

News Release

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What you need to know about the digital TV transition

A recent survey carried out by the Malta Communications Authority, shows that 11.2 per cent of Maltese households rely solely on traditional free-to-air analogue TV broadcasts to watch Maltese television programmes.

Traditional free-to-air analogue TV broadcasting – i.e. television signals which can be received free of charge via aerial in analogue form – will be upgraded to digital by the end of 2010. From 2011 onwards, viewers will continue to benefit from free-to-air broadcasting since six slots will be made available for national TV channels on a free-to-air basis, including the state TV station TVM.

This shift from analogue to digital TV broadcasting is commonly known as the Digital Switch-Over (DSO) and forms part of wider EU and international programmes aimed at enhancing the TV experience through the deployment of advanced digital technologies. Benefits of digital television include improved sound and picture quality and a wider choice of TV channels.

According to a recent survey carried out by the Malta Communications Authority, it is estimated that 16,000 Maltese households (11.2 per cent of all Maltese households) are not subscribed to a pay TV service and still rely on free-to-air analogue broadcasts to watch television. When respondents were asked why they have not subscribed to a pay TV service, 48 per cent replied that they are happy with free-to-air TV whilst 35 per cent believe that pay TV services are expensive. Almost 19 per cent of respondents indicated that they will be considering a subscription to a pay TV service within the next two years.

The survey results also indicated that 54 per cent of respondents are aware that Maltese free-to-air television will be switched to digital by the end of 2010.

The digital switchover will affect households which rely on free-to-air analogue broadcasts to watch national TV stations. Analogue transmissions on the cable network will not be affected since the cable operator is under no obligation to upgrade to digital. Should, however, the cable operator opt to cease analogue transmissions, it is required to include all free-to-air TV channels in its digital TV offerings and to replicate the equivalent of the analogue reception package in digital.

Subscribers of the digital terrestrial pay TV operator will be able to watch any free-to-air digital TV channel via their existing operator-provided set-top box.

In order to benefit from free-to-air TV broadcasting from 2011 onwards, 'free-to-air' households would need to upgrade their receiving equipment to digital.

Such an upgrade will be only necessary for older TV sets and video recorders which do not have a digital tuner built in. According to the survey results, 1,920 (12 per cent) of the 16,000 households have at least one LCD/Plasma television set. Given that sets of the latter type are more modern than the older 'TV-tube' televisions, they are likely to have a built-in digital tuner. Thus no upgrade to digital may be necessary. One is nevertheless encouraged to refer to the owner's manual in order to find out whether the television set has a built in digital tuner.

Upgrading to digital doesn't need to be expensive. Digital terrestrial TV (DTTV) set-top boxes receive a digital television signal and convert it so that it can be received on an existing (analogue) television set or video recorder. A DTTV set-top box is a good option where fully functional televisions and video recorders within the household need to be upgraded to digital. These boxes are relatively inexpensive – they currently sell for around €30.00 in Europe.

One other option would be to purchase a new television set which features an integrated DTTV tuner. This is a more expensive option than the purchase of a DTTV set-top box. Nonetheless, this option may be considered if one is seeking to replace an old television with a new television set.

Subscribers of pay TV services do not need to upgrade their existing television and video recorder since the set-top box provided by the respective pay TV operator already converts the signals so that they can be received on an existing (analogue) television or video recorder.

The survey was carried out ahead of the MCA's digital switchover public information campaign scheduled to be launched towards the end of the year so as to gain a better understanding on households that rely on traditional free-to-air analogue TV. The public information campaign will run through the digital switchover period, providing the public with information on how to convert to digital.