



# Stimulating the local

*Trying to find open content projects in Africa may seem frustrating. There seems to be very little on the Internet written by Africans about Africa. But if you look at the number of Africans that are actually Internet users then things make a little more sense says **Heather Ford**.*

So what are the factors that inhibit Africans from creating their own content?

## 1. Low audience levels

If you consider that only 1.7% of Africans are online and that over half of this number resides in South Africa and Egypt, the number of websites developed by Africans is relatively high. Add to that the low literacy levels (about 50% of the population) and you begin to recognise that the Internet is not currently a medium that offers any significant local audiences in Africa.

Many local content developers complain about feelings of isolation when developing content for local audiences – the percentage of the population that are active users is so low that the feedback and interactivity potential that drives non-commercial content is not fully realised.

Of course, if you consider the opportunities presented by a relatively high demand for African content from a large Western audience, it seems to be a good idea for Africans to increase the levels of their content production to meet demand.

It also appears to be a good idea for Africans to open up their knowledge and opinions to a global audience because a closed approach wouldn't necessarily benefit emerging voices.

The problem is that Africans have yet to recognise their active participation or at least presence on the Internet as an opportunity.

## 2. Africans are afraid of 'theft'

The Internet is a medium where success is determined by the wealth of knowledge that the market perceives you hold in any particular sector. Google is successful because the market perceives it to have the best knowledge about search technology.

The theory is that if you know more than your competitors about a subject – or at least you tell people about how much more you know – you will become a market leader in your field.

The issue here is that you have to share your knowledge in order to grow your reputation, your brand, your perceived wealth.

And newcomers to the field will have to do that better than the others.

But Africans have little faith in sharing knowledge when the local discourse around intellectual property is focused on stories of how Africans' local knowledge has been "stolen" by outsiders.

Add to this the fact that much of the knowledge that is published on the Internet by Africans is actually consumed outside the continent, by a massive, unknown, unseen and largely unregulated community (try suing someone for copyright infringement in the United States), and you begin to realise how content development for international audiences has less appeal – especially for small companies and organisations.

Also, until we dissolve the idea – through popular debate and statistics – that open content is another way to extract value from developing countries and feed new wealth to the West, the ideals of open content will remain isolated to the academic community in Africa.

## 3. Legal complexities and costs

As Lawrence Lessig argues (*Free Culture*: 2004), culture and knowledge has never been cheaper, more accessible, but legal issues are so complex – even with licences like Creative Commons that try to make the legal process simpler and cheaper – that copyright can, and does, strangle the potential for more people to engage in sustainable publishing initiatives on the Internet.

There are many possible solutions to this particular set of problems. In order to assist local content developers to navigate the terrain of legal issues on the Internet, a legal advice body, with knowledge of alternative licences such as Creative Commons, could be set up as an accessible point of reference.

The problems with the current complexities of copyright law in the digital age cannot be solved until there is legislative reform, but one thing is certain: without access to the infrastructure and the support to understand how they can protect their intellectual wealth and develop value from it, Africa's forays into the knowledge economy will continue to be isolated to call centre development and low-end technological support.

## 4. Missing the branding boat

An interesting point about open content in Africa is that many African websites do, in fact, contain most of the elements of "open content" but without a licence or alignment with the open content movement that is characterised by many Western sites.

This scenario plays itself out in many arenas of African trade. Many African products, for example, are essentially "organic" simply because fertilizers and pesticides are too expensive for many farmers. But because Africans are unaware of the popular organic food movement, they are unable to take advantage of branding themselves in line with international trends.

In the same way, many organisations in Africa subscribe to open content principles, with wording on their websites that states what users can do with the material. Because they don't see it as strategic to align themselves with the legal licensing movements, Africa is seen as a "dark continent" when it comes to the uptake of Creative Commons and other open content licences.

If one had to look at a map of the adoption and uptake of Creative Commons licences in Africa (see a post from [www.lessig.org/blog](http://www.lessig.org/blog)), one would think that Africa is, indeed, the "dark continent". But if one had to analyse the percentage of sites that adopt open content principles in some way (most often without the use of a licence) then the picture is not so bleak.

This is not to say that licences are unimportant in Africa – they are, perhaps most important here – but it is critical to recognise that licences are not the only piece in a puzzle where the question is: How do we stimulate the development of local content in Africa?

## 5. A lack of local applications

Many bandwidth bytes are taken up discussing why Africans have come so late to the blogging table. These debates have been given new direction in relation to South Africa, as blogging recently started

to gain popular support. In my opinion, the reason for this sudden change is due to the fact that M&G Online recently released a free, visible platform for bloggers in South Africa. M&G Online's "Blogmark" (licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution 2.0 licence) is only a few months old and yet it receives over 1 500 unique users a day and has around 800 local bloggers on its pages. Local bloggers know that over 1 500 could read their blog if they make their mark (the home page lists latest entries rather than most popular) providing huge incentives for new authors and publishers.

The Blogmark case has displayed how the implementation of local software is critical to establishing a local community of content creators and users who can feed off and engage with one another.

## 6. Lack of infrastructure

Another reason why blogging is catching on in South Africa is because it has relatively low technological requirements – you only need a computer with an Internet connection if you want to blog.

But what about content like video, animation or photography that require relatively large capacity computers, expensive software and high bandwidth to produce and disseminate? Development of this type of content is currently isolated to expensive training centres, and a handful of advertising and private sector entertainment companies.

The opportunity for community access to new media content production is lost in telecentres that operate on thin client machines with limited hardware and facilities, as policy-makers attempt to scale up access to ICTs.

Equipment in African telecentres presumes a user who, typically, wants to learn how to type out a CV and look for jobs online. But the potential for local communities to be producing new media is huge – especially as the costs of producing video and animation decreases.

Countries like Brazil have recognised this potential. The Brazilian Department of Arts and Culture has recently started a project called "Points of culture" (Pontos de Cultura) aimed at creating cultural hotspots throughout the country where local cultural production exists. These hotspots will establish free-software studios in a thousand towns and villages throughout Brazil, enabling people to create culture using alternative intellectual property licenses and broadband connections to the Internet.

Africa can learn some great lessons from Brazil's approach to technology as a way for communities to actively create and share local culture. Instead of sending billions out of the continent every year as consumers of a Coca Cola culture, Africa could be using some of that money to build a local content industry independent from the United States.

The development of such an industry is dependent on the openness of such content – in terms of a) initially competing with imported culture, b) ensuring the rapid spread of local cultural products c) and enabling others to build on, improve and collaborate in the development of local culture. ■

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