

Behind the smoke and mirrors of SA's internet

By [Grant Parker](#)

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Everywhere you look these days in urban areas and surrounding suburbs, there seems to be an advertisement for a different fibre provider. Clearly, the South African internet market has come of age, and consumers - especially business customers - are benefiting from plummeting prices, increased speeds, and a myriad of package choices.



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Not so fast though

This Golden Age of Internet access has a dark underbelly, with many too-good-to-be-true promises proving to be just that. There is a lot of smoke and mirrors in the sector, with providers easily winning customers via impressive offers, and then disappointing when the actual experience falls short. What is going on? Who can actually deliver on their claims?

Types or levels of internet provision

The first point that needs to be mentioned is that internet service provision in South Africa, as elsewhere in the world, occurs at different levels. Global and Continental ISPs (Internet Service Providers) operate at the highest levels and are essentially the backbone of the internet because these ICT companies have typically invested in infrastructure like undersea cables to connect their far-flung presences. While a Global ISP can be found in multiple cities across the planet, a Continental ISP will, like its name suggests, service multiple urban centres on one specific continent.

Seacom slots into this category

In addition to these providers, there are also Regional ISPs which focus on some sections of a continent, such as selected countries or cities in Eastern Africa or Mediterranean Europe. Further narrowed in focus are National ISPs, which operate in a single country, and may even be hyper-local as they serve customers in just one city or town. Without the vast infrastructure outlay of their global, continental and even regional equivalents, national ISPs enter into agreements with

these international providers, peering at national-level exchange points to bringing large-scale Internet connectivity to their own customers. Another way to look at it is that national ISPs are usually customers of global, continental and regional providers because of their capability to serve large corporates.

Locally, Telkom monopolised the connecting of South African networks to their international counterparts until 2009 when Seacom launched its own cable system, running along the east coast of Africa. Three submarine cable systems currently carry most of the internet traffic between South Africa and the rest of the globe.

The result is that today every type of ISP – from big telco names to smaller players – may operate side-by-side in the same market, offering solutions to business and home customers direct, or through last-mile channel partners. While these ISPs provide an internet connection and related services to customers, separate infrastructure companies like DFA, Vumatel and Openserve handle the trenching and physical laying out of on-site fibre which facilitates network access.

As for wireless and mobile internet connectivity, fibre still underpins the services of South Africa's major cellular providers, even if the last mile to the mobile customer is wireless. The bigger issue here is that advances which would improve performance, lower costs, and extend the availability of celebrated newer wireless broadband transfer technologies – like 5G – have been hamstrung by a shortage of radio frequency; not to mention indecision from policy-makers about how to make it available to ISPs.

Broken promises and how they happen

In a very cluttered, competitive sector, deciding on a broadband contract and ISP can be incredibly confusing. When rival products look the same, it's not uncommon for providers to promise the earth in terms of 'speeds and feeds' to win a sale – only to hide behind the SLD (Service Level Description) when the customer is dissatisfied. SLA (Service Level Agreements), which may include penalties for early agreement terminations, also help more nefarious providers get away with providing an inferior service.

Key to avoiding disappointment as a customer then is to read the list of restrictions in your ISP's contracts, and watch out for the nebulous "fair usage" clause, which can be used to justify "shaping" (i.e. when your ISP reduces its wholesale bandwidth consumption by slowing down your data speed). It also pays to know the nature and reach of your ISP, as smaller National providers may be facing bandwidth restrictions of their own due to the allocated amount they have from their own ISPs. These connectivity limits will inevitably impact on customer access in the event of over-subscription.

In fact, broken promises typically hinge on breakage models widely used in the market. In this case, the ISP, (typically a National provider) is relying on variable usage patterns from its customers to offset the fact that it has "less" bandwidth than it actually sells. The provider is also taking advantage of large-scale business customers who don't, or simply can't, take advantage of the full throughput because of natural TCP/IP (Transmission Control Protocol/Internet Protocol) limitations on data transfer.

The internet connectivity sector has seen mammoth shifts in the past decade as it opened up post the state-owned-telecoms

monopoly period. And it looks set to change even more in the coming years due to ever-growing bandwidth capacity and industry consolidation. Then there are those ISPs embracing the very digital technologies their connections enable, to transform themselves into New Age Telcos offering fully converged communications solutions for businesses and home users alike.

For consumers navigating this environment, it'll pay not to fixate on product specifications. Instead, you should look beyond the product to the true nature of the ISP, and the service and support that underpins it. This is the best way to assess its true value to you as a customer.

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