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The Digital Donga:

Universal Access and Service in South Africa

(1994 - 2014)

by

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Abstract

At the dawn of South Africa's democracy, the majority of its citizens, black, poor and disenfranchised, found themselves at the far side of a deep digital donga[1], cut off from telephony infrastructure, services and content.

At the same time a movement to reform the telecommunications sector was sweeping the globe, driven by technological change, business imperatives and shifting market structures. Its vehicles were a loose cluster of international telecommunications institutions, including the International Telecommunication Union, the World Bank and the WTO. It called for a fundamental overhaul of existing telecommunications regimes, prescribing in their stead: the privatisation of state-owned monopoly telephone incumbents, the introduction of competition into the telecommunications market, and the establishment of independent regulation of the ICT sector. And it developed and espoused a series of international 'best practice' interventions designed to ensure the universal availability and affordability of telecommunications services for those individuals and communities too poor or too remote to enjoy access to ICT infrastructure, services and content.

From 1994, the incoming ANC government embarked on a fundamental reform of the country's telecommunications sector, through a consultative process that led to the passage of legislation that was to shape the country's ICT sector going forward. In addition to creating an independent regulator, and to providing for 'managed liberalisation' of the sector, this included extensive provisions designed to ensure universal, affordable access to telecommunications for all South Africans, particularly the country's poor, black, rural majority.

Rollout and service obligations were imposed on licensees. Levies were collected from licensees, into a fund designed to finance the extension of ICT infrastructure and to support 'needy persons' in securing access to telecommunications services. A dedicated agency was created to manage the fund, and to advance and promote the cause of universal access and service. Some years later a series of licences were awarded to small-scale entrepreneurs in order to provide telecommunications services to under-serviced areas.

[1] South African term for a narrow, steep-sided, dry gully formed by water erosion.

This study documents the rise of international best practice for universal access and service, and examines how this influenced South Africa's adoption of the specific mix of interventions listed above.

The study then proceeds to examine the implementation track record in respect of each of the key interventions listed above, identifying and accounting for the relative degree of policy success and failure in each case.

The study is informed by regime theory to account for the rise of the precepts of international 'best practice' in respect of universal access and service. It further uses policy diffusion and transfer theory to examine how international practices were adopted and adapted by South African policy-makers and regulators. Finally, the literature on policy success and failure is used to examine and account for the implementation track record in respect of each of the key interventions. The outcomes are shown to be at best mixed, often precarious or conflicted, with multiple instances of outright failure.

Finally, conclusions are drawn regarding the applicability and value of the conceptual framework adopted. Regime theory, along with the concept of epistemic communities, and the theory of policy diffusion, are shown to offer a valuable structural framework for case study research such as this, albeit with some limitations. Despite the implementation of universal access and service interventions having largely failed, a long-term paradigm shift in the ICT landscape has resulted, suggesting that theoretical and practical questions of policy success and failure may need further examination.