

ISPA celebrates 20 years of Internet industry activism on 6 June 2016

June 6th, 2016 marks twenty years since five Internet Industry representatives -- David Frankel, Mark Todes, Jon Oliver, Steve Corkin, and Ant Brooks -- met at the offices of The Internet Solution to form the Internet Service Providers' Association (ISPA). When the formation of ISPA was announced to the press a few days later, nine of South Africa's then fledgling ISPs were identified as the founder members: The Internet Solution (IS), UUNet Internet Africa, Global One, PIX, Global Internet Access(GIA), LeClub Internet Access (LIA), Interlink, Planet Pinnacle and GEM Internet Company.

Of these companies, only two exist today. The Internet Solution is now known as Internet Solutions, following a name change in the late 1990s, and is a division of Dimension Data. However, the networks of many of the other founding Internet Service Providers may still exist in some form. UUNet Internet Africa, for example, had numerous shareholder and name changes and eventually became MTN Business. PIX, LIA and GEM were all acquired by MWeb, part of which was in turn later acquired by Internet Solutions.

ISPA's initial reason for existence was to combat the threat then posed by Telkom's entry into the Internet services market. Independent ISPs accused Telkom of anticompetitive practices which threatened a vibrant and growing Internet industry. These accusations were eventually borne out by a 2013 settlement between Telkom and the Competition Authority, in which Telkom agreed to pay a R449m fine for abusing its dominance. Today, partly in response to this settlement, Telkom operates a separate wholesale division in Openserve and provides competitive services to many ISPs. ISPA has championed a fair Internet industry for two decades and many of the improvements in the sector can be directly linked to ISPA's efforts.

By 2006, ISPA's membership had grown to 113. In the ten years since then, it has continued to climb, and now stands at 176. It has become more challenging for companies to qualify for membership in recent years. In 2009, ISPA was recognised as an Industry Representative Body by the then Minister of Communications. This recognition gives ISPA's members special legal protections for third party traffic passing over their network. To qualify for this recognition, ISPA's members are required to comply with a strict Code of Conduct including a commitment to fair business practices.

In 2015, ISPA handled 164 complaints from consumers, and all allegations of

breaches of the Code are investigated, and if necessary reviewed by an independent adjudicator. A further 236 take-down notices were lodged with ISPA. The take-down notice process is a mechanism for illegal content to be reported to ISPs for expeditious attention. So far in 2016, the take-down notice process has been used to remove nearly fifty phishing sites from the Internet, which helps reduce potential harm to consumers.

Although there is a direct benefit to ISPA's members who are covered by the take-down notice process, all ISPs -- ISPA members or not -- have also benefitted from ISPA's regulatory activism and efforts to shape communications legislation in South Africa. ISPA has consistently lobbied for transparency towards consumers, open competition, respect for the privacy of Internet users, and a legislative framework that is consistent with the open standards and collaboration that underpins the global Internet.

ISPA has, through the operation of some of South Africa's most important Internet exchanges, also supported the development of local infrastructure. Internet exchanges encourage local traffic to remain local, and provide a more responsive experience to Internet users. Founded in December 1996, the Johannesburg Internet exchange (JINX) has remained operational for almost two decades with no unscheduled downtime. Now run under the auspices of INX-ZA, the Johannesburg exchange extends to three sites, and is accompanied by exchanges in Cape Town and Durban. The latter was the first South African city to receive a multisite Internet exchange point.

Every year for the last fifteen years, ISPA, together with many partner organisations in the Internet industry, has operated the iWeek conference. This free conference is open to the public, and brings together industry, civil society representatives, government representatives and industry experts to debate industry developments, governance of the global Internet and new technologies. iWeek XV takes place from 19-23 September 2016, and registrations are now open at <http://www.iweek.org.za/>.

ISPA is looking forward to celebrating its twenty-year anniversary and the fifteenth iWeek conference with the many Internet professionals who have helped build the South African Internet industry. We also hope to welcome to the event the entrepreneurs and Internet visionaries who will be building networks for the next twenty years.