more backward than some rural provinces in the Mainland where TV broadcasts were digitized. He strongly urged the Government to review its policy in this respect. He also enquired what assistance the Government would render to the broadcasters and what measures or financial assistance the Government would offer to the public to ensure that all people in Hong Kong could view the 2008 Beijing Olympics in HD format by August 2008. In this regard, the Chairman remarked that the remaining 25% of the population outside DTT coverage could still view the 2008 Beijing Olympics in analogue format.

9. In response, DS(CT) pointed out that while 75% digital coverage would be achieved by 2008, to achieve a close to 99% coverage would need some 20 more transmission stations, the construction of which would take time. PAS(CT) further advised that apart from terrestrial TV which had yet to be digitized, currently all the pay television and satellite television services in Hong Kong were already digitized. He clarified that although satellite TV in most advanced countries were digitized, they might not necessarily be in HD format. In fact, Hong Kong's DTT implementation was on a par with most other countries. He assured members that the Administration would work closely with the two broadcasters to increase the digital coverage as early as practicable and hopefully to achieve more than 75% coverage by end-2008 and close to 99% coverage by 2011.

10. Mr Albert CHAN remained unconvinced. He strongly requested that part of the \$150 million allocated for the publicity and promotion of the 2008 Beijing Olympics be used to expedite the roll-out of transmission network to achieve close to 99% digital coverage by the 2008 Beijing Olympics. Mr SIN Chung-kai shared his view.

DTT reception in premises with no communal antenna

11. Mr Albert CHAN raised concern about DTT reception in old private single-block buildings in areas such as Sham Shui Po, Tsuen Wan and Wanchai. He asked what measures the Government would take to facilitate the digital reception in these old buildings where there was no communal antenna. Referring to the earlier demonstration on live reception of signals from Temple Hill transmission stations, DS(CT) highlighted that with the installation of a basic-tier DTT receiver, a typical off-air antenna could already provide quality pictures of the

four programme channels simulcast by TVB and ATV in digital format. There was no need to replace the antenna or change the television set.

Soft launch of DTT

12. Mr SIN Chung-kai noted that the two broadcasters were presently conducting technical trial of national DTT broadcasting system in Hong Kong and that due to regulatory restrictions, they could only use repetitive non-commercial programmes for testing purpose. He suggested that DTT should be soft-launched as early as possible prior to the formal launch scheduled for end-2007 to enable early detection and resolution of any technical problems and for the two broadcasters to receive feedback from viewers for further enhancement. To arouse the interests of the public in purchasing the set-top boxes and thus encouraging early DTT take-up, Mr SIN suggested the Administration to consider relaxing the regulatory restrictions, thereby allowing the two free TV broadcasters, i.e. ATV and TVB, to use more entertaining programmes for their four existing analogue programme channels for the soft launch. Sharing his view, the Chairman called on the Administration to seriously consider relaxing or removing the restrictions on the use of commercial programmes for the DTT soft launch. Concurring with Mr SIN Chung-kai and the Chairman, Mr Albert CHAN said that an early DTT soft launch would benefit all parties concerned.

13. In response, STE(AS) and PAS(CT) explained that the current technical trial was mainly for "interference testing" purposes and the permit issued by the Telecommunications Authority to the two free TV broadcasters required that the trial should be conducted on a non-commercial basis. Acknowledging the benefits of an early soft launch and noting members' suggestion, PAS(CT) and DS(CT) assured members that the Administration would liaise closely with ATV and TVB on the matter. Details of the arrangements for the soft launch, once finalized, would be announced.

(Post-meeting note: ATV and TVB carried out DTT soft launch in early December 2007.)

Health risks of DTT

14. Dr Philip WONG was concerned whether DTT broadcasting would have any adverse impact on health, particularly, on the eye. He enquired whether the Administration had any plan to conduct a study in this respect or whether any overseas countries had ever conducted such study that could be used for reference. In response, STE(AS) said that DTT broadcasting, as compared with analogue broadcasting, would provide more stable images and a better picture quality which was free from ghosting and snowing. DS(CT) remarked that DTT broadcasting had been launched in a number of overseas countries and so far there was no report on DTT posing any health risks. At the request of the Chairman, the Administration undertook to provide information in this regard to the Panel, if available.

Voluntary labeling scheme

15. Referring to the voluntary scheme to label DTT receivers to be sold in Hong Kong, the Chairman enquired whether the Administration would consider making the scheme mandatory for better regulation. Director-General of Telecommunications (DG of T) explained that the purpose of the scheme was to provide information to assist the viewing public to make informed purchase choice of DTT receivers according to their needs. Participation on voluntary basis was considered appropriate at the present stage as it was anticipated that market forces would drive suppliers of consumer electronics products to join the scheme to increase consumer confidence in their products. In this respect, members noted that no fees would be charged for participation in the scheme and that the labeling tag for "basic-tier" and "higher-tier" receivers would state clearly their respective reception capabilities.

Television reception and availability of domestic free television programme services in remote areas

16. Mr Albert CHAN expressed great disappointment that under the existing policy guidelines, small communities of less than 300 people in remote areas in Tai O and Sai Kung were still not covered by the free TV programmes of ATV and TVB. He considered it unacceptable and strongly urged the Administration to review the relevant policy and, if need be, to inject public funds to set up transmission towers and provide the essential infrastructural facilities to ensure territory-wide coverage.

17. In response, DS(CT) said that the Administration would conduct a comprehensive study to review the overall situation in Hong Kong and would report the findings to the Panel for further discussion. The Chairman shared with members that during a recent informal meeting with the Secretary for Commerce and Economic Development (SCED) to discuss the Panel's workplan for the current legislative session, SCED had indicated that case-specific TV reception issues would be handled by administrative means. Members noted that the matter would be discussed in the 2008-09 legislative session.

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