

The South African ‘Information Society’: Problems with Policy, Legislation, Rhetoric and Implementation

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1. Introduction

This chapter critically examines the politics of the South African ‘Information Society’. Since the dawn of political democracy in 1994, information and communication technologies (ICTs), such as fixed and mobile telephones and the internet, have been identified by government as critical to various forms of ‘development’. As a result of the perceived importance of ICTs, it is essential that government’s ‘goals’ are met by relevant ‘tools’ in its attempts to achieve those ‘goals’. However, it would seem that government rhetoric is more reflective of deterministic interpretations of the potential of ICTs than it is of systematic and methodological undertakings of how to actually achieve its policy objectives. This potential inadequacy is examined in terms of its implemental implications for both government and those in ‘need’ of its policies – the latter, perhaps more aptly, referred to as material consumers of a global culture.

The emergence of ICTs in the ‘new’ South Africa has followed a path mostly paralleled to the growth of political democracy since 1994. The centrality of ICTs to the Reconstruction and Development Programme (RDP)¹ was made very clear with its identification as a key feature in meeting the ‘goal’ of “basic needs” (Government Gazette 16085, sections 1.3.6 and 3.6.3). Similarly, the Growth, Employment and Redistribution (GEAR)² policies (aimed at socio-economic transformation) classify ICTs as necessary ‘tools’ in addition to the “quality of life in communities” and contributing to an “increase in...social and community living standards” (Roux et al. 1996: 16, 21). During this time, however, it has been acknowledged that the RDP and GEAR policies have largely failed to deliver on promises of a more equitable society (Bond: 2000, 2004; Desai: 2004; Habib and Padayachee: 2000). Indeed, wealth continues to be in the hands of an elite minority. The country ranks 121st out of 177 countries on the Human Development Index (HDI) (UNDP 2007: 231). The trend of this index in South Africa has been downward since 1995 and decreased by 4.67% over the 2000-2005 period (derived from UNDP 2007: 236). Worryingly, unofficial

¹ The RDP comprises integrated policies based on meeting basic needs, developing the country’s human capital, building the economy, democratising the state and improving foreign direct investment.

² GEAR is market-driven and seeks to, as the name suggests, address social and economic needs of those who were oppressed during apartheid.

unemployment stands at over 40% (Mbeki cited in Fin24: 2007).³ Despite the apparent lack of impact of ICTs on ‘development’ indicators, the ANC government continues to embrace them as ‘tools’ of ‘development’. Following the association of global capitalism and ICTs, explored in Chapter 2, it would not be unrealistic to position South Africa’s embrace of these technologies within the realm of global trends. This is explored by Habib and Padayachee (2000: 246), in terms of its ideological reality, as being “the result of the ANC’s particular perception and interpretation of the balance of economic and political power, at both the global and local level”.

Based on this, the purpose of this chapter is to question the levels of clarity, consistency and coherency of how ICTs as ‘tools’ of ‘development’ are directly linked to government’s broader socio-economic ‘goals’ of ‘development’. To do this, the chapter is divided into three sections. The first provides a very brief history of how the ‘information society’ has emerged as a dominant aspect of present political discussion and discourse. The second examines, separately, the attention invested in telecommunications in the form of ‘national legislation and policymaking’ and ‘government rhetoric and policymaking’. Finally, the culmination of the implemental and effectual consequences of all the above are explored in terms of their actual effects on the consumer market of South Africa’s privately-owned mobile telecommunications providers.

2. The emergence of the ‘Information Society’ in South African politics

The presidency of F. W. de Klerk over the 1989-1994 period brought with it growing divisions in the ruling National Party. This breakdown was one of the final factors in the history of apartheid which led to the regime’s demise and the transition to a Government of National Unity in May 1994.⁴ The transition which this referred to (although evidence of this transition was already evident earlier in the 1980s) was movement from a mostly state-led market arrangement to a growing free-market, which had direct and immediate influences on the political and economic structure of the telecommunications sector. These were most evident, as Benjamin (2001: 89-97) shows us, in three forms: the introduction of the privately-owned mobile telecommunications duopoly of Vodacom and MTN in 1993, the emphasis of market-led telecommunications in the RDP, and the privatisation of Telkom. Therefore, by the time political democracy was a South African reality following the iconic 1994 elections, the “impressionist” socio-economic focus of the

³ Official unemployment stands at 25.5% (Statistics South Africa 2007: iv). The difference between ‘official’ and ‘unofficial’ indicators is that the former includes only those who were searching for employment up to seven days because the most recent census. The latter expands this to include those who had been searching for employment for the four weeks prior to the most recent census.

⁴ This is not to dismiss the justifiable arguments that global economic pressures towards economic liberalism played central roles in dismantling apartheid. In fact, this is even more likely when considering the different stances taken by the ANC in its anti-apartheid struggles compared to its ideological framework post-1994 (Habib and Padayachee 2000; Bond 2004).

ANC government through telecommunications to, “balance sustainable economic growth with social empowerment” was arguably already underway (Habib and Padayachee 2000: 245; Maphatane 2006: 30). The distinctive role which ICTs would play in this was very clear from the attention given to them in the 1994 ANC election manifesto (ANC: 1994a), the Reconstruction and Development Programme (ANC 1994b: section 2.8) and later, the Under-Serviced Area Licenses (USALs). The RDP was very specific on the direction of telecommunications towards universal access in every household:

Telecommunications is an information infrastructure and must play a crucial role in South Africa’s development programmes. The RDP aims to provide universal affordable access for all as rapidly as possible within a sustainable and viable telecommunications system; to develop a modern and integrated telecommunications and information technology system that is capable of enhancing, cheapening and facilitating education, health care, business information, public administration and rural development, and to develop a Southern African cooperative programme for telecommunications. In terms of the RDP, telecommunication services must be provided to all schools and clinics within two years. (ANC 1994b: section 2.8)

By 1995 the growing emphasis on telecommunications and the use of ICTs, led to the appropriation of the concept of an ‘information society’ in South African political discourse. Then-President Nelson Mandela and then-Deputy President Thabo Mbeki were the initial mainstream promoters of this in the country, with clear reference beyond the generic concept of ‘telecommunications’ (van Audenhove 2003: 3). The initial thrust to their vehement support for this took place a year into political democracy with Mbeki’s (1995a) speech at the G7 Conference in Brussels and Mandela’s (1995a) speech at the International Telecommunications Union’s (ITU) Telecom Conference in Geneva. While emphasising different forms, both were clear on the ways in which the ‘information society’, or the ‘information age’, are linked to South Africa’s macro socio-economic policy. This primarily took the form of Mandela’s (1995a) emphasis on the importance of democracy, integration and the elimination of the ‘digital divide’,⁵ while Mbeki (1995a) concentrated on economic competitiveness, culture and reconstruction and development (van Audenhove 2003: 3). With such forms in mind, the adoption of, or rather, the participation in, the ‘information society’ would obviously require deliberate attention in the case of South Africa given its racialised past. In Nelson Mandela’s (1995b) address to the General Meeting of Urtna in Johannesburg, he highlighted a parallel issue when he drew comparisons between domestic and international disparities: “How is this [global] village organised? The spectre of a privileged few setting the cultural agenda for the world’s majority is very real. If we allow this to happen, then the potential of new technologies to build bridges will have been wasted”. Emerging from a traumatic

⁵ In its simplified form, the ‘digital divide’ refers to distinctions between countries based on them being technologically ‘rich’ and technologically ‘poor’. Although not always the case, this generally follows the well known classifications of countries in the global ‘north’ and the global ‘south’.

history of racialised oppression, the introduction of the ‘information society’ in political discourse was seen as both friend and foe: friend because of the possibilities it presented to macro-economic global integration and local development; foe because of the possibility of the ‘digital divide’ further entrenching the predicament of social engineering of which apartheid was the architect (These are discussed in further detail later in this chapter).

With this in mind, it was believed that a fusion of labour, business, civil society and government in the form of the National Telecommunications Forum (NTF) would go a long way in promoting the development of legislation sensitive enough to addressing the country’s history. These participants, as well Minister of Posts, Telecommunications and Broadcasting, Pallo Jordan, formulated a discussion document which became the Green Paper on Telecommunications.⁶ Those involved initially reached little consensus, but later agreed on the future of the economic arrangement of telecommunications, especially with respect to Telkom. This culminated, in 1996, in the emergence of the South African Telecommunications Regulatory Authority (SATRA) and the Universal Service Agency (USA). It was emphasised that these should not be in competition but should work together to best address the issue of universal service in South Africa (Ministry for Posts, Telecommunications and Broadcasting 1996: 9). This was targeted as a prime focus specifically because of the unequal access to telecommunications which was inherited from apartheid. As a result, the USA sought to “promote the universal and affordable provision of telecommunication services” throughout South Africa, with subsidies provided by the Universal Service Fund (USF) (Republic of South Africa 1996: 10).

With the finalisation of the Telecommunications Act No. 103 in 1996, it was decided that the liberalisation of the market and the privatisation of Telkom would bring in much needed investment and skills both to Telkom and to the sector in general. Of course, this impetus to the free-market would further favour the interests of the duopolistic mobile telecommunications sector, despite the fact that the Act did not include obligations for such companies as it did for the fixed-line operator. The necessity of economic liberalisation, together with its promotion of investment and skills, was seen as a solution to two factors. Firstly, the excessive debt which Telkom had accumulated, and secondly, the Department of Posts, Telecommunications and Broadcasting’s need to meet the required roll-out of infrastructure, particularly in disadvantaged areas. The implementation of the above legislation and the corresponding roll-out of telecommunications which this referred to would commence, generally, over the 1997-2000 period, primarily with the

⁶ South Africa’s legislation process follows the British model. The first part of that process is the creation of a discussion document called a Green Paper. It raises the issues of concern brought to light by policy discussions. This is followed by the drafting of the government’s position on the issue through various drafts called Bills. When this becomes official, the final Bill is passed by parliament, the resulting White Paper is signed by the President and the Act becomes law.

creation of ‘telecentres’.⁷

Sensitivity to socio-historical realities were emphasised by Pallo Jordan’s successor, Jay Naidoo, who continued to promote the interests of positive social change during his 1996-1999 tenure in office. It is largely his three-pronged focus which gave much impetus to shaping South Africa’s ICT positions at the time. The first was the identification of socio-economic progress to which he viewed a direct link to the possibilities of ICTs. The second element was that if ICTs become integrated into the basic functionings of social and economic activities they can have productive influences on healthcare, education, rural development and youth development and can improve social service delivery. Thirdly, Naidoo highlighted the importance of maintaining an up-to-date technology resource base in order to promote global competitiveness (van Audenhove 2003: 5-6).

By the end of Naidoo’s term, the emergence of the ‘information society’ in South African political discourse was clearly a reality in its permanency in both policy and political discussion. While this trend continued, the arrival of Thabo Mbeki to the Presidency in 1999 as well as his choice of new Minister of Communication, Ivy Matsepe-Casaburri, resulted in new and supplementary ICT policies and legislation being formulated. It is these which are now dealt with.

3. Contradictions within political processes and discourses around the issue of ‘goals’ and ‘tools’

3.1 Legislation and policy

When the Green/White paper process towards the 1996 Telecommunications Act was underway, the issue of a regulator was largely absent from these discussions. This possibly indicated that the management of telecommunications was prioritised *below* the urgent attention given to addressing the effects of apartheid which created telecommunication imbalances, particularly in black rural areas (Ministry for Posts, Telecommunications and Broadcasting 1996: 9; Benjamin 2001: 93; van Leijden and Monasso 2006: 22; Gazette 16995). With this in mind, what is most striking, in terms of legislation, policy and implementation, is that compared to Broadcasting which had the Independent Broadcasting Authority (IBA) created in 1993, the changes to the telecommunications sector had no introduction of guiding legislation, regulatory frameworks or co-ordinated policy until 1996.

⁷ This term is used in South African ICT policy to refer to the points of access which offer services (such as telephone, facsimile and internet usage) to impoverished people. This is dealt with, in detail, in Chapter 5.

This arguably accounts, partially, for why the Telecommunications Act fell short in many respects despite its advancement of the interests of improving nationwide access to telecommunications. Clause 65.4, for example, states that the USF is to be “administered by the Agency subject to the control and in accordance with the instructions of the Authority” (Republic of South Africa 1996: 53). However, the delegation of responsibilities between the Department of Communication⁸ (DOC), SATRA, the USA and the operators was not clear, and sometimes overlapped. For example, the lack of clarity on the functions of SATRA and the USA resulted in an indirect dual granting of responsibility to them to oversee the obligatory roll-out by the telecommunication operators.

The problem this presented to the DoC was two-fold: firstly, due to the lack of clarity and common goal, by the end of 1996, Jay Naidoo was reconceptualising the ideas of what function the USA should fulfil; secondly, the confusion at the time seems to have fuelled ‘competition’ between different departments to develop public use of ICTs in their respective ‘development’ policies independently of each other. Indicative of this fact that “there was contestation between a number of departments to be seen as championing this new area”, the Department of Arts and Culture and the Department of Science and Technology were beginning steps towards a project examining the future prospect of the ICT sector in what was known as the Foresight Project (Benjamin 2001: 99). At the same time, the Department of Trade and Industry commenced research into its South African Information Technology Industry Strategy. It was, arguably, a partial response to this which motivated the Department of Communication to conceptualise the goal of providing 3000-5000 telecentres to under-serviced areas. It seems, however, that many of the initial aims of the USA and the Department of Communication’s info.com programme (a programme intended to showcase the possibilities of ICTs to government) were emotionally based on historical imbalances of access to telecommunications rather than on setting achievable goals for its initial roll-out. As a result, “ambitious” goals such as those concerning the number of telecentres to be constructed were likely to have only been conceptualised because of the looming digital divide (van Audenhove 2003: 19). This was highlighted by the evidence that once the difficulties of fulfilling the initial promises were encountered, it was too late to prevent the ensuing “crisis” of juxtaposed policy and implemental shortcomings (van Audenhove 2003: 19). This was the result of,

serious problems with the implementation of...policy. This was true for all sectors relating to ICTs, but particularly for the telecommunications sector...the [national] regulator did not succeed in developing a proactive policy geared at the development of the telecommunications sector or more generally directed at universal service in support of social development. van Audenhove (2003: 19)

⁸ Throughout the official documentation of this department, it refers to itself as the ‘Department of Communication’ *and* as the ‘Department of Communications’. For the sake of consistency, the former is used hereafter.

Because of this, by May 1998, the USA's Universal Computer Project which sought to deliver on the promise of telecentres, was closed down by the DoC because of the costs it was incurring. Indicative of the growing tensions, the USA was more and more excluded from mainstream actions, activities and meetings of the DoC (Benjamin 1999: 102).

With Mbeki victorious in the 1999 presidential elections, the resignation of Minister Naidoo from politics and the appointment of his successor, Minister Ivy Matsepe-Casaburri, the face of the South African ICT sector was clearly changing. This was primarily because the new Minister was less focussed on universal access than was Naidoo, and this would potentially hamper the progress of the already dwindling success of the USA. It was only later that year, with the implementation of the 'Telecentre Implementation Plan' of David N. Townsend and Associates, a private consultancy firm, that the actions of the USA became more focussed on electronic training, education and public awareness of the importance of ICT literacy and less on the direct implementation of telecentres which had proven too costly for the DoC.

This was evident in the USA's influence in the license obligations of fixed and mobile operators. It promoted universal access to public telephones in schools and hospitals, especially in the poorer parts of the country, which has initially been formalised in the Telecommunications Act (1996). Although protected from competition for local and international voice communication in the fixed line sector for a period of five years beginning in 1997, Telkom was obliged to install 2.69 million new lines (60 percent of which were to be in disadvantaged areas), provide telecommunication services to 3 204 villages, install 120 000 public payphones and provide access to 20 000 'priority customers' (such as community centres, clinics and schools). However, the Telecommunications Act (1996) made no mention of the affordability of telephone lines to local consumers. This accounted for the 50% to 70% rate of disconnected lines as consumers were unable to pay their accumulating phone bills (Benjamin 2001: 109) shows that in the first three months of 2000, the company had disconnected 223, 386 lines. Importantly, Telkom's license conditions did not take notice of this as they focussed instead simply on the numbers of new lines.

Despite the unsustainability and lack of success of these license obligations in many cases (van Leijden and Monasso 2005: 22), the initial roll-out figures of the fixed-line operator greatly exceeded those of Vodacom and MTN. On one level, this is because "from a legal perspective, universal service is defined as individual access to basic telecommunications at the level of the household via the *fixed* network" (van Audenhove 2003: 21, emphasis added). On another level, the mobile communication duopoly enjoyed less demanding Community Service Obligations (CSO) of 22 000 and 7 500 community service lines respectively, and fulfilled these three years

before the 1999 deadline (Benjamin 2001: 98). As a result of this, the introduction, in 2001, of the third mobile telecommunication operator, Cell C, did little to interfere with Vodacom and MTN's comparatively higher prices which they were able to maintain after their initial CSOs were achieved.

Beyond legislation, South Africa has failed to formulate a formal and all-encompassing 'information society' policy (van Audenhove 2003: 2; Esselaar et al: 2006: 13). This has allowed for various departments to manifest their own implementation strategies and develop their own bureaucratic arrangements of ICTs for their respective departments and intended public roll-out. Consequently, there is an incredible complexity in the content of ICT-related discussions, statements and documents. Partially in response to these complexities and their uncoordinated effects on implementation, the Department of Communication began a new strategy in 2001 to re-legitimate itself as director of ICT initiatives and co-ordinator of ICT policy. This commenced with the awarding of Under-Serviced Area Licences. The main aim of this, based on the American National Telecommunications Cooperative Association (NTCA), was to allow small and locally-owned companies the opportunity to provide universal ICT access to 'under-serviced areas'. In the first round, seven licenses were issued to new small-scale operators.⁹ However, this was done formally only in October 2004 while Gazette 22959 of December 2001 had originally published information regarding applicants' submissions. As a result of this three year period, the many more potential licensees who had applied "could not sustain themselves during the lengthy process" (Cohen: 2001; Smit 2004: 19).

Due to the pressure which the DoC was under in terms of urgently addressing Black Economic Empowerment (BEE), it decided to speed up the process by granting licences to those BEE companies which would introduce their own physical infrastructure. Although attaching regulatory standards to this in the form of the 2001 Telecommunications Amendment Act, costs in rural areas were relatively high and were mostly passed on to the consumer (van Leijden and Monasso 2006: 26). As van Leijden and Monasso (2006: 26) conclude, "the regulations were not based on an analysis of cost structures, but on the mere determination of an operator as a USAL". Furthermore, the insistence on specific technologies being provided in specific under-serviced areas limited the ability of the new licensees to compete with established operators and choose the technologies most suited to them.

With these licenses, the idea was that empowering local, previously disadvantaged

⁹ This was formalised in the 2001 Telecommunications Amendment Act. The seven named operators were: Ilizwe Telecommunications, Amatole Telecommunications Services, Bokone Telecoms, Kingdom Communications, Thinta Thinta Telecoms, Karabo Telecoms, Bokamoso Consortium

businesspeople would deal simultaneously with two objectives: stimulating black-run business in the formal sector of the economy and creating universal telecommunication access in marginalised communities (ICT Charter Steering Committee 2005: 5). Despite the logic of the argument, the pre-determined nature of an overarching liberalised macro-economic market presented the DoC with a major problem. This was, and continues to be, that, the encouragement of Small, Medium and Micro Enterprises (SMMEs) in South Africa is based on the possession, by definition, of skills and capital at the point of entry to any competitive market. To the contrary, South Africa's skewed history of resource distribution has ensured that high skills and access to capital are, as acknowledged by government, limited in possession of those targeted entrepreneurs (Gazette 16995). As a result, the stimulation of economic competition at the point of entry to any sector is mostly counter-intuitive to redressing the imbalance of resources in South Africa.

With this shortcoming partially recognised by government, the second round of licences began in 2005 and was led by the combined broadcasting and telecommunications regulator, the Independent Communications Authority of South Africa (ICASA) (Gazette 27166). This regulator received its authority in the ICASA Act (2000) which was most recently amended in 2006. The clearest difference to the first reform round was greater state involvement, which was formalised both in South Africa's Telecommunications Amendment Act (2001) and the new economic strategy of Accelerated and Shared Growth Initiative for South Africa (ASGISA) in 2005. The structural changes to the adopted "managed liberalisation" have meant the slowing down of the entire universal service provision. Had this been done initially, the roll-out would arguably have been further along its process by this stage. With hindsight aside, the reality of this time lag renders any further analysis of the operational effects of the second round of licenses premature at the time of printing this thesis.

3.2 Rhetoric and policy

In the face of implemental shortcomings juxtaposed against the progressive ICT legislation they are intended to represent, the role of political rhetoric must not be overlooked. It would appear that, in a South African context where debate over ICT is often very fragmented, rhetoric is often the origin of legislation and the promoter of policy once that legislation is in place. In the case of South Africa, this has already been shown with the praise granted to the 'information society' by Mandela and Mbeki one year *before* the formalisation of the 1996 Telecommunications Act. One could even argue that their speeches which have been referred to played key roles in catalysing the 1995 Green paper which led to this Act.

With the apartheid-created inequalities fuelling most of the impetus awarded to ‘universal service’ and ‘universal access’ (terms which were used synonymously in the 1996 Telecommunications Act and which are still not clearly separated in definition), the ‘digital divide’ is a useful starting point to understanding the role of political rhetoric. While a generic definition of the ‘digital divide’ may be somewhat self-explanatory,¹⁰ a critical policy-deciding element to that definition differs between countries. This largely revolves around socio-centricity and techno-centricity as the key focus areas of policy.¹¹ The former emphasises the use of technology for the improvement of lives and the latter emphasises the increase in technological possession, largely, for reducing comparative statistical imbalances. Although these can be complimentary they can also be counter-productive if promoted uninformed of each other.

Along this line of thought, perhaps the term ‘digital divide’ is more qualitatively than quantitatively productive and encouraging to the creation, promotion and mobilisation of efforts in the interest of ‘curing’ the problem of this ‘divide’ (if it is a problem to begin with). In other words, does the ‘digital divide’ focus attention on, statistically increasing the availability of technologies to those people who do not already have such access or, on using these technologies to bring about socio-economic betterment? Although obviously linked, the difference in specific and direct attention to quantitative and qualitative factors has the potential to, it is argued, dramatically influence on-the-ground effects of ICT policy implementation. Consider the following four definitions of the ‘digital divide’ in the first column:

Table 1

<i>Interpretations of the ‘Digital Divide’</i>	<i>GOAL</i>	<i>TOOL</i>
“Our first task is to close the digital gap that already exists between the developed world and ourselves. As we carry out this task, we cannot seek to tie our country to outdated technology as this would guarantee that we further widen this digital gap” (Mbeki 2001a)	Bridge the digital divide	Continuously embrace new ICTs
“We must bridge the gap between urban and rural communities, between blacks and whites and the digital literacy gap...efforts to bridge the divide [are] primarily about <i>people</i> and not primarily <i>technology</i> ” (Matsepe-Casaburri 2001; emphasis added)	Bridge historico-geographic and digital literacy divides	Social development

¹⁰ See chapter 2 for a detailed analysis of this term.

¹¹ This difference in perspectives is reminiscent of a social inclusion framework which “redirects the focus from providing *access to technology* to the effective integration of ICT into communities and institutions for *social development*” (Warschauer cited in Mutula 2005: 124; emphasis added).

<i>Interpretations of the ‘Digital Divide’</i>	<i>GOAL</i>	<i>TOOL</i>
“As government, while committing ourselves to an information revolution in our country, we are fully aware that bridging the digital divide is <i>not</i> the cure-all for social ills that afflict society, especially given our unique history in this country” (Zuma 2001; emphasis added).	Embracing the ‘information revolution’ as part of a larger social transformation	Bridge the digital divide, amongst other tools
“Another challenge identified is the bridging of the digital divide between Africa and the developed world through developing infrastructure and ensuring the transfer of technology.” (Mbeki 2002)	Bridge the digital divide between the global ‘north’ and the global ‘south’	Infrastructure development, technology transfer

On one level, these views may appear to be complimentary and implicit of the prescriptions for synchronised foundations to ICT policy. However, when considered in terms of ‘goals’ and ‘tools’ it is very clear that these are not always consistent and therefore have the potential to be counter-productive to each other. There does appear to be an element of consistency in Mbeki’s interpretations: in both his excerpts, he identifies a techno-centric strategy in achieving the ‘goal’ of bridging the digital divide. The second quote is clearly socio-centric. The ‘goal’ is to bridge geographic and digital literacy divides and the ‘tool’ for achieving this is social development. In the third quote, Zuma implies that the ‘goal’ is embracing the ‘information revolution’, within a holistic context, and that bridging the digital divide is one facet to realise this.

While there is some similarity in certain cases, the ‘goals’ and ‘tools’ are mostly inconsistent. The criticism will undoubtedly be levelled against this that the above quotes are taken out of context. Even so, they are excerpts from the *same* government administration, at a time when *all* were members of Cabinet (and therefore, seemingly in close contact), *between* national elections and from the *same* policy period of 2001/2002. As such, they should be reflective of consistency, be written in an informed manner and, indeed, subject to such interrogation. While ‘goals’ and ‘tools’ will always overlap in vertical linkages (such as Cabinet to Department to Agencies to Implementers), the appearance of ‘bridge the digital divide’ in Table 1 should not, at the very least, appear as both ‘goal’ and ‘tool’ at the *same* political level of Cabinet.¹² The argument even, that perhaps the above ‘goals’ and ‘tools’ are holistically assumed in all the respective cases by all the speakers, does not stand. If the assumptions are as simple as the members of Cabinet may think, then there is actually no obstacle to conceptualising them in such

¹² Interestingly, before the end of 1996, the Task Group on Government Communications which Mbeki had commissioned in his capacity as Deputy-President, to examine the role, benefit and management of e-government and e-governance in South Africa, produced its report. Of its 83 recommendations, one of the most interesting was the proposal that ICT-related policies should be conceived, managed and co-ordinated by a Cabinet Committee led by the Presidency (Communications 2000: 1996).

speeches.

Furthermore, this inconsistency of views towards the ‘digital divide’ emphasises a concern that the lack of common identification of what exactly this term refers to impacts on a problematic culmination in implemental policies. In the view of van Audenhove (2003: 3), “[b]y trying to construct a vision on the basis of fragmented political discourse and political statements, one risks creating a vision that is more comprehensive than the underlying reality”. Similarly, the above inconsistencies possibly account for the claim by Esselaar et al. (2006: 13) that “[t]he mechanism to achieve the objectives of the Department [of Communication] is not clear”.

This is exacerbated with, for example, the encouragement given to constantly-changing technologies to enter ICT markets (such as cellphones, computers, and internet). While the reasons for this could be argued as complimentary, the failure to stem from the *same* concern or to go about accomplishment in similar ways raises doubts over the potential of success. This is emphasised, most clearly, with the self-labelling of the Department of Communication’s (2007a) role of being at “the forefront of Government initiatives to bridge the digital divide and provid[e] universal access to Information and Communications Technologies (ICTs) for all South Africans”. Despite this claim, between 1995 and 2008, eight government departments or institutions were involved, whether independently of each other or otherwise, in ICT-related policy initiatives (van Audenhove 2003: 10).

But such a problem is not a new one in the DoC, as has already been shown to have been the case in the earlier years of its existence. The Department of Posts, Broadcasting and Telecommunications (which was dissolved into the present Department of Communication in 1996) outlined a very critical position towards the information society. Then-Minister, Jay Naidoo stated that,

[i]n the Global Information Society, there is a direct positive correlation between *access* to telecommunications and socioeconomic development. We realise that telecommunications is no longer the *consequence* of development; rather it is a necessary *precondition*. (Naidoo 1998, emphasis added)

In this quote, Naidoo displays an understanding of the idea that telecommunications, as a concept, is only the initial stage of broader developmental potential. On a deeper level, he identifies ‘access’ to telecommunications as a ‘precondition’ for ‘development’. There is, of course, nothing empirically wrong with such a statement because with telecommunications being viewed as a precondition in such a context, access to telecommunications, implicitly, *facilitates* ‘development’ and is not a *product* of development. The issue which *is* of concern is that such statements contribute to a problematic imbalance between, on the one hand, attention to the possibilities which

can be derived from access to telecommunications, and on the other hand, attention to the precondition for that access to telecommunications. It is the latter which is glanced over, whether intentionally or not. Surely the ultimate precondition for ‘development’ would be the infrastructure for the tools which can then be used to bring about that ‘development’?

Of course, one may argue that the above quote is, like those in Table 1, isolated and out of context. Again, even so, it does not account for the paralleled contradictions and shortcomings within the DoC regarding its emotional determinism and devolutionary controversies which have already been shown. In this instance, the idea that the importance of physical infrastructure is sometimes overlooked in political speeches does appear to have associations with ‘trickle-down’ effects to departmental agencies, policymakers and the public. It is arguably the effect of ignoring infrastructural necessities which has alarming consequences on the ground and can lead to the lack of sustainability of government-led ICT projects. In other words, the resources required for telecentres, for example, require electricity, cellphones require signal towers from which the topography of the land does not interfere with signals etc. The problem, however, is that policymakers in South Africa seem to, too often, begin the process at the point of ‘access’ and not the ‘precondition’ for that access.¹³ One could very well argue that the various infrastructures which this point to are so obvious that they are assumed. Reciprocally, if they are so obvious why then are they not mentioned as often as they could or should be? The overlooking of this ‘obviousness’ arguably accounts for the determinism which is the reality of many government-initiated ICT policies and programmes.

The repercussions of the interpretations of the ‘digital divide’ which have been described, have the potential to breed one of the central complexities in the ICT policy debate. The failure of government to ensure the consistency of policy and implementation in the specific targeted localities it identifies as technologically ‘poor’ points to two factors (Ministry in the Office of the President 1995; Mbeki 2001a). One, the national ambiguity of policy and, two, the lack of co-ordination between policymakers and the implementers of those policies.

These are clearly illustrated with the juxtaposition of Figures 1 and 2 below. Although the former may suggest that efforts are being invested in reducing the digital divide, the latter (which is a comprising component of statistics for Figure 1) shows that this is not the case. In other words, although the implementation of public internet access points is seemingly responsive to government

¹³ In support of such a claim, David Quail, spokesman on education for South Africa’s opposition Democratic Alliance Party said, “We’re not opposed to the concept of giving people computer skills. That’s great, we need to do that. The problem is the pragmatics of the situation....A lot of schools don’t have sufficient classrooms. There are not sufficiently trained teachers. Until those concerns are addressed, I don’t think you should try to give all schools computers” (Itano: 2001).

calls to reduce the digital divide throughout South Africa’s nine provinces, the reality is that these internet terminals are predominantly grouped in ‘digital villages’ which are mostly in major towns and cities (Maphatane 2006: 3). When viewed from this perspective, the great inequality of internet distribution is startlingly obvious with emphasis predominantly on Gauteng, South Africa’s financial heartland (Figure 2).

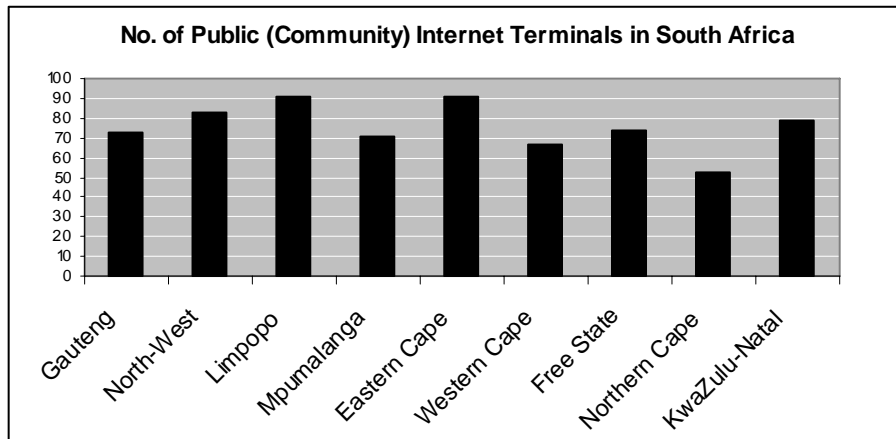


Figure 1

Source: Adapted from Maphatane (2006: 3)

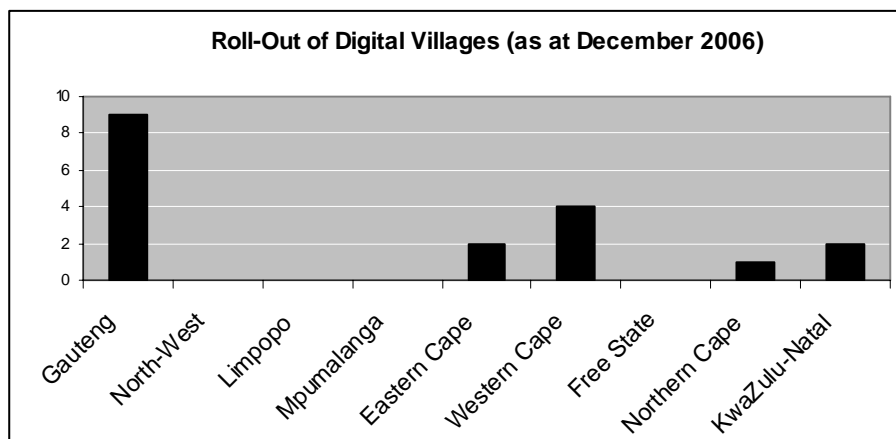


Figure 2

Source: Adapted from Maphatane (2006: 3)

It seems likely that the aim to implement an ‘infrastructural revolution’ in rural areas – South Africa’s “domestic Third World” – is based on an assumption: because this revolution has occurred so transitionally in urban areas – South Africa’s “first world” – the same level of ‘development’ will occur with the same level of ‘ease’ and certainty in rural areas (Mbeki 2001a). The assumption of the willingness to accept these technologies in rural areas is based on the

expectation of ICTs, such as cellphones, being endlessly advertised through the medium of other ICTs such as radio and television in these areas. Despite the reliance on this advertising, it largely overlooks the harsh reality of the different stages at which ‘urban’ and ‘rural’ operate with regard to ICTs. For example, while cities such as Durban, Cape Town and Johannesburg popularly use ICTs as tools of development for city governance, many rural areas, largely through the second round of USALs, are still attempting to achieve the goal of basic infrastructural construction necessary for a similar kind of development.

4. Implementation – subjects of development or members of material consumerism?

The awarding of licences by the National Party in 1993 to Vodacom (with ownership of 50% Telkom, 35% Vodafone UK and 15% South African Rembrandt Group) and MTN (30% M-Net, 30% UK Cable & Wireless, 30% NAFTEL, 10% Transtel) without consulting the ANC alliance sparked controversy outside of minority leadership. If the then-ruling party’s attempts to privatise Telkom were anything to go by then the introduction of the mobile telecommunication companies at a critical time in South Africa’s history was argued by some to be an attempted shift of capital to white businessmen before the political transition to black majority rule (Battersby 1990: 3). However, given the more threatening possibility of this with the already existing fixed-line operator, it was agreed by Mandela and de Klerk in September 1993 that, in exchange for the National Party *not* privatising Telkom immediately through an amendment Bill, the ANC alliance would not oppose the mobile telecommunication licences any longer (Business Day 1993: 1).

Fifteen years later, the South African economic arrangement which has allowed Vodacom and MTN (and, to a lesser degree, Cell C) to be ‘price makers’ is one in which they are largely influential. This plays a role in undermining much success of smaller license-holders in under-served regions which are forced to be ‘price takers’.¹⁴ By the end of March 2004, these three operators “had a total of 18.3 million subscribers representing a penetration level of more than 40%” (see Figure 3) (Maphatane 2006: 11). Clearly, from Figures 4 and 5, the mobile telecommunications consumer market which props the market-creation of these companies grew by more than 1032% during the overlap of the Mandela and Mbeki governments.¹⁵ The Economist (2007: 38) estimates that over the 2000-2005 period, South Africa’s cellphone subscribers had

¹⁴ In economic theory, the characteristics of a market dominated by a duopoly or oligopoly most often have the result of such participants being able to set prices above market efficient levels. While smaller participants can change their levels of production, they have little influence on market prices.

¹⁵ Data in the years after those contained in the graphics are not available from government. According to the Department of Communication, this is because “[m]easuring ICT’s as a driver and enabler of socio-economic development is a challenge. In the first instance, generic data on ICT’s is not kept. Instead service providers are collecting the data, and this makes the validity and reliability of such data questionable” (Maphatane 2006: 28). If anything, this response further adds to the lack of control and involvement of government in socio-economic development.

increased by 297.8% to a level of 71.6 subscribers per 100 inhabitants.

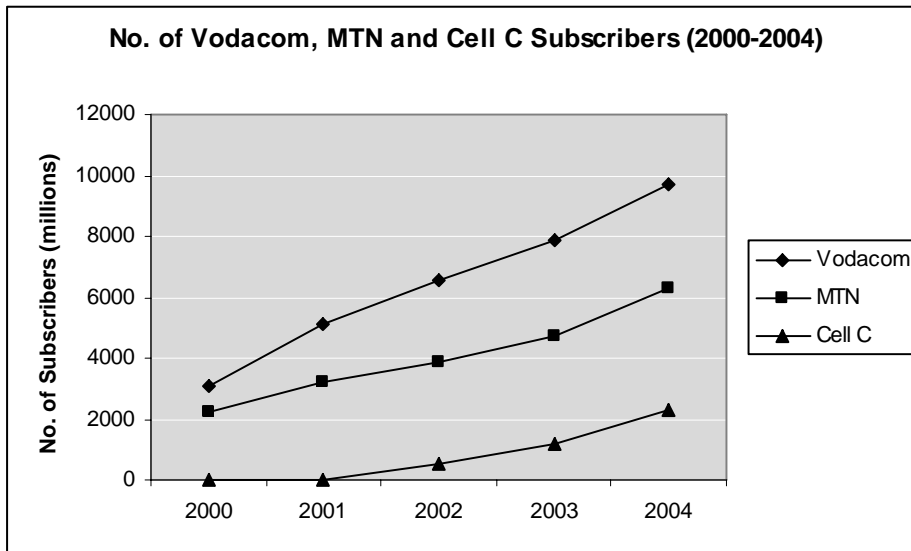


Figure 3

Source: Adapted from Maphatane (2006: 11)

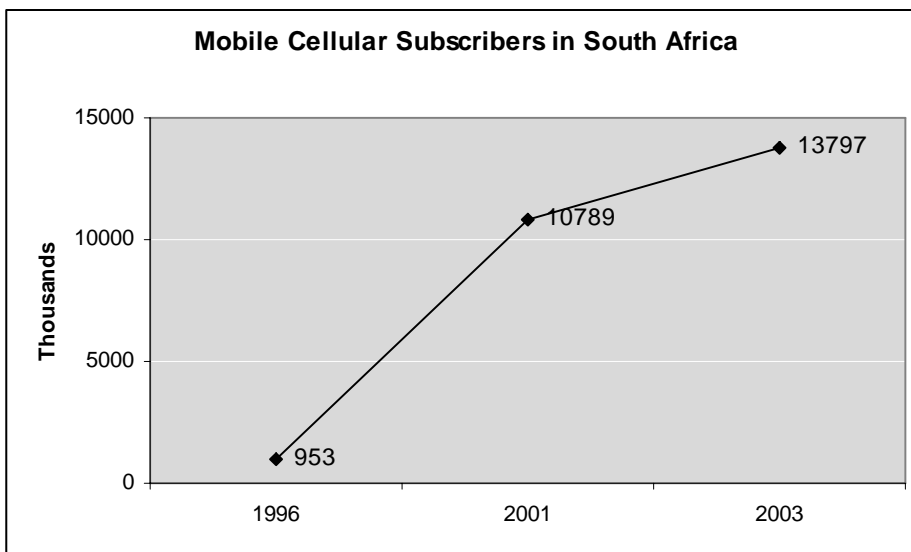


Figure 4

Source: Adapted from Maphatane (2006: 10)

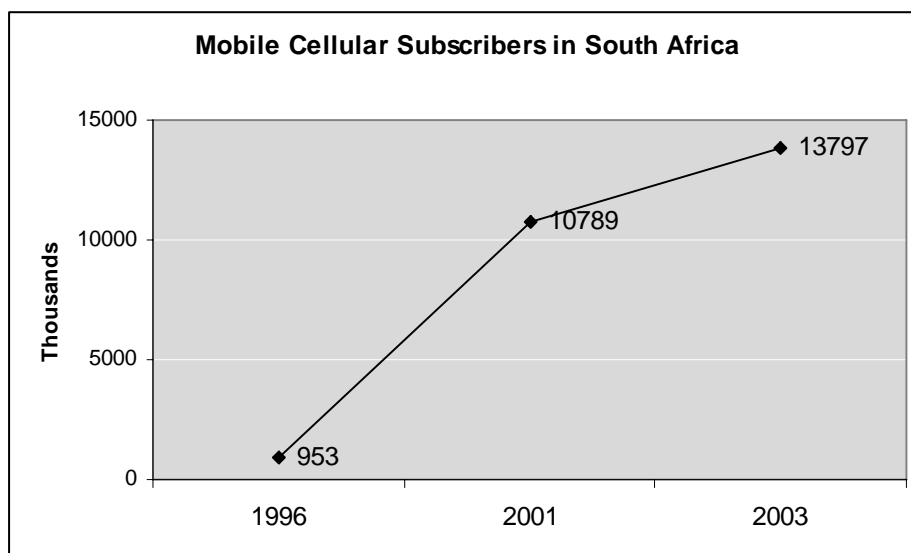


Figure 5

Source: Adapted from Maphatane (2006: 10)

Providing affordable ICT access to the South African public is seen by the Department of Communication as the “cornerstone” of its ICT policies (Maphatane 2006: 13). The investment in this direction is targeted at equating access to ICTs as fundamentally equivalent to basic healthcare and education on the level of basic human rights and as an “inherent attribute of citizenship” (Maphatane 2006: 13). However, with the phenomenal progression towards a technologically consumerist society, by its own admission, the Department of Communication acknowledges the problems associated with this. Due to the “recent proliferation of new technologies as a result of advances and the evolutionary nature of ICTs”, the composition of basic needs and “‘bare’ essential service[s]” suffer from a lack of consensus (Maphatane 2006: 13). This then raises the possibility that ICTs are not necessarily consumed for the ‘developmental’ purposes suggested by government. Instead, the possibilities of consumerism in a material culture (described in Chapter 1 as a ‘technological fetishism’) seem more likely. This questions the ability of government ICT policy, with its contradictions and inconsistencies, to ensure the use of technologies, such as cellphones, for its intended purposes. As a result, while this need not affect policy decisions in the associations of ICTs to human and social ‘development’, it has a direct impact on both the roll-out of ICTs by the private sector and the nature of acceptance of these technologies by the public.

One needn’t look beyond South Africa’s Electronic Telecommunications Act (2002) which provides mobile network operators with the luxury, in terms of their consumer markets, that “[t]here aren’t any no-go areas” (Knott-Craig 2007: 6). Similarly, there appears to be no incentive to question the possibilities of the technological devices which provide us with this information. Browsing through any cellphone magazine or brochure, one is bound to find pages advertising different ring tones, cellphone desktop images, downloadable jokes and many others. Because such

advertising is within the confines of legality, can it be suggested that the promotion of the above, by implication, is inclusive of government policy (albeit fragmented) to promote the existence of private network operators in South Africa? Does the possession of a cellphone from which such downloads are possible help create the status necessary to live the lives people have reason to value? In promoting the ability for “living a *better...life*”, what is the qualification for the level of betterment? (Vodaworld 2007a: 13, emphasis added). Following the lead from government, the Chief Executive Officer of the Vodacom Group notes,

The world is full of mountains of information that grow bigger every moment. Services that help our customers to dig into the mountain of information and sculpture the content to their specific needs will add an important new dimension to our business...[w]hatever it is, Vodacom wants to provide what consumers want...nothing is impossible. (Knott-Craig 2007: 6)

Along this line of thought, Vodacom, and its competitors are largely praised by government for the cellphone technologies and other services which they offer as ‘tools’ in the development of peoples’ individual ‘needs’ (whatever these may be) (Goodenow 1996: 199). Given that the political leaders of this country associate these ‘needs’ with ICTs, ‘trust’ is evidently given to the socio-economic environment promoted by globalisation to create the ‘goals’ of livelihoods which people want to live. This is despite the failure to, at a policy level, explicitly trace the association between ICTs and ‘essential services’ in terms of backward and forward linkages. This ‘trust’ is seen to be linked to the “valuable contribution” of the mobile telecommunications operators and its associated technological producers to provide the ‘tools’ for this achievement (Maphatane 2006: 22).

To illustrate one of the ways in which the commitment provided by government to the private sector has manifested, consider the Nokia E90 Communicator. This is one of South Africa’s newest and most recently introduced communicative devices (‘new’ when this chapter was written, but probably outdated by the end of this thesis!). The old English proverb ‘knowledge is power’ refers primarily to the world being the ‘oyster’ of the person with ‘knowledge’. It is advertised in this case with the same English proverb except that ‘knowledge’ is used in reference to *technological* empowerment and not social or intellectual empowerment (Nokia 2007: 5). Although still a ‘tool’ regardless of how it is packaged or marketed, emphasis seems to shift from any stated ‘goals’ of the DoC towards ‘fashion’. With this in mind, the flexibility of ‘living the life which one has reason to value’ is clearly subjected to the times and environments in which people live. This is largely irrespective of whether or not those times or environment are conducive to healthy living or indeed, to the satisfaction of ‘essential services’.

5. Conclusion

This chapter has explored the emergence and interpretation of ICTs at the level of government in the ‘new’ South Africa. Based on this, it has invested its attention, with the use of a simple framework of ‘goals’ and ‘tools’, in exposing the shortcomings and contradictions in government legislation and rhetoric targeted at implementation of policy. This has been extended to the role of mobile telecommunication operators and their inconsistency with government legislation and policy.

The conclusion of this analysis points, squarely, to the failure of the South African government to effectively act on its initial ‘goals’ for embracing the ‘information society’ in its aim to address the inequalities it inherited from apartheid. It had conceptualised a role for these technologies in the early 1990s, but, because of inconsistent and counter-intuitive ‘tools’ which have been employed, has largely failed in this regard. Evidence in support of this was first shown with the politics of disagreement originating in an unclear Telecommunications Act (1996), with respect to the USA and SATRA over control of the USF and universal roll-out. Building on this, attention was shifted more intensely to ‘goals and ‘tools’. The vision of ICT policy was based so strongly on dealing with apartheid that decisions made in all sectors of the economy tried to accomplish and redress more than was possible and more than these sectors were individually capable of.

This has been shown in three key forms: firstly, the roll-out target of the DoC and the USA was unrealistic from the outset. Therefore, the self-anticipated shortcomings could not culminate in anything more than implemental failure; secondly, competing actions, decisions and projects by various government departments exposed the uncoordinated ‘tools’ in striving for what was seemingly the same ‘goal’; thirdly, USALs were introduced by trying to deal simultaneously with BEE and universal access – however, the simultaneous intentions were contradicted by the chosen economic arrangement of market liberalism. Such logic, when conceptualised in conjunction with counter-productive political rhetoric, shows that the issue raised in this chapter have not merely been about harmless ‘semantics’. Rather, the chapter has exposed the relationship between contradictions and fragmentations of political rhetoric and the inconsistencies in legislation and policy formulations.

What this reveals is that such contradictions and fragmentations of political rhetoric, within the context of the globalising market arrangement, are implicitly continued to an implemental level. When asking the question, ‘does this interfere with the bureaucratic management of the South

African state and its policy objectives?', the answer is an unmistakable 'yes'. This is because the contradictions they breed promote deterministic perspectives towards a slogan: *'possess ICT and lives will improve'* – with little due attention to the importance of infrastructure necessary to support ICT possession.

There is no indication, from the involvement of national departments or from any government speeches or documents, that the uncoordinated views, which have been discussed, will change in the near future. If anything, these views appear to be playing a role in fuelling the interests of corporate marketing in the mobile telecommunication sector more than their own supposed 'goals'. As a result, one cannot help but be driven towards the idea that while the Department of Communication has identified a specific role as leader in the use of ICTs for 'development' there is clearly a 'missing link'. This has been identified as the lack of clarity in legislation, inadequate co-ordination of policy prescriptions, questionable devolutions of power in government, the failure by political players to all understand the complexities of ICT discourses, and of course, the questionable effects of implementation. This is largely because the lack of common ground at government level of what the 'digital divide' is or of how to address apartheid-created inequalities, impact on confusion in identifying the 'goals' which need to be achieved and the corresponding 'tools' which should be employed to meet those 'goals'.

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