2014 - The breakout year for Wi-Fi

Global public Wi-Fi hotspot numbers are set to grow from 1.3 million in 2011, to 5.8 million by 2015*, marking a 350% increase and it's easy to see why the numbers are growing exponentially.

By Michael Fletcher 16 Jan 2014

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In 2014, Thailand will see more than 400,000 free Wi-Fi hotspots nationwide, Greece plans to implement a Wi-Fi cloud an give everybody in the country free internet access - free Wi-Fi for all in 2014 - and of course, if you look at the local and African initiatives such as free Wi-Fi in Rwanda's Kigali and the City of Tshwane - not to mention Google's Project Link to bring faster connectivity to Africa - 2014 is set to be a watershed year for Wi-Fi.

Mobile data growth is a key factor here, where it is estimated that 1.9 billion Wi-Fi devices will hit the networks next year a global mobile data traffic is expected to reach 16.84 million terabytes by 2014.

Ultimately, consumers are looking for access and Wi-Fi has proven to be the solution that works. As a result, it is a growin industry and finally the promise of what Wi-Fi can provide is coming to the fore as consumers, enterprises and operators alike become more aware of the possibilities that this spectrum provides.

Looking into 2014 I believe the state of the Wi-Fi industry continues to look great, and here's what I think we're likely to se globally and in Africa:

Predictions for Wi-Fi overall in Africa

1. We are likely to see a lot more free Wi-Fi across the regions - and being used in different ways. Many are trying to it but they are going to find that it is not easy to get it right with inadequate equipment. Offering free Wi-Fi but not be able to connect can cause more damage than not offering it at all.

2. The industry needs to be cautious of throwing the words 'carrier-grade' Wi-Fi around - as true carrier-grade equipm results in a high consumer experience and not all supposed 'carrier-grades' are equal.

3. As a result we are likely to see more consolidation in this space - it makes sense to make Wi-Fi work.

4. Wi-Fi in shopping malls will become more common and in the hospitality sector we are likely to see the rise of the premium service where basic Wi-Fi will be free and if customers want additions they will pay extra for this.

5. Lastly, 2014 will hail the first true 3G offload to Wi-Fi in Africa - with many countries including the likes of South Afri and Kenya looking at this as a viable option. However, it wouldn't be surprising if a smaller carrier takes the lead her ahead of the big industry players.

Predictions for Wi-Fi in the Enterprise (WLAN)

1. Cloud solutions for Wi-Fi management and services will continue to provide 'out of reach' enterprise technology for t

SME.

2. Wi-Fi based location analytics will play a bigger role for organisations to increase business intelligence, define secu policy, and improve customer/user Wi-Fi experience.

3. Analytics will become more important, specifically to correlate the myriad data points from clients (locations, apps, device type, trending, etc.).

4. We'll see a continuation of adoption and integration of BYOD solutions and device management.

5. Hotspot 2.0 will get traction in the Enterprise as another means to provide Wi-Fi access as Passpoint-certified/ready smartphones make their way into the marketplace.

6. Social media (Facebook, Google+) as user log-in credentials for Wi-Fi will be pervasive amongst organisations providing guest access.

7. 802.11ac Access Point (AP) adoption will increase, mainly driven by more 802.11ac-enabled devices, and as vendo release lower cost 2x2 802.11ac APs.

Predictions for Wi-Fi for carriers/service providers

1. Large scale Hotspot 2.0 roaming consortiums will become a reality. They will allow automatic and secure connectivity Wi-Fi networks with tens of thousands of roaming partners and millions of APs. Most of these partners will consist of public venues that have extensive indoor Wi-Fi deployments.

2. Enterprises continue to look to service providers for a managed Wi-Fi service to address issues with network complexity, new services, and a skills shortage in many IT shops.

3. Location based services will become a profitable piece of the enterprise managed services opportunity.

4. Seamless Wi-Fi handoff will become a reality with technologies like 802.11r and 802.11k making their way into mobi devices and APs. No longer will smartphones try to cling to the AP that they associated with even as the user moves into another coverage area. This will allow Wi-Fi to emulate the seamless handoff experience that we all enjoy with cellular services.

5. Multi-system operators worldwide will continue to aggressively embrace Wi-Fi technology as a way to fend off over-builders, add to their service package, and grab the best locations. This will also set the stage for roaming relationshi with MNOs in the future.

6. Work continues on the convergence of Wi-Fi and LTE small cells, but small cells are unlikely to emerge in large numbers before 2015.

7. Carrier class Wi-Fi management systems start to catch up to carrier class Wi-Fi network infrastructure.

8. Work will continue on policy solutions that will help smartphones to select between Wi-Fi and cellular connectivity. Th is a complex issue, and one that will not be resolved for several more years.

9. 802.11ac continues to make inroads, with the really compelling step forward coming with multi-user MIMO in Wave 2 This will allow access points to talk with as many as four single stream smartphones at the same time.

No matter how much network capacity is put in place through a combination of cellular and Wi-Fi, it will never be enough. More spectrum and spectrum sharing ideas are required, along with ever greater network densification.

However, what is clear is that Wi-Fi certainly has its place and 2014 will be the year Wi-Fi takes its rightful position in the

industry.

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