

## Keeping your mental environment unpolluted

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"All you can eat broadband" is the way one South African ADSL provider ([allyoucaneat.co.za](http://allyoucaneat.co.za)) describes its package of 30 Gigabytes (which is the most bandwidth you're allowed to sell here) of bandwidth access. When we first got our ADSL line at home, it was hard to chomp our way through our allotted two Gigabytes, but lately we seem to be eating more, and it looks as though we'll be needing to upgrade to three soon. Thirty seems a very long way off what we'll ever need, but apparently, perhaps because the web is so full of things to download &ndash; music, video and software, some people need so much bandwidth that the only package that will suffice is an unlimited one. In the UK that is what you will get for £40 (about R470) a month plus a free ADSL router (which Telkom sells for R799.00). The lowest available speed in the UK is 2 megabytes per second. In comparison with the rest of the developing world, South Africa is starving for bandwidth, a commodity that is prohibitively expensive here, as well as being very slow (the fastest Telkom can offer is 1024 kilobytes per second).

There are some excellent on-line forums ([myadsl.co.za](http://myadsl.co.za), [hellkom.co.za](http://hellkom.co.za)) that point out the foibles of the South African telecommunications monopoly. I found a Telkom profit counter at [scorpioncity.com](http://scorpioncity.com) that puts Telkom's daily profit at R18,650,000. Not surprising since we have the highest national call charges in the world &ndash; R59.40/hour. According to the Hellkom website, Telkom CEO Siphon Nxasana's 2004 salary (R11.1 million) could keep 183 people employed for 1 year at R5,000 a month.

No doubt we'll eventually succeed in breaking the stranglehold that Telkom is exerting on our economy, but our propensity for rampant consumerism might mean that we'll be laying ourselves bare to a far more dangerous monopoly. Greed. The word aptly defines the first world. Utter obsession with filling our already bloated bellies, lining our pockets and having our egos stroked.

"You are the most important thing on earth, the heaviest object in the universe!" scream the ads, music videos and sitcoms that we rely on to feed our extreme individualism.

Bill McKibben of Adbusters magazine says of our self-absorption: "We are the first few generations to receive most of our sense of the world mediated rather than direct, to have it arrive through one screen or another instead of from contact with other human beings or with nature."

In 1997, Wired magazine predicted in an article on push media that the messages would soon be piped to us on our cellphones and PDAs, on windscreens and digital billboards. Push media hunts you down and finds you wherever you are: at school, on a solitary country walk, even at church, providing information about things to buy and entertainments to enjoy. It does not ask you if you want to interact, it forces itself on your mental environment, which in all likelihood has already been rendered passive by the stream of constant visual messages that pollute our physical environment. Soon, we won't even have to depend on screens. With wireless technology the message can be projected onto walls or onto the back of someone's T shirt.

So, what is all this information good for and why do we want it so badly? Well, most of it, as I've pointed out, is about encouraging us to become better consumers: forcing us to eat more, drink more and smoke more, run up bigger bills and get into greater debt, with the excuse that it will improve the economy. From this information you need to run: switch off your TV, your cellphone even your computer if that's what it takes. The other kind of information &ndash; the good kind &ndash; which might just help to alleviate poverty, bring about world peace and clean up the environment? Seek it out and sell it for all you're worth!

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