

The Skype's the limit

Contributed by Debbie Smit
Sunday, 08 January 2006
Last Updated Wednesday, 23 August 2006

In the world of IT and communication, everything seems possible, even, according to Cell C, world peace. For mere mortals like myself, all this potential seems too much. The adage "That which does not change dies", might hold true when evolution is a slow and natural process, but what if that change is happening too fast?

Most of us cannot afford the time or trouble to research and investigate the sometimes ridiculous changes that are happening in our world. We are likely to respond rather to good marketing of a concept or product and walk around jabbering about our new-found gospel in rather superficial terms.

Take Skype for instance. At first banned here, we are now engaged by its funky-sounding name and identity, and have promoted its success as a VoIP (Voice over Internet Protocol) over similar applications. To us, Skype means free phonecalls, a very marketable commodity in our world. By the time Skype was sold to eBay (yes, eBay!) in September last year, for the princely sum of \$2.6 billion, Skype had been downloaded more than 100 million times. The magic is very real. Download Skype and the whole world can talk for free. Although there might sometimes be a bit of delay or fizz on the network, the line quality is mostly pretty good. Along with the free peer-to-peer calls including free video calls (you can only make calls to people who have also downloaded Skype), you can, at a reasonable rate, subscribe to SkypeIn, which allows you to receive calls from the POTS (Plain Old Telephone Service) and cellphones, and SkypeOut, which makes it possible to dial POTS and cellphones.

Skype was founded in 2003 by Niklas Zennstrom and Janus Friis, the creators of the controversial Kazaa, a peer-to-peer file sharing application, which, since its launch in 2001, the same year that Napster was shut down, has faced ongoing allegations of infringement of copyright. Although the website states that the download is spyware-free, Kazaa is often accused of installing spyware or malware onto user's computers. The Kazaa website has a rather scary warning to Australian users: "The Kazaa Media Desktop is not permitted by persons in Australia. If you are in Australia, you must not download or use the Kazaa Media Desktop." Why Australia? Well, when Kazaa started running into trouble in the first world, it sold the Kazaa application to a number of offshore companies, one of which is headquartered in Australia and incorporated in Vanuatu. (Thanks to Survivor we all know where that is.)

Despite warnings of nasty viruses, last week alone there were still 821,951 downloads from the site. Why? Because we like free stuff.

So how free is Skype really?

As with Kazaa users, Skype users can become supernodes, which means that other users can use your computer to conduct searches and route data. This peer-to-peer mechanism forms the basis of Skype's service. Any Skype user may be assigned as a supernode; selection is random. Being a supernode can chew up bandwidth, which is why it is banned by some network providers, such as universities. Kazaa encourages its users to become supernodes, stating that by doing so one is helping others, but also explains how to make one's computer unavailable as a supernode. With Skype it is either difficult or impossible.

Still, I downloaded the latest version of Skype for my Mac just this morning. I like it. It's pretty and easy to use. For South Africans, with our notoriously expensive communication costs, Skype could save us a lot of money and with enough publicity could soon be competing strongly with our local telecoms.

The bottom line is that Skype's motives are not wholly philanthropic, as the innocent among us would believe, although, in a sense, it is helping us to help ourselves.

© Debbie Smit – The Sunday Independent