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---- WebWorld Quicklinks ----

Point of View   >> Archives

How people use the Internet today in Africa
by Jean-Michel Cornu

March 18, 2002 - Use the words "Internet" and "Africa" in the same sentence and you'll be soon be confronted by two opposing camps, both of them with well-entrenched ideas: For the first group, Internet is the solution for Africa. For the second, Africa has far more urgent matters to deal with than the Internet.

As is often the case, extreme positions conceal a subtler situation. The real question we should be asking is rather "how can the Internet help or hinder a development path for Africa that takes account of the desires of all the African peoples?"

To do that, the Internet needs to make a real impact in Africa. As Thabo Mbeki, Vice-President of South Africa, pointed out in 1995 at a meeting of the G-7 countries devoted to the information society, "there are more telephone lines in Manhattan, New York, than in sub-Saharan Africa." [1] Like the telephone, the Internet is virtually non-existent in Africa, and to connect just 1% of the population would require 60 billion dollars' worth of investments. [2]

But in Africa, even more than elsewhere, it is impossible to judge the impact of the telephone or the Internet simply by counting numbers of lines or connections. We need to look at things from a different perspective: that of how people use them. Rather than counting how many computers are connected to the Internet, let us instead look at who Africa's Internet users are, or more precisely, on whom the Internet has an impact, assuming that each machine is assigned to a single user.

Hindu Mint Ainina, editor of the French edition of Calame, an independent weekly magazine several times banned by the Mauritanian government, explains: "The figure of approximately 10,000 Internet users (in Mauritania) is not actually all that representative: it fails to take account of Internet centres, or what we call cybercafés." [3] You would however be forgiven for thinking that the Internet is the preserve of the rich, but Hindu Mint Ainina goes on: "As for the question of whether illiteracy is a barrier to Internet access, you soon realize that this problem is very quickly overtaken by events. There is always somebody in the cybercafés who can type messages for those who cannot write."

In large cities, the development of cybercafés has been dramatic. In Bamako, the capital of Mali, the number of cybercentres rose from 1 to 100 in one year. "There is a real fashion effect here," explains Oumar Ibrahima Touré of Bamako University. "And the arrival of the Internet makes it possible to compensate gradually for the things we lack. In education and research, for example, we don't have much in the way of computer equipment, but there is a real passion for the Net, which enables teachers to access many scientific resources which make up for the extreme poverty of Malian libraries". [4]

Of course, today you really only find cybercentres

and computers connected to the Internet in large cities, but here too, appearances are misleading, and the solutions people find in order to access the Internet are not all technical ones. The testimony of Yam Kupri, who opened several cybercafés in Ouagadougou and Bobo Dioulasso in Burkina Faso, is eloquent: "We are seeing the beginnings of Internet usage by populations who cannot actually access it. Development associations in villages where there are no telephones communicate via the Internet. Either they go up to the capital city, or they leave a message with a driver who goes into town and sends e-mails while he picks up the post." (5)

But the impact of the Internet is not limited to those people who take an interest in it, or even to those who have heard of it. Take the example of several projects launched within the framework of the RANET (6) initiative, which show how the Internet fits into a real chain of information, a jigsaw puzzle whose pieces already exist.

1. ACMAD (7) helps 53 African meteorological offices to co-operate amongst themselves. Exchanges over the Internet and meetings have recently enabled them to develop a meteorological model for Africa which makes long-term forecasting possible. The impact of this will be of the greatest importance, because the duration of the rainy season in Sahelian Africa strongly influences planting methods during the only possible planting period for most crops.

2. The Worldspace satellite AfriStar™ is located right over the continent, and broadcasts not only digital radio but also Internet data. The Worldspace (8) Foundation's African Learning Channel broadcasts programmes on health, agriculture and the environment, as well as climatic data from RANET. Content is currently provided by the American NOAA (9), but ACMAD is currently setting up a core of expertise in each sub-region to take part in the RANET project.

3. This data can be received by a small radio receiver fitted with a 12cm square moulded satellite antenna. The receiver can be connected to a computer on to which the information broadcast on a website can be downloaded. However, radio receivers like these cost money (just under $200), and priority is given to local radio stations, local radio being a particularly important media in Africa. A selection is made from the information received in digital form, generally in English, and re-broadcast in the local language (of which there are some 1,200 to 1,500 in Africa).

4. At the other end of the chain, the farmer receives vital information in his own language using a radio set powered by solar energy or … a hand crank (10), batteries often being difficult to get hold of.

The farmers concerned are however not counted in Internet statistics, even though the Internet contributes to an information chain which could save their lives.

Trying to understand the Internet by simply counting terminals and technical infrastructures leads to a dead end. This is particularly true in Africa. Only a dual approach, based both on the possibilities of technologies and actual ways of using the Internet, makes it possible to broaden the framework and to understand the impact of the Internet on the whole of the environment which supports the life of humankind.

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1. Suzanne Perry, Reuters, 28/2/1995 - http://www.di.unito.it/mail_archive/G7/0015.html
2. Michel Berne, in Institut National des Télécommunications, Observatoire des Stratégies et Technologies de l'Information et de la Communication,

Télécom, Electronique, Informatique, Médias, Internet, L'année 2000, p67, Evry 2001

3. FING feature article: Quelques usages de l'internet en Afrique - http://www.fing.org/index.php?num=1951,4
4. ibid.
5. ibid.
6. RANET : RAdio and interNET for The communication of Hydro-Meteorological and Climate-Related Information, http://www.ranetproject.net/; see also « L'Internet africain », interview with Jean-Michel Cornu, FING article dated 21/6/2000, http://www.fing.org/index.php?num=404,4
7. ACMAD, African Centre of Meteorological Applications for Development, http://www.acmad.ne/
8. Worldspace: http://www.worldspace.org/
9. NOAA, National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (US Department of Commerce), Climate Information Project (CIP): http://www.cip.ogp.noaa.gov/
10. Mohammed Boulaya, "RANET: Use of Climate and Environmental Information as a Resource for Development and Poverty Reduction in Africa", FAO website: http://www.fao.org/docrep/003/x6721e/x6721e24.htm

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