

HEARING VOICES?

The advent of Voice over Internet Protocol

(Second Part)

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The first part of this essay explained how Voice over Internet Protocol (VoIP) allows people to make telephone calls over the Internet, resulting in several advantages over traditional telephony.

More than just a cheaper means of carrying voice, VoIP provide a much-enhanced range of services. As an OECD paper of December 2001 puts it: *"The potential for IP-based voice as a cheaper alternative to traditional telephony is considered to be less important than the opportunity for the integration of voice in new IP-based applications that are considered drivers for broadband services"*.

Increasingly, residential consumers too recognize that VoIP services offer:

- More choices of voice operators and tariff packages
- Cheaper services including possibility of 'free' calls
- New services such as conferencing
- Future innovations
- A compelling reason to subscribe to broadband

With VoIP you need not even have your computer turned on if you make calls with a phone and adaptor or special VoIP phone, but your broadband Internet connection needs to be active. You can also use your computer while talking on the phone and you can take the adaptor with you when you travel so you can use your *VoIP*.

If you're considering replacing your traditional telephone service with VoIP, there are some possible drawbacks:

- Some Internet Voice services don't work during power outages and the service provider may not offer back-up power;
- It may be difficult for some Internet Voice services to seamlessly connect with the US 911* dispatch center or identify the location of Internet Voice 911 callers; and
- They may or may not offer white page listings.

The United States Federal Communications Commission (FCC) has worked to create an environment promoting competition and innovation to benefit consumers. On February 12, 2004, the FCC found that an entirely Internet-based VoIP service was an unregulated information service. On the same day, the FCC began to examine what its role should be in this new environment of increased consumer choice and what it can best do to meet its role of safeguarding the public interest.

The FCC has organized an FCC Internet Policy Working Group to identify, evaluate and address policy issues that arise as telecommunications services move to Internet-based platforms.

Aspects of these considerations may change with new developments in Internet technology. You should always check with the VoIP service provider to confirm the advantages and limitations of their service.

Until recently, the National Telecommunications Commission (NTC), the Philippine government's counterpart of the FCC, considered Internet Voice or VoIP as a telecommunication service. This meant that for any entity to engage in Internet Voice, a congressional franchise is needed to be secured first. Thus, for anybody to legally receive a VoIP call, it had to pass through the infrastructure of telecommunication companies like PLDT, Smart, Globe, Digitel or Bayantel. This ruling made all Internet voice calls from, into and within the Philippines illegal unless such calls are coursed through these major telecommunications players.

But technology has obviously overtaken existing regulations; this ruling severely limits the availability of this Internet voice service to users who have the infrastructure and technology to use it.

Early this year, the National Telecommunications Commission reclassified Internet Voice (VoIP) as a value added service (VAS) and thus internet service providers can offer this service without having to secure a congressional franchise. The service has become available to practically anyone with an internet connection. (Understandably, the telecommunications companies are extremely upset.)

The very term "Value Added Services", popularly known as "VAS" explains itself. Broadly, they are services that add value to the basic telecommunications service of voice telephony as specified in the European Union Green Paper, and also "as any facility and/or feature modifying the content and/or format of the information." Value can be added step by step and in this way hundreds of different new services can be developed and customization can be done.

Examples of VAS include Voice Services, Intelligent Networking Facilities [IN], Virtual Private Networks, Conference Calls, Abbreviated calling facilities, Automatic transfer, Voice Messaging Systems, Paging Systems, Mobile Telephony, Teleconferencing and Teletraining. There are many more and each passing day will add to the list.

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