

Canadian-designed tablet creators hope Internet, information will change world

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MONTREAL It's an ambitious plan from two Canadian brothers to bring the Internet to billions of people around the world, from remote farming communities to bustling streetside markets.

The Indian-born, Canadian-raised entrepreneurs are behind the product dubbed the world's cheapest tablet computer, scheduled to be released in India within weeks.

They say the beauty of UbiSlate, an Android-based tablet, is that users will be able to obtain quality Internet access using existing low-speed cellphone networks.

Brothers Raja Singh Tuli and Suneet Singh Tuli, who own the company DataWind, plan to retail their tablet for about \$60 in India.

Tack on another \$2 a month for unlimited Internet access, and the plan is that people living in even the smallest, sleepiest areas will be connected, bridging India's considerable digital divide.

That means farmers being able to access the weather forecast; India's army of small-business owners having access to eBay and email; and, of course, it means things Canadians take for granted like information on schools and social networking.

"In those villages, there is no other way to get the Internet, and they've never had it before," Raja Singh Tuli said in an interview.

"You're talking about people who have never had a screen of this size to look at anything other than maybe a television."

The vision was hatched in Canada, Tuli explained, in the cluttered, box-filled 11th-floor DataWind offices in a downtown Montreal office tower. The company also has a Toronto office, and is headquartered in Britain.

The Tuli brothers came to Canada from India as youths in 1980 when their father, a civil engineer, moved them to Edmonton.



Cheapest tablet computer. Raja Singh Tuli, chief technology officer of DataWind, displays a UbiSlate at the company's office in Montreal. Tuli and his brother, both Indian-born and Canadian-raised entrepreneurs, are behind the product dubbed the world's cheapest tablet computer, scheduled to be released in India within weeks. Ryan Remiorz/The Canadian Press Source: The Canadian Press

They are both University of Toronto-educated engineers and have long been entrepreneurs, designing what was once recognized by the Guinness Book of World Records as the world's largest fax machine.

Their company is behind the Indian government-subsidized version of the UbiSlate, dubbed Aakash ('Sky' in Hindi), a \$35 Wi-Fi-only product intended for Indian university students.

Tuli said the problem in India is the same one that exists in emerging markets like Africa and Southeast Asia — a lack of infrastructure and an affordable product to allow for web access.

In the recent past, attempts to digitally link Indians has wagered heavily on widespread Wi-Fi access that simply doesn't exist. Only a tiny fraction of Indian families have Wi-Fi at home.

However, 800 million people in India, and five billion people around the world, from all walks of life, have cellphones. In India, they pay about \$5 a month for phone service. That cellular phone network is what DataWind technology, developed over several years in Montreal, keyed in on.

"We have a technology that reduces the amount of data required to go on the Internet by 30 times — that's the core of what we do," Tuli said.

"So we're able to run (the device) on those low-speed networks that are available everywhere and we can afford to buy that bandwidth and sell it at a very low cost."

The UbiSlate tablet has been in development over the past 18 months.

The company's development lab is in downtown Montreal, where about 40 engineers toil away on various products in a nondescript office with cubicles and tall piles of boxes and paperwork.

The product now includes a seven-inch touch screen, an Android 2.2 operating system, built-in cellular modem, two USB ports, and 256 megabytes of RAM.

The brothers say they've been able to keep the cost low because they're more "vertically integrated" than other companies. Parts from around the world are pieced together at a plant in Hyderabad, India.

There are, also, few frills.

Raja Singh Tuli laughs when he reads comparisons between UbiSlate and the iPad 2, which retails for \$499.

"It's not the PlayBook, it's not the iPad, it's not going to give you the same kind of performance," said Tuli, who uses an iPhone himself. "It doesn't run Angry Birds, so it doesn't do 3D graphics."

But Tuli says it does two basic things well: provide decent Internet access, as well as the ability to play HD video — which was necessary for Bollywood-obsessed India.

A small keyboard can be bought separately, which converts the tablet into a netbook computer.

The Indian model won't require electricity to charge it. A small solar panel that generates about two watts of power per day, under the Indian sun, is enough to fully charge the device.

But bridging the digital divide will require time.

According to a study by an Indian industry association, less than 10 per cent of Indians have Internet access. There are an estimated 112 million users, three-quarters of whom live in the biggest cities.

Gurprit Kindra, a marketing professor with the University of Ottawa's Telfer School of Management, says a

reasonably priced tablet for students and families is a blessing.

"I think a lot of the critics of this product are looking at it from the perspective of the West — it's slow, the touch screen is not all that slick — they're comparing it to the iPad," Kindra said in an interview from Ottawa.

"Of course it's not an iPad, but for hundreds of millions of people, it's a godsend — in emerging markets, poor countries and Africa."

Raja Singh Tuli says he's heard from critics who question what people will do with a tablet in far-flung villages that, in some instances, don't have electricity, running water or toilets.

DataWind isn't promising to fix those other problems.

But Tuli says arming the population with information is just as important.

"They may not have access to toilets — but as long they have access to information, imagine what it can do for them," Tuli said.

"It'll hopefully change the world. Then the toilets will come after that."

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