

Grade 11 pupils lobby for free mobile access to Wikipedia

A group of grade 11 learners at Sinenjongo High School, Joe Slovo Park, Cape Town is lobbying for free cellphone access to Wikipedia in South Africa and have sent a letter to the four mobile network operators, Vodacom, MTN, Cell C and 8ta, urging them to give their customers free mobile access.

In a country such as South Africa with high cellphone penetration and mobile Internet use, this open-content initiative is a key stepping stone to improving education via equal access to information. According to latest stats from research house World Wide Worx, about 8 million South Africans access the Internet on their cellphones. Of these, 2.48 million have no access to computers at all. And while the rest of South Africa's 8.5 million Internet users (at the end of 2011) access the Web using computers, laptops and tablets, 90% of them - 5.42 million - also use their cellphones to go online.

When it comes to the Joe Slovo learners, it is estimated that 90% have cellphones and 70% access Facebook from their phones. What they don't have, said Pieter Streicher, MD of BulkSMS.com and volunteer computer studies teacher at the school, is access to computers outside of the school environment. "The 25 school computers are available to each learner for an hour a week," he said. "Their alternatives are to walk or take public transport to the nearest library, where the learners have to queue to use the few available computers with Internet connectivity, or they have to go to Internet cafes, an expensive option for learners from low-income households."

An ideal resource for the learners

Wikipedia, the online, open and collaborative encyclopaedia, is an ideal resource for the learners, said Streicher, as it covers all the topics they study at school and allows them to research topics in more detail and find explanations for new concepts. A number of studies have shown that Wikipedia is an informative knowledge resource, which matches a number of well-known offline encyclopaedias.

Mobile network operators in both Uganda and Kenya have made Wikipedia free to cellphone users as part of the Wikipedia Zero initiative. According to Wikipedia, most operators will zero-rate the full mobile version of Wikipedia (located at m.wikipedia.org) along with a lightweight, text-only version (at zero.wikipedia.org). The latter is ideal for older phones that don't have the processing power to handle the regular site.

Isla Haddow-Flood, project manager of WikiAfrica said: "Just this year, in India, high school learners used to club together to pay for data in order to access science and technology articles on Wikipedia. With the roll-out of Wikipedia Zero (free Wikipedia for cellphones) in India in late 2012, they now don't have to.

"With only 21% of South Africa's schools offering a library, our schoolchildren face the same problem. Orange, which currently offers Wikipedia for free on its networks in 18 African and Middle Eastern countries, looks upon Wikipedia Zero

as a differentiator in a highly competitive market. With around 95% of all users in Africa on prepaid, cellphone users are fickle and go for the operator with the best deal. Access to free information and education is a great service to offer to retain customer loyalty.

"South Africa's operators are continental players; they can play a significant role in ensuring a brighter, better connected future for our children by providing them with access to the knowledge that they so desperately need."

A surefire way to solve some of the enormous education challenges

Arthur Goldstuck, MD of World Wide Worx, said: "With international bandwidth coming to South Africa set to double in 2013, and our Internet population on track to reach 10 million users by the end of the year, the mobile Internet trend use is only going to escalate. Giving school kids free mobile access to Wikipedia should be a priority for South Africa. It's a surefire way to solve some of the enormous education challenges that we currently face."

Andrew Cardoza, founder and CTO of mobile CRM company Mobilitrax, and one of the business leaders driving the S@CC (schools at the centre of the community) project, which matches business people with school principals for mentoring and support, said: "The idea behind S@CC is that to grow a healthy community we need to start with our schools. Communities are failing because schools are failing. Free mobile access to Wikipedia for learners would be a significant step in the right direction so I fully support this initiative."

Paul Jacobson, web.tech.law's director and a web and digital media lawyer who specialises in digital and social media-related law, said: "South African learners in less-privileged parts of the country face numerous challenges. Their schools are underfunded and lack adequate resources to meet the children's educational needs with the result that they are not afforded the opportunities they deserve to achieve their dreams. Technology can help bridge the gaps and, perhaps, even help these learners overcome them entirely and all it takes are forward-thinking companies that have the means to facilitate this.

"The Wikipedia Zero campaign is a terrific campaign that aims to give learners around the world cheap access to Wikipedia's tremendous resources through collaborations with regional partners. By enabling learners to access Wikipedia from their mobile devices at no charge, network operators in South Africa will fundamentally change their children's lives by giving them access to an unprecedented wealth of knowledge we take for granted in our wealthier communities. This initiative has the potential to make a real difference in these learners' lives and change their destiny.

"The question for the network operators shouldn't be whether to do this, but how soon."

At time of writing, MTN had responded to the learners saying that the proposal was being considered at the "highest level". And 8ta had pointed out that its Google Free Zone promotion allows some free access to websites, including Wikipedia. Although this is a positive step in the right direction, ideally all operators need to come to the party with full zero-rated access to Wikipedia.

How can you help?

Like the Facebook page: www.facebook.com/FreeAccessToWikipedia

Tweet your support of the campaign using the hashtag: [#freeData4Wikipedia](https://twitter.com/#freeData4Wikipedia)