

O3b transforming Africa's internet

Google's plans to provide telecommunications connectivity across the African continent are gaining momentum as O3b Networks plans to launch four satellites next month that will provide high-speed connectivity in emerging markets.



O3b, whose name represents the "other 3-billion" people in the world without Internet access is backed by Google.

It will launch a total of eight satellites into medium Earth orbits and aims to make the internet accessible and affordable to those people who cannot connect via mobile or landlines. The satellites would help speed up connections in densely populated areas and get rural populations online.

The first four satellites go into orbit next month followed by four more in September. The commercial service will be available from November. Google has been working on a number of initiatives to get more people online in Africa.

It says satellites will help connect those people that mobile network operators and fixed line telephone companies cannot reach.

The US\$1.3bn O3b satellite project, which includes four additional satellites, bring the total to 12, is aimed at boosting the economies of emerging markets.

Cheaper prices, greater speeds

O3b's regional vice-president for Africa and Latin America, Omar Trujillo, says the satellites will cover Africa, the Americas, the Middle East, Southeast Asia and the Pacific Islands. He says customers can look forward to cheaper bandwidth prices of up to 30% less and a quality service. About 50% of O3b satellite capacity has already been sold.

Trujillo says as the launch date comes closer demand from potential clients has spiked.

In Africa, O3b is targeting oil and gas companies, as well as the mining industries and mobile network operators, to provide them with satellite-based service. They will also assist them with the transition from the traditional GSM networks to 3G networks in rural areas.

"The advantage of our satellites is that they are positioned closer to the earth than many other satellites, addressing the issue of latency that companies experience when using other satellites. Our satellites capabilities are comparable to fibre," Trujillo says.

New satellites

This means that through these satellites, customers are able to provide cloud computing services, interactive applications including, relational databases and video conferencing, which were unable to be accessed via traditional satellites.

In recent years, Africa has been flooded with a number of new satellites but Trujillo says while it may seem there is an over-supply of capacity, the demand for satellite services is growing at a high rate because telecommunications companies still need to expand to remote areas.

According to a report by Hamilton Research, there are over 500m people who live more than 25km away from a fibre connection point in Africa. "The first eight satellites from O3b will provide bandwidth capacity of 15-20 Gigabits, which can cater for tens of millions of people," Trujillo says.

O3b's other key investors include HSBC, the Development Bank of Southern Africa and satellite provider SES.

In SA, O3b has partnered with Mavoni Technologies, a service provider focused on selling services in Limpopo, Mpumalanga and the Northern Cape. Trujillo says O3b is also in discussions with other service providers in SA.

Meanwhile, Intelsat, one of the biggest satellite providers, will launch its next generation of satellites in 2016. Intelsat has more than 20 satellites covering the African continent. The satellites provide broadcasting signals for pay-television channels, telecommunications and other related services.

Intelsat Africa head Grant Marais says the new satellite will, among other things, reduce the cost of ground equipment. "The satellite will complement our existing fleet of satellite assets," he says.

Source: Business Day via I-Net Bridge

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