



Research

The World Internet Project



By Sim Kyazze

Here's a disturbing detail from the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP): only 1 in 118 Africans has access to the Internet. This ratio is actually skewed, partly because it averages out statistics in big countries (Egypt, South Africa) and the big cities (Johannesburg, Cairo, Cape Town, Lagos) with their poorer country cousins (Central African Republic, Mauritania).

The dismal stats have, however, not dampened the enthusiasm of Prof Jeffrey Cole of the UCLA Centre for Communication Policy. Cole presented findings from a World Internet Project on various aspects of the Internet at this year's Highway Africa conference. But Cole was actually more interested in speaking to potential partners from the continent.

"We absolutely must have African partners or we cannot call ourselves truly a world project," Cole said. The World Internet Project is pining for South Africa and Nigeria, because, as Cole says, "we really cannot say we've done Africa until we have done [them]," together with another four others, which might include Mali, Ghana, Mozambique and Zambia.

The original UCLA Internet Project in 1999 surveyed 2 000 households across the United States, compiling responses of Internet users and non-users. Each year, the researchers have tried to contact the same households to see how ICTs are affecting continued users, new users and those who have

refused to engage with ICTs.

The real value of the UCLA Internet Project is that it's the first trans-boundary study of Internet use and how this is influencing the social, political and economic behaviour of both users and non-users.

Now in its second year the primary goal for the project is to monitor the effects of the Internet, which as the report notes, "represents the most important technological development of our generation".

"Its effects may surpass those of television and could someday rival those of printing," the report notes. "Had research been conducted as television evolved in the late 1940s, the information would have provided policy-makers, the media, and ultimately historians, with valuable insights about how broadcasting has changed the world."

The project has since incorporated 19 countries from North America, Europe and Asia (especially IT-heavy Taiwan, Hong Kong and some big Chinese cities), and uses the same paradigm to test for the same phenomena in all these countries.

Cole is of the same mind as many people who have predicted mostly good things coming from Internet use in Africa, especially in research (reducing the costs of scholarship), health (combating HIV/AIDS), democracy and bringing African peoples closer together.

"It's a remarkable source of valuable information on AIDS," Cole said. "And in China, [the Internet] has also been remarkable. The government had two choices: to bar the Internet and hold back the country's economic development, or allow the Internet and occa-

sionally censor it. It chose the latter route and the results have been remarkable." This two-steps-forward-one-step-backward approach is still progress, says Cole.

In his study, Cole and his partners have looked at whether continued use of the Internet weans people off television (it does), whether it affects their understanding of governance (it does), whether it increases their cynicism about honesty and truth telling in the media, government and international affairs (it does) and a whole range of other issues.

For Africa, it's important to get in early on these effects of the Internet on democracy, for example: organising around common issues, reduction of costs of education materials, helping in research, empowering previously disadvantaged groups like women (in gender, sexual and reproductive rights), as well as democratising the media and empowering indigenous people to tell their own stories.

The last two issues might perhaps be the most significant influences of the paradigm shift in African media and how they are interacting with the Internet, wrote Jay Rosen of New York University recently.

"Do Net-surfing patients stop trusting their doctors? No, but they are less likely to be overawed. Something like this is happening in journalism, making users more assertive," Rosen said.

There is no doubt that Jeffrey Cole and the UCLA Centre for Communications Policy will soon have African partners in the World Internet Project.

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