

Reviewing 2012 tech trends

 By [Toby Shapshak](#)

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There is universal agreement that this is likely to be the year of the cloud, the mobile, Africa's emergence as a new economic region, the year of the tablet and the app economy too. Here are 12 tech trends for 2012.



1. Africa rising

- Africa is the fastest-growing telecoms market in the world, second in overall subscriber numbers only to Asia with 649-million connections.
- The GSM Association, an industry body, said Africa's subscribers would hit 735-million by the end of 2012. Subscribers have been growing at nearly 20% a year over the past five years, according to its Africa Mobile Observatory 2011 report.
- Africa will also see one fifth of its internet traffic being accessed over cellular networks by 2015, much higher than the global average of 3%, according to researchers Informa Telecoms & Media.
- Additionally global mobile data traffic is predicted to grow 10-fold between 2011 and 2016, mainly driven by video, say Ericsson, the largest maker of telecoms equipment. "Mobile broadband subscriptions grew by 60% in one year and are expected to grow from 900-million in 2011 to almost 5-billion in 2016," according to Ericsson's Traffic and Market Data report, released in November.

2. Cloudy with a chance of music

- You can bet on the cloud taking the lead in trends this year. It has become, as Steve Jobs, envisaged, the centre of our digital with devices on the periphery.
- Although internet-based storage and processing - the "cloud" - has been around for years, all the ingredients are finally in place, especially in broadband-starved South Africa. Fast wireless broadband, increasingly powerful devices (especially) smartphones and both getting cheaper.
- There are now offerings from all the big players, including Google, Amazon and Microsoft, with Apple's iCloud completing the line-up - as well as nimbler companies like Dropbox and Box.net.
- Meanwhile, Google, Amazon and Apple have taken the next step of let you store your music in the clouds, synchronizing the songs you want to your devices, or phone.
- Meanwhile, little Swedish Spotify launched in the US with its little social media partner (Facebook) and is the poster child for streaming music. Spotify is a paradigm shift in thinking about music, as much as ownership. We have owned music, now Spotify lets us rent it, sometimes for nothing and it works.
- Cloud-based storage is as significant a leap, even if we have been slowly emerging ourselves into it - much like inching into those cold Atlantic seas that all Vaalies do in Cape Town in December.

- South Africans will adopt this trend too, as soon as broadband access gets (even) cheaper, with the arrival of new undersea cables in the next 18 months. Who cares what device you have - you just want your email, and data and Twitter obviously.

3. Facebook hits a billion

- Facebook, the internet's intranet, will hit 1-billion users this year, having reached 800-million in 2011. Rumours of a Facebook phone pop up every year, but it's a moot topic as an estimated 300-million users access the social website from their phones anyway.

4. Goodbye PC, hello smartphone

- Smartphones, which outsold PCs for the first time last year, will get cheaper and more powerful. However, the battery life will not get any better. Sorry. So buy a booster pack, car charger or both.
- On the devices side, this will be Android's year, by sheer force of numbers. Google says daily activations of its smartphone operating system reached 700 000 in December.
- If you are not familiar with Android's habit of naming versions of its operating system after desserts, Ice Cream Sandwich is sure to make you. Android is like Windows for smartphones, given away free by Google to phone makers. Ice Cream already runs on the Samsung Galaxy Nexus.

5. Cashless + mobile wallets

- This year is expected to be the year near-field communication takes off. NFC is a cashless payment system already widely used in access cards for trains and undergrounds, including the Gautrain. Now it is in new smartphones and various pilots projects are running in South Africa.
- Mobile wallets will become more bountiful and cashless trials are running across South Africa.
- Mobile payments are set to surge, especially in Africa, where Kenya's M-PESA is the gold standard but hasn't translated its success into South Africa just yet.
- Watch MXit, the free messaging platform that was bought last year by World of Avatar and is being revamped and rewritten. Its ~~20-million~~ fast growing 50 million users and potential are still undervalued.

6. Talking to your phone, and other natural user interfaces

- Apple - with its single annual upgrade of a single model, which still captures two thirds of the smartphone market profit - continues to hold the high ground with the iPhone 4S. Its voice assistant Siri represents a bold step towards the much better suited voice input into a cellphone with its limited keyboard. Google Voice Search, being run by a South African, is also developing well.
- Expect to see other natural user interfaces too. This is a fancy term to describe using our voices or bodies as input devices, instead of keyboards or mice. Nintendo popularised it with their Wii remote; now Microsoft and Sony have brought out their own equivalents. Microsoft's Kinect holds significant promise for a range of things - not just gaming, but everything from smart houses to controlling computers - and we will see clever examples of this in 2012.

7. Nokia and Microsoft aim to bounce back

- Nokia, still the largest seller of cellphones and Microsoft, still unable to reproduce its desktop computer dominance in the mobile space, will be hoping their unexpected alliance bears fruit with the Lumia Windows Phone.
- Microsoft's Windows 8 is due out this year, integrating desktop and tablet operating systems into one and represents the biggest push from the world's biggest software maker into the new cloud-based world.

- Steve Ballmer, its boisterous but unloved CEO, has already had to deal with rumours late last year that he'd be replaced by his retired predecessor Bill Gates - after Microsoft's share price has hovered, mostly unchanged, around \$30 for the past decade, despite making buckets of money.

8. Whither BlackBerry?

- Research In Motion (RIM), whose BlackBerry phones are booming in emerging markets but plummeting in developed ones, face a black year. Last year revenue declined by 70% and share price by 76%, putting the maker of the original email cellphone in dire straits. Expect something significant in the next few months, not ruling out a buyout.

9. The two Ss

- Samsung, fresh from selling 300-million phones for the first time last year, will aim to take Nokia's pole position in the cellphone industry.
- Meanwhile, the other big S, Sony - after a miserable year in 2011 that included hacking, tsunami-related setbacks and more record losses - had a bright point with its 1-billion Euro (R10.9-billion) buyout of Ericsson from its 10-year Sony Ericsson cellphone venture. However, it needs a hit this year.

10. Ultrabooks

- Intel would like it to be the year of the ultrabook, a new fancy name for smaller, thinner laptops. The name is trademarked by the largest chipmaker and to qualify these ultraportable laptops must have five hours of battery life, a solid-state hard drive and weigh very little. Similar to the MacBook Air, but running Windows, these light devices are great for mobile workers or people who just want a lighter, but no less powerful, laptop.

11. Tablets

- Once again there is will be a rush of enthusiasm for tablets, as they look to be the replacement to other computer formats. Outside of the iPad, which holds two thirds of market share, the Android tablets failed to make any significant impact. This year, by sheer force of numbers Android tablets are expected to make a difference - especially because Google chairman Eric Schmidt said in late December that the search giant would make its own tablet "of the highest quality" in the next six months. Having bought Motorola, this will be interesting.
- The one Android tablet that appears to have broken from the masses is Amazon's Kindle Fire. Although the video streaming service does not work in South Africa, like Apple it is the only other tablet tied to a media store. It is a good device but stunted without the video. The Kindle reader itself though is a winner. I just got the new entry-level model and love it.

12. What's Apple up to?

- Apple will continue to flourish in the tablet segment it created and still dominates. In addition, yes, there is always "another one coming," as I am so often asked. Nothing but rumours currently, the iPad 3 is expected to be launched in March, following previous release schedules.
- No, I don't know what features it will have exactly, but every new model of every new device always has these: faster processor, better screen, and bigger camera. And more fans. And it's usually thinner. And lighter. And yes, you'll want one.
- While we're on mythical Apple products, the rumour mills have been churning about an entry into the TV market since the late Steve Jobs said "I've finally cracked it!" in his biography. He was talking about the television interface and everyone assumes it's the Siri voice-recognising assistant. Instead of using a remote control, it will

be an upgrade to the age-old habit of talking to your TV - except conceivably the TV will now respond when you say "show the latest episode of Dexter" or "find me a decent game of rugby".

Nevertheless, we do know, this is year of the cloud, of mobile, of Africa rising.

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