

Why is our internet so slow?



By [Tim Wyatt-Gunning](#)

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When we fall asleep, I am told that we go through a few phases, one of which is curiously named after an aging American rock band.

I've never quite come to terms with the whole REM thing because just conceptualising any rapid movement going on beneath my eyelids when I'm trying to sleep freaks me out... All of which leads me to an admission of my concentration problems while listening to technical wizards painfully complicating our already over-complicated lives with their confident use of vocabulary which they must have made up.

It's my waking version of REM - the curtains are drawn but the lights are on as I scrabble 27 other possible more exciting meanings for their latest acronym.

Why can't this man (because, let's face it, they usually are, sorry chaps) explain this concept in a way in which I will understand? Einstein managed to give us a very truncated version of quite a tricky issue so WHY CAN'T YOU? Alan, our Web African tech guru, always takes a wonderfully deep breath as he digs deep into his vault of knowledge and reconfigures for idiots like me but I can see it exhausts him. For all the Alan's out there, these articles are not for you. I'm sorry.

For those of us who still believe that gigs are something our favourite musicians should be producing rather than our ISP, read on!

So why is our internet so slow?

So I'm planning a few articles to explain, in the simple way I understand, some of the commonly asked questions of Web Africa and probably several of our fellow ISP's.

First up let's ask why our internet is so slow in South Africa when, compared with most countries, we presume to have very fast internet.

The answer is because Justin Bieber is American (or at least he's trying to be).

Forget the techie-speak claptrap and imagine this.



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You live in Woodstock, Cape Town (like we Web Africans do) and have a hilarious German cousin who emails you two tickets to join her for Justin Bieber's "farewell, I'm giving up music", and rightly so, concert. You would have thrown them away, but your teenage daughter found them first. The problem is the concert is happening tomorrow night, and it's in New York. You need to get there sharp, sharp.

There are two major things which will determine whether you make it or not:

- The directness of the route that you take,
- The speed of the transport that you use en route.

And then, of course, on top of all that, whether you can afford the most direct route with the fastest transport.

Time to fly

You pack your bag, you set the alarm, you fetch your daughter (assuming she's at school and not in the house), you run down to Main Road listen to her humming "And I was like baby, baby, baby, oh", you wait 10 minutes for a taxi, taxi arrives, it's full, you wait another 10 minutes for the next one.

You get it, it goes the busiest route to ensure high passenger loads, finally gets on the N2 and dumps you and your daughter somewhere close-ish to the airport.

It's taken 1 hour to get there, and of three flights to New York that day you've already missed one and the next best bet is Turkish Airlines via Istanbul. You have to get it. If you are very lucky, you might make it to the concert but it's an awfully long way to go, it's expensive and it's so slow.

Meanwhile, your hilarious German cousin drove at 180kmh on an autobahn, got to the airport in 15 minutes and had the option of five different direct flights to New York that day.

She's arriving in New York just as your connecting flight takes off from Istanbul.

You don't find her that funny anymore.

Forget her. New Yorker Beliebers are still a full working day away from considering whether to walk or get the subway to the concert. They're not worrying about getting there, all they care about is how good his show is going to be.

And that, in a nutshell, is our internet life in South Africa.

a long, long journey

Almost every time we want to travel to see Justin Bieber, because he lives in America, we have further to go than most others, and to top it all we have a dodgy, complex and variable transport system to get there. And most of the delays are caused by traffic jams in getting us to the airport.

Translated into the world of internet access, unfortunately we, as South Africans, need to make the trip to another country, usually America or Europe, pretty much every time we Google something, stream something via YouTube or download on iTunes, torrent, Skype etc. Why? Because most of those videos which our believing daughters want to watch are stored on servers in those countries, and every time you watch them you have to make the full return trip!

Just occasionally, Justin Bieber plays his big hits on tour in SA and we don't have to travel so far (welcome to the world of "caching", but let's not complicate things now, I'm just worried that Alan is actually reading this).

When it's not rush-hour, often we get lucky, we hit the local roads when traffic is light and we find a direct international flight with a minimal wait. We're beginning to progress but we still can't guarantee success:

It's quicker

We can now get to the airport quicker, if we live in one of 53 streets in the country: Telkom has recently introduced the Gautrain of local internet access, with the launch of VDSL <http://www.webafrica.co.za/vdsl/home-capped/> - when it's more widely valuable and affordable, we will be able to browse with the best of them, although by that time they will be travelling by spacecraft.

From the airport, we can now get to any international destination tens of times quicker than we could a few years ago http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Cable_map18.svg

So what's our role in all of this, your ISP?

We try and make sure that from the time you leave your home or office until the time you get to your destination, on whatever mode of transport you can afford, we choose the quickest route for you and do whatever we can to make sure you're travelling in the class you paid for.

My own experience (and yes, Marius in Bloem, I do understand your Telkom line has been down for three weeks because someone nicked the copper cable) is that we generally do a pretty good job.

I can watch most movies I download within five minutes of starting to download them, I can stream YouTube without buffering 95% of the time and I can speak to my mum in the UK every Sunday evening at 7, crystal clear over Skype, not that I always wish it was.

Taxi!

First class in a taxi still, sadly, means you're in a taxi.

It's changing though. Fast.

My step-daughter went to the little chap's concert the other day, and I only had to drop her off three kms down the road, close to our superstar-magnet of a stadium. They're starting to come to us. Lady Gaga, Metallica, U2, RHCP, Michael McIntyre, Jimmy Carr - apparently Rihanna's next, so we can soon cache her too!

Our beautiful internet. Early days.

ABOUT TIM WYATT-GUNNING

Tim graduated from Cambridge in 1992, was a banker in London for 4 years, before getting involved in the European telecommunications industry in 1996 with LDI. In 1999, he moved to South Africa to set up Storm Telecom. For 9 years Tim co-ran Storm, driving it to revenues of over R250m, with over 6000 business customers across the country, until it was bought by Vox Telecom in January 2008 for R360m. Tim joined Webafrica as CEO in October 2011.

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