

The Internet: dead or alive in the emerging market?

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In South Africa, the usage of personal computers (PC's) as well as the Internet over the past year has had little or no growth. 8,4% of adult South Africans residing in major metropolitan areas have access to the web, with this figure dropping to 1,3% amongst Blacks.

However, what is often not taken into consideration, is the examples of work being conducted on a grassroots level.

People do possess the cognitive ability to teach themselves computer skills

Minimally Invasive Education (MIE) introduces technology literacy without any instruction. The concept originated in India and has been piloted successfully in South Africa.

In **Cwili**, a town in rural eastern Cape, a kiosk was placed in the Community Hall (after obtaining permission from community heads and leaders) to provide access to various applications including Internet. The computer had logging software for monitoring and evaluating usage, as well as closed circuit cameras to record the behaviour of the Cwili inhabitants.

About 60% of Cwili township's children have taught themselves or each other basic computer functionality. They play educational games, write letters, and surf the web. People are using the facility from as early as 04h30 right up until midnight.

In **Greater Cape Town**, another initiative has been launched to provide free computer access and Internet connectivity to previously disadvantaged individuals. Members of six libraries (in Brooklyn, Delft Main, Grassy Park, Gugulethu, Lwandle and Westfleur) have access to computers which have been set up in such a way that the involvement of library staff is minimal. Over a four-month period, over 4000 users had registered on the system and just under one-third had logged on for more than one session.

Three-quarters of the sample of respondents using these facilities were under 25 years of age, and almost 80% were male. The majority were scholars or students (62%), and the remainder consisted of working individuals, those seeking employment, as well as housewives and pensioners. The youth were more inclined to use the facilities for entertainment and experimentation, while the older users concentrated on jobs and business-related subjects. Barriers of entry of non-users are fear, lack of basic skills and knowledge, but word of mouth is seen as a powerful marketing tool.

The business sector is committed to closing the gap between the 'haves' and the 'have-nots'

Microsoft South Africa has been setting up Digital Villages (DV's) throughout the country with the help of partners and very willing communities. Up until recently, there were 28 active DV's across the country – in previously disadvantaged areas, both urban and rural. These villages offer membership to use facilities (PC's, Internet, etc), as well as training programmes.

The pattern emerging is that unemployed youth tend to visit the centres in the mornings, school children in the afternoons, and mostly the older working generation at night who are looking to upgrade their skills as well as gain access to the various facilities.

So what does this tell us about our Internet statistics?

We now have a glimpse of what is occurring beyond the documented statistics on Internet penetration. The digital divide in South Africa will not be narrowed by conventional means as in First World countries. In fact, we have an enormous vault of opportunity for the development of Information and Communication technology

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