

Free Wi-Fi: spreading the web

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What it means: Wi-Fi is free for users, but someone has to fund it. Most SA metros already offer free Wi-Fi. Can free public Wi-Fi access become an election issue? It should. Voters should be aware of how political parties intend to expand access to the internet, especially in under-served communities.



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The roll-out of public Wi-Fi networks is gaining traction, and communities have begun to expect that their newly elected councillors will keep their promises regarding free Wi-Fi.

Wi-Fi is a short-range wireless network. It is already offered in public places such as restaurants, shopping malls and hotels, sometimes for a fee. The rise in the adoption of smartphones has resulted in a spike in data usage, and the demand for fast and reliable broadband networks has soared. Wi-Fi is increasingly offered in places as divergent as malls, schools, taxis, and buses.

During the campaign for local government elections, political parties promised to provide free Wi-Fi. A study released this month by BMI-TechKnowledge has found that most metros in SA already offer free broadband internet access through Wi-Fi hotspots. "There are around 2,100 public hotspots, of which nearly 80% are in Gauteng," says BMI-T director Tim Parle, author of the report.

Bridging the digital divide

Tshwane has the single largest network for a metro in SA and has complemented this with other value-added services. Its service has been branded TshWi-Fi.

Parle expects more municipalities to promote access to free public Wi-Fi. In June, the City of Cape Town announced its partnership with VAST Networks to deploy Wi-Fi to all MyCiTi buses. Nelson Mandela Bay also launched its free public Wi-Fi in April. Through these public hotspots, consumers are given a free data allowance of between 50MB/day and 500MB/month. But top-up options - which are paid for - are also available. This may help municipalities recover some of the costs.

Telecommunications and postal services minister Siyabonga Cwele said in his May budget vote that most people use free Wi-Fi for educational content, job opportunities, small business development and marketing. "Free Wi-Fi is bridging the digital divide," he said. "We encourage all municipalities to set aside funds for this empowering programme for affordable internet for all."

VAST Networks, an open-access Wi-Fi provider, has 2,000 locations throughout SA, says CEO Grant Marais. And the company is working with other municipalities to extend this. VAST, which aims to grow its locations by up to 45%/year, has 750,000 users/month across its locations in areas such as shopping malls.

Addressing misconceptions

Marais says many people are willing to pay once they have depleted their free Wi-Fi data allowance. "There is a misconception that Wi-Fi is free. This is not true as someone (municipalities, businesses, shop owners) is always covering the cost for the user's free experience," he says. Parle expects access to the free public services to have an effect on the number of internet users. A free service gives people who might otherwise not have access the chance to become data users.

But there are problems. To increase the adoption rate, Wi-Fi providers need to make it easier for consumers to log on. "Ease of use is a big thing for users. Complex or repetitive log-in procedures are a barrier to uptake," Parle says.

Some mobile network operators have added Wi-Fi to their portfolios to, among other things, give customers an alternative in areas where there is network congestion or poor coverage of its traditional network. Telkom has 6,000 hotspots and has price packages for Wi-Fi, while Cell C has launched Wi-Fi Calling. Its users can call using a Wi-Fi network rather than their cellphone network. But consumers are billed for a normal voice call. Other mobile operators also offer free Wi-Fi.

MVN-X, which connects mobile virtual network operators with network providers, has partnered with Always On to give its customers Wi-Fi access at more than 2,500 hotspots. Mobile virtual network operators - companies like me&you, FNB Connect and Virgin Mobile SA - do not have network infrastructure but piggyback on Cell C's network to provide data and voice packages.

Risk awareness

Users need to be aware of the risks. A report by technology group NordVPN warns people using free public Wi-Fi to protect themselves from hackers, who often position themselves as Wi-Fi hotspots and can easily steal personal information

"In addition, identity thieves have lately been using wireless sniffers, software designed to intercept and decode data when it is transmitted over a network," the report says.

"Anyone who is shopping online or doing online banking using a wireless network is especially vulnerable."

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