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Web costs inhibiting innovation

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DEREGULATING and promoting competition in South African telecommunications, especially with regard to Internet access, is important for the development of the country's information and communication technology (ICT) sector.

"Internet costs are certainly an inhibitory factor at the moment," says Tellumat CEO and the CSIR's new Meraka African Advanced Institute for Information and Communication Technology acting director **Llew Jones**.

"New technologies are becoming available, creating greater opportunities through convergence, such as the convergence between mobile and fixed-line telecommunications and Internet access," he argues.

"But telecommunication deregulation and telecommunication competi-

tion will be a key part of promoting and developing ICT in South Africa," he asserts.

"I would hesitate to predict how long the deregulation process will take, but it is now well on track," he states.

"The introduction of an Indian shareholder into the second network operator (SNO) will have a clear influence on changing the face of the South African telecommunications industry," he suggests.

(The SNO will be the fixed-line competitor to current de facto monopoly Telkom; India is famous for the development of its ICT industry, due to cheap Internet access between that country and developed states in North America and Europe.)

"Our vision with regard to the Meraka Institute is that we will play a very important role in the development of a



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vibrant South African ICT industry," he affirms.

"Clearly, we have a long way to go and it will take a couple of years to achieve, but our contribution will be important to the local ICT industry," he avers.

"I don't think that the government is trying to direct the local industry; what it is doing is directing its resources to areas it thinks need them, but that's not the same thing as trying to direct the industry," he assures.

"The South African private-sector ICT industry is doing far more innovation than it is given credit for," he highlights.

"A lot of it is being done by small and medium companies, which are below the radar screen, but more can be done," he adds.

"By the time we get telecommunications deregulation and competition we will need to have the people in place to take advantage of these deve-

lopments," he cautions.

"Our institute clearly has a major software focus in a couple of areas – for example, in the entire open-source software space," reports Jones.

"The government has various initiatives to promote the use of open-source software," he points out.

"Equally, we have other areas which feature the application and development of hardware to meet specific national needs," he states.

The Meraka AAICT was officially launched on May 17, World Telecommunications Day.

At the launch, Communications Minister Dr **Ivy Matsepe-Casaburi** stated that it was one of the government's steps to deal with the needs of both the 'first economy' and the 'second economy' (the developed and developing elements of the South African economy, respectively) with regard to ICT.

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