CORPORATE STRATEGIES AND MARKET DEVELOPMENTS IN SOUTH AFRICA'S TELECOMMUNICATIONS INDUSTRY

Communitas
ISSN 1023-0556
2006 11: 125 - 136

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ABSTRACT

This article focuses on various factors that are usually exploited by media institutions to impede competition. A case study of South Africa's Telkom and three cellular phone service providers is used to illustrate how such factors are often used to buttress monopoly in the market and impede other smaller competitors. This article posits that company size alone cannot yield higher profits and market gains without factors like concentration strategies and forms of integration; vertical, horizontal and diagonal expansion; the impact of regulation; policy stipulations; and technological innovation. Demand size also causes a ripple-effect to the increase in value of a product, thereby increasing the volume sold. Economies of scale and scope also need to be analysed concomitantly.

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BACKGROUND, PURPOSE AND RESEARCH METHOD

The debate concerning implications of company size on the market, and the degree to which it can be an aiding factor in impeding smaller market actors, provides an intricate situation in the telecommunications industry. This article focuses on the telecommunications sector, specifically Telkom as a national company in South Africa, but also on other key telecommunications players in the South African terrain. In this regard, Vodacom, MTN and Cell C, South Africa's three main cellular phone service providers, form part of the effort to understand the telecommunications environment and help us to glean on the corporate strategies employed by these companies to impede competition and entry of smaller companies into the market. Furthermore, this article argues that company size alone cannot yield higher profits and market gains without other factors like concentration strategies that can be interpreted as forms of integration; vertical, horizontal and diagonal expansion; the impact of regulation; policy stipulations; and technological innovation. The use and attainment of these corporate strategies will lead to the creation of barriers to entry for smaller market actors.

In the analysis of the effects of company size on profits and the fulfilment of investors' expectations on continuous and sustainable profit growth, Kolo and Vogt (2003: 251) warn that there is a growing assumption that company size does work in isolation from other factors. They further refer to this as "conventional wisdom" whose mask has been used to entrench the notion that the bigger the company size and its market share, the more successful it is (cf. Sanchez-Tabernero 1993:7; Hoskins, McFadyen and Finn 1997:22; Doyle 2002a:47). It is worth noting that size effects can be achieved through improved utilisation of resources and capabilities in tandem with regulation. Doyle (2002a:9) says effects add up to improved economies of scale and scope that act as barriers to entry for smaller firms into the market. A brief assessment of economies of scale shows that these economies would exist if a company increases its operating unit, which in turn reduces the costs of production or distribution. The reason for this development can be due to the fact that the size of an economically viable product generates a large output exceeding fixed costs. As will be shown in the case study of Telkom, due to its diversification drive, the company, which has been a monopoly for years, formed synergies with multinational companies: Thintana Consortium from Malaysia and SBC from America. This helped in the injection of capital meant for infrastructural development and service provision. The company is now viable and competing with cellular phone service providers, a positive development on the part of Telkom as it had lost most of its customer base to wireless service providers due to the customers' preference of cellular phones. This move from being a monopoly to a duopoly coupled with diversification, as will be shown in this article, has maintained Telkom's grip on the market.

Specialisation is another factor which has been proffered as the main reason for the attainment of economies of scale and a barrier to entry for smaller market actors. If a big company decides to concentrate on its core business, even in the face of competition it tends to yield profits. Kolo and Vogt (2003:251) add that the merger of American On-Line (AOL) and Time Warner, for example, which formed the largest company, created buzzwords whose results had nothing to show on the ground, whether the merger was positive or negative. They are quick to posit that the ambitious expectations of media and communications executives, as well as investors, have faded following the unsuccessful specialisation deal on profitability and economic performance. Linked to the above point is the suggestion that if a big company buys more inputs it may realise more returns. In telecommunications these inputs can be in the form of new technologies meant to enhance efficiency, improve company output and service delivery, such as Integrated Services Digital Network (ISDN), Digital Subscriber Line (DSL) and Voice over Internet Protocol (VoIP).

Hoskins, McFadyen and Finn (1997:22) also suggest that economies of scope occur when the total cost of producing different goods within one company is less than the sum of the costs of producing various goods in separate companies. It is also noted that mergers and not company size alone exacerbate the attainment of these economies; this also reduces effective competition and may be a deterrent for smaller market actors. In summary it implies the creation of a monopoly and that there is power in monopoly caused by the merger which can be exploited to increase profits. Hoskins, McFadyen and Finn (2004:101) add that economies of scope are often the motive for mergers or joint ventures involving companies making different products, in some cases at different vertical levels of the same industry. In the case study of Telkom it will be noted that the merger with some Internet Service Providers (ISPs) increased the returns for Telkom and the realisation of profits, as Telkom's services now expand to internet facilities such as domain name provision and e-mail solutions.

Kolo and Vogt (2003:252) say these economies of scope include tangible and intangible resources coupled with organisational capabilities. Tangible resources would mean the elimination of duplication of facilities between companies and the creation of a single shared facility. In telecommunications this can be seen in the case where Cell C as a small and new company was allowed to operate following an arrangement with Vodacom that required it to use Vodacom's base stations. Following this arrangement, Cell C uses Vodacom's base stations to this day. This move is characterised by a combination of the three forms of integration: vertical, horizontal and diagonal expansion as a way of diversifying. These corporate strategies are often based on synergies or mergers resulting from convergence, as in the case of Telkom, which now combines the use of satellite facilities and Voice over Internet Protocol (VoIP) in an effort to influence profit and economic growth in telecommunications.

This article is informed by a case study research method, rooted on a phenomenological underpinning with a qualitative paradigm. The research techniques that were used to amass the data include the desktop method, with the use of the internet for online journals, newspapers and research into various websites for Telkom, MTN and Vodacom. Other secondary sources of information used include books, journals and newspapers.

TELKOM AND ITS CORPORATE DRIVE

Telkom, South Africa's leading telecommunications company, provides an interesting case study of a national service provider whose drive has seen an incorporation of various corporate strategies to maintain its market grip and development. Due to its various market strategies, Telkom has earned South Africa the profile of being the leading country in telecommunications in Africa. This follows Telkom's corporate drive to seek to offset impending challenges from other players in the communications sector. These include cellular service providers, namely Vodacom, MTN and Cell C. South Africa's telecommunication sector possesses 40% of all telephone lines on the African continent. This is also characterised by marked growth levels in the telecommunications sector linked to the significant changes in the institutional environment governing the sector. The enforcement of the Communications Act of 1996 brought about rapid growth in the telecommunications sector, a move which indirectly implied that Telkom Ltd., a company which was once State-owned, now held a *de facto* monopoly on fixed telephone line services.

Furthermore, South Africa's two major governing authorities, the South African Telecommunications Regulation Agency (SATRA) and the Independent Broadcasting Authority (IBA), were merged in 2000 to form the Independent Communications Authority of South Africa (ICASA) (Ali 2003:125). ICASA's main task is to regulate communication structures and technologies at national level (Republic of South Africa Telecommunications Act 103 of 1996). The purpose of this merger was to clarify the situation in the telecommunications industry. This new regulatory board expressed the need for consistency in the evolution of the telecommunications sector through technology convergence and with opening up for other players (market liberalisation) thus embracing a free market approach where market forces play the determinant role. This paved the way for two major cellular phone operators (Vodacom and MTN) by 1997, a move which saw the number of subscribers rising to around 1,4 million in that same year. These two new entrants had the task to invest in community projects aimed at promoting widespread access to telecommunication services in South Africa. Vodacom was tasked to allocate 22 000 lines in underprivileged areas over a four year period, while MTN created 7, 500 access points countrywide.

Russell Southwood (2006)[1] says Vodacom's background shows its link with Vodafone, whose main area of concentration has always been in the north of Sub-Saharan Africa. He states that in 2005 Vodafone increased its stake in Vodacom from 35% to almost 50% in a deal worth US$2,4 billion. Telkom remained with almost half the shares. This means that Telkom to a certain extent controls Vodacom's activities in South Africa. Telkom's corporate strategy is to exploit all opportunities and also to benefit in some services offered by Vodacom.

A third cellular phone operator, made up of groups of local business traders and foreign partners who own 60% shares (specifically Oger Telecom South Africa, a subsidiary of the Saudi Arabian company, Oger), was also granted the licence to operate. This led to the establishment of Cell C. By 2001 an estimated number of subscribers to cellular telephony was pegged at 9 million.

It was agreed that Cell C will not open its own base stations but use Vodacom's already existing ones. This became a horizontal integration and was obviously advantageous to Vodacom, as it meant that in effect there were two cellular operators merged to compete with MTN.

Vodacom offered a facility called *receive a lot,* which charged R29 monthly, whereas MTN's was R30 for three months. This difference forced Vodacom to shift to three months. In response, MTN shifted further and changed its facility for life, hence the slogan *MTN for life*.[2] Following all these changes Vodacom had to change and offer their facility for life. MTN responded to this move by further diversifying and introducing the *call per second* facility. This implies that a conversation is no longer determined by the units one has, but by the time one will spend on the phone. In turn, Vodacom introduced the *for you* package which operates in a similar way to that of MTN![3]

This competition between the three service providers saw the creation of business ties with major stores, supermarkets and outlets being established for the distribution of Vodacom, MTN and Cell C products, such as sim-packs and fixed lines with gadgets for contract lines. Big stores such as Edgars, Jet, Game, Shoprite and some furniture shops offer distributing services. This has been followed by incentives offered by most furniture shops, whereby if one purchases furniture, they offer a particular brand of cellular phone, either with MTN, Vodacom or a Cell C sim-pack. The brand in most cases is Nokia following co-production and distribution deals entered between Nokia South Africa and these cellular phone service providers. This case provides an example of a vertical supply chain and expansion as a corporate strategy meant to boost sales and profits.

The telecommunications operators have further diversified to sponsoring sporting activities in a bid to expand their customer base. For example, Vodacom sponsors South Africa's two major football teams, Orlando Pirates and Kaizer Chiefs, and is a Premiership soccer league sponsor. MTN sponsors a junior talent picking league, and recently sponsored the Africa Cup of Nations tournament (AFCON 2006 staged in Egypt).

MTN has further expanded through its Global System for Mobile communications (GSM) networks to eight African countries, with an estimated 17 million subscribers by June 2005.[4] These networks involve wireless communications services that offer the following technologies: General Packet Radio Service (GPRS), Enhanced Data Rates for GSM Evolution (EDGE) and the Third generation GSM services (3GSM). This is another form of vertical integration aimed at improving market efficiency and service delivery. The most recent horizontal expansion as a corporate strategy by MTN follows its acquisition of Econet's shares in Botswana's Mascom wireless company, and a deal to operate in Congo-Brazzaville, sealed at the end of 2005. This entails the expansion of MTN's market share either by acquisition through internal growth or by acquisition of another firm with a similar product. Gillian Doyle (2002a:25) says such a move is motivated by the firm's desire to maximise profit in order to have greater market power and ensure efficiency gains. However, she warns that much as the achievement of efficiency gains might be seen as serving the public, the accumulation of market power and market dominance may lead to the company's policies that run contrary to the public interest.

The impact of cellular phones on the South African market signalled the demise of Telkom which had enjoyed a monopoly before the final merger of SATRA and IBA in 2000. This meant that Telkom had to diversify as a corporate strategy meant to regain its market share, development and control. Telkom therefore embraced technological convergence, which ranged between high value-added and high-yield sectors such as network development and service data integration systems, and low-yield sectors such as computer manufacturing and distributing outfits. This vertical integration, coupled with a seemingly diagonal expansion (as in the case of computer manufacturing and distribution) exploited the real opportunities in the information technology market characterised by the emergence of an economy increasingly based on the internet, the development of e-commerce, and technologies of media convergence. Telkom now offers a wide array of internet services ranging from Integrated Services Digital Network (ISDN), Digital Subscriber Line (DSL) to Voice over Internet Protocol (VoIP) and Telkom offers satellite services also known as Telkom Internet Powered by Satellite (TIPS). This facility is targeted at customers in remote areas and reduces the previous burden of setting up poles for telephone lines, a move which saw them losing potential customers to cellular service providers. TIPS uses Space Stream Express and Space Stream Office to enable a single satellite dish antenna for receiving and sending information.[5]

In November 2005, Telkom South Africa announced that it had embraced the services of a global Israeli company called Amdocs based in America by fully utilising its Integrated Customer Management strategy (ICM).[6] These services include the following: Amdocs billing, Amdocs CRM and Amdocs order management products. Telkom's vertical supply and horizontal integration strategy to employ these services is meant to increase its ability to track service issues that affect its network and subscribers. Telkom's installation of Amdocs' trouble-ticketing software aims to speed up the company's response to customer reports regarding service problems and reduce the amount of time customers spend on the phone with customer service representatives. This new software advances the integrated customer management (ICM) strategy and is aimed at placing the customer at the center of Telkom's key business processes. Telkom had to exploit these services in a bid to challenge the market, which was increasingly slipping away towards the other three cellular service providers: Vodacom, MTN and Cell C.

Furthermore, Telkom plays a big role in corporate social responsibility by sponsoring a wide range of social activities. Soccer tournaments form part of the main social responsibility programme. Examples include the annual Telkom Charity Cup and the recently launched Premier Soccer League (PSL) Telkom knock-out cup competition (for 2006/7 soccer season), which has been dubbed as "the richest tournament in the history of South African football"[7]. Other forms of corporate social responsibility include the recently packaged national brand meant to entrench the spirit of patriotism and nationhood in South Africa called *Proudly South African*. This brand is a product of various South African companies, notable among them the South African Broadcasting Corporation (SABC), South African Airways (SAA) and Eskom Holdings limited, a South African electricity services provider. The use of this brand by Telkom is meant to advertise and also sell its products, such as world-call cards and phone cards among others.

THE IMPACT OF REGULATION ON THE MARKET

The impact of regulation, whether positive or negative, in the South African case cannot be seen in isolation from other militating factors, especially political factors. Initially, the government's commitment to privatising state-owned utility monopolies was impeded by the fear that new-comers might solely focus on making profits and low-population areas would be left out because of costs of rolling out infrastructure. This fear was aggravated by the ruling African National Congress' (ANC) tripartite partners, the Congress of Trade Union of South Africa (COSATU) and the South African Communist Party (SACP) whose socialist perspective was that liberalisation was not a means to an end. Instead, it was seen as a way of increasing profit margins at the expense of the poor and previously disenfranchised communities. They further argued that Telkom already had a backlog which it was suppose to offset before any plans towards privatisation are to be considered.

In light of this view, Storsul's (Forthcoming:03) case study of telecommunication companies in Denmark, Norway and Ireland offers interesting comparative insights on problems likely to be experienced by market liberalising. She suggests that by liberalising, universal provision of services will be affected as the state monopoly would have faded, giving way to competition and with dominant players likely to use their market power to hinder smaller actors from entering the market. While this view would give a tinge of being pro-monopolies, it provides another insight into the political privileges a monopoly would enjoy in the case of Telkom in South Africa. In a monopoly, Telkom had an obligation to provide services nation-wide in exchange for their monopoly subsidies that transcended between profitable and non-profitable areas, thereby politicising nationwide access to telecommunications services (Storsul 2002:03).

This political pressure from the Tripartite Alliance members puts the government in a bind, as it had a political will to fulfil on the one hand and business interests for Telkom on the other. From the government's view, privatisation was the best for attracting foreign revenue, a move which was believed to be the conduit for the provision of services without Telkom incurring losses, thereby achieving economies of scale and scope. They had to settle for a compromise, that is, managed liberalisation - slowly privatising the State utility companies over several years. Hence the 30% sell of shares.

However, the Telkom monopoly had to be extended to give the company the market and an advantage to complete the roll-out of infrastructure, especially in the rural areas and other disadvantaged areas. This move was buttressed by the Telecommunications Act of 1996, which gave Telkom a revised monopoly over fixed telephone lines for five years, but went on to stipulate specific service delivery obligations for a five-year period. This meant an entrenched duopoly instead of monopoly considering that Telkom had earlier on sold 30% of its share.[8]

According to various analysts, the state of quandary the government found itself in had to be viewed from a two-pronged approach by assessing the willingness of those who are exerting pressure on both sides. In a bid to trade cautiously the government had set out to continue with its policy of managed liberalisation by introducing a second national operator, a move which was spurned by its overseas business partners (Malaysian and American) and other local captains of industry.

Two different views opposed to opening up the market for other market actors came from the already mentioned interested parties. The first being COSATU and SACP who were getting upset with the ANC-led government's zeal for privatising state companies, and so they threatened to withdraw their voter support in the next election. Then, on the other hand, the big business owners of the South African telecommunications sector threatened the government as they felt that more competition might give them less chances to make profit. Specifically M-Cell, the holding company of MTN, threatened to withdraw its proposed investment plan in the second national operator if another national operator was to be allowed. As stated above the government was in a state of quandary as it had a significant shareholding in M-Cell, therefore such a move would dent the state coffers. Furthermore, Thintana Consortium threatened to sell most of its Telkom shares into the market once Telkom was listed in the Johannesburg Stock Exchange (JSE). This move generally threatened Telkom's economic hold, as it would mean that if the overseas conglomerate dispensed of its shares into the market at the same time as the government, the value of Telkom shares would fall and the government would fail to realise about R18 billion from selling its share as initially planned.

In essence, this implied that partial privatisation has acted as a barrier to smaller market actors, thereby hindering competition which is likely to usher in an era of revised lower prices. Furthermore, the threat by an overseas conglomerate, Thintana Consortium, from a developed world had a negative impact on the possibility of having new entrants, a move meant to protect their share price and market grip. This also serves as a pointer that local companies are and will be less able to compete in the international market. The other factor brought forward by this move is that more competition would mean improved service provision, the price of local calls would be lowered and more people would be able to afford information and communication technologies (ICTs) such as internet, especially the VoIP facility which Telkom had initially chosen to restrict and effect a ban on. A shift from a monopoly to a duopoly poses a danger of taxing smaller companies with higher charges and banning efficient technologies like VoIP.[9]

It is worth suggesting that the final move to open up the market has been done, though in a government-managed style. Telkom has benefited in that the company has had to widen its scope by embracing new technologies of communication as can be gleaned from its now wide network of service provision to the extent of expanding to regional countries like Namibia and Angola. Telkom has also been given time and space to locate its niche in the market. Furthermore, through its core-sponsored brand, *Proudly South African*, Telkom has a slight stake in the South African Broadcasting Corporation (SABC) and is listed on the Johannesburg Stock Exchange (JSE).

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Following the argument presented in the introduction that company size alone cannot act as a barrier to entry for smaller market actors, the case study has shown that other factors such as corporate strategies pursued by a company, regulation and political factors play a role in impeding entry for other actors in the market (Picard 1996:30). These corporate configurations that companies tend to adopt in a bid to maintain their hold on the market include cross-media growth expansion, strategies of monomedia (Doyle 2002a:17) together with strategies of horizontal, diagonal and vertical expansion. The case study of South Africa's telecommunications industry shows how big actors, namely Telkom, Vodacom, MTN and to a lesser extent Cell C, employed these corporate strategies to maintain their market share, growth and development.

The arrangement between Vodacom and Cell C, that the latter uses Vodacom's base-stations, provides an example of horizontal expansion. This is a corporate strategy which most companies in the telecommunications sector in South Africa seem to have first explored. It has advantages, some of which include efficiency gains, creation of a greater market power, and ensuring an entrenched public interest and customer base. The major aim to be realised is the attainment of economies of scale. Cell C is expected to benefit from this arrangement by exploiting already existing infrastructure. This means a reduction in expenditure on the part of installation of base stations and other inputs that Vodacom was offering. Vodacom also benefited from this arrangement, as it meant that it had some share from the Cell C's returns.

The other advantage is that by competing with MTN, Vodacom was incurring losses as it had to shift most of its policies in order to stay afloat as MTN was fast becoming popular with its services. Cell C therefore was a window of compensation for the losses Vodacom incurred. In view of this development, Albarran and Dimmick (1996:43) proffer what in their study of media concentration and economies of multiformity is referred to as "across-industry" concentration. Across-industry concentration entails a situation where a company, in this case Vodacom, crosses to acquire shares and business influence in Cell C as an independent entity, but engages in a similar line of business. There are some advantages associated with this form of business development: the attainment of economies of multiformity being one. Economies of multiformity in this form of concentration result from the enhanced revenues and lowered costs due to the operation of companies in more than one communication industry. Albarran and Dimmick (1996:43) add that economies of multiformity constitute a form of corporate efficiency analogous to economies of scale. The difference could be that it is not only realised within a single industry but from corporate operations, that is, in two or more similar industries.

A recent development involving the acquisition of 20% shares by MTN and another substantial amount by Telkom in the MHN98, a media firm housing M-Net and SuperSport, provides an interesting case of diagonal expansion as a corporate strategy. The form of diversification into the film industry as in the case of MTN and Telkom's shares in M-Net further entrenches the two companies' hold on the market share. This also acts as a barrier to entry for smaller market actors, as Cell C is almost invisible having entered the market in 2001 and only managed to gain 10% of the market.

The corporate strategies employed by the three big telecommunications companies in South Africa (Telkom, Vodacom and MTN) impede the entry of other players except on the condition that the new entrant has to be swallowed. It can best be viewed and analysed following Herman and McChesney's (1997:71) description of Rupert Murdoch's corporate strategies as those of a media tycoon who wants to conquer the world and seemingly is about to achieve his goal. Telkom appears, despite the establishment of ICASA and re-regulation in the form of managed liberalisation, set to control the South African telecommunications market share and even expand across the African continent as can be seen by its acquisition of 50% shares in Vodacom. MTN also appears to have found the market niche in the African terrain through its activities in eight African countries.

The above discussion shows that many factors meant to develop a company double up as impediments to competition and entry of new players in the market. The exercise of market power by large media groups serves to impede competition; it therefore confers strategic advantages on a big company such as Telkom, which simultaneously acts as an obstacle to market efficiency and a barrier to entry for smaller market actors. Storsul (Forthcoming:03) warns that there is need for a "strategic model" which states that full competition alone, if not checked with some form of intervention (regulation), would also be a barrier to entry. Similarly, Doyle (2002b: 63) concludes that the greater "market power" which many firms command undoubtedly serves to enhance their profitability, but it also has the potential to harm consumer interests and threaten the efficient operation of the market.

Endnotes

[1] Russell Southwood's (2006) article, "*The new scramble for Africa",* provides an interesting insight into some corporate strategies employed by the big multinational companies. He also sees this move as blocking other local small market players from participating in the market as big companies create synergies that later influence governing authorities on regulations and policy moves. This article can be found in the following website:

http://mybroadband.co.za/nephp/?m=show&id=2618

[2] See MTN website: http://www.mtn.co.za

[3] See Vodacom website: http://www.vodacom.co.za

[4] Refer to MTN section 'who we are', on their website.

[5] For more information on services provided refer to Telkom's website:

http://www.telkom.co.za/athome/products/satellite/index.html

[6] For more information on these services visit the following website:

http://www.amdocs.com/hotnews.asp?news_id=533

[7] Information on Telkom's latest soccer knock-out cup competition can be accessed on: http://www.psl.co.za/Latest_News/story_12428.shtml

[8] For further consultation on this subject refer to Bridges.org, on the following website: http://www.bridges.org/case_studies/122

[9] See Bridges.org on the website stated above.

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