COMMENTARY
WRONG OF THE DIVIDE

Ethiopia's technology challenges often start with electricity, or its lack.

If "belg", moderate little rains from February to May, fail as they did last year, government rationing of power is likely until the heavy winter rains arrive between July and September. Without this rain, public officials say, the country's hydroelectric dams controlling the main source of the Nile cannot power the capital, let alone the country's rural areas.

Others complain, however, that blackouts are induced, with the government selling rationed power to its neighbour, Sudan.

A blackout is a blackout, whatever the reason. Sometimes on schedule, more often not, lights go out in patches of Addis Ababa, with desktop computers stopping immediately and video cameras, audio recorders and mobile phones stopping eventually. Last year, such power shedding lasted roughly 12 hours, usually between 7am to 7pm, once a week. Now, blackouts routinely stretch 24 hours, sometimes two or three times a week. Institutions such as hospitals – and sometimes universities – are exempt.

In 2007, when the government opened 13 regional universities and announced more to come, Addis Ababa University quickly became the premier trainer of faculty and successfully negotiated to keep electricity flowing on campus. This year's policy for AAU, also site of the country's only graduate journalism programme, is not yet clear.

Even under the best conditions, Ethiopia is tough for tasks such as convergence that rely heavily on technology. Consider the country's small base: approximately 1.9-million mobile phone subscribers and 30 000 internet subscribers, plus those who frequent internet cafes in urban areas, in an estimated population of 80 million. They are often frustrated by poor or non-existent service. Yet the Ethiopian Telecommunications Corporation (www.ethionet.et/), a state-run monopoly, appears immune to complaints.

Of course, some online trouble is unpredictable and uncontrollable. In February, for example, internet and telephone service was drastically cut throughout Europe, Asia, the Middle East and sub-Saharan Africa when three fibre-optic cables were simultaneously severed in the Mediterranean. While French engineers worked to restore connectivity, many internet users noted only a blip for a day or two, but Ethiopians had no alternative routing and lost online access for a week.

How did, and do, media cope here? By and large, government media – ETV, the nation's one television station, and Radio Ethiopia, its largest radio station – are powered by generators so that production, if not reception, is not greatly impaired. Three privately licensed FM stations and most newspapers may not be so fortunate. Any teaching of journalism, and specifically media convergence, has to address such physical challenges.

Even with electricity flowing, however, the daily effort of education, and any real attempt at media convergence, is difficult. Limited bandwidth and high demand prevents all but glimpses of websites, let alone intelligent searching. Documents usually have to be downloaded painstakingly for hours in the middle of the night.

Censorship compounds problems. The Ethiopian government, for example, cut text messaging during the country's 2005 post-election violence and did not allow service to restart until millennium celebrations in 2007. As laid out in last year's US State Department Human Rights Report:

The government restricted access to the internet and blocked opposition websites, including the sites of the OLF, ONLF, Ginbot 7 and several news blogs and sites run by opposition diaspora groups, such as Ethiopian Review, CyberEthiopia.com, Quatero Amharic Magazine, Tensae Ethiopia, and the Ethiopian Media Forum.

FROM THE SIDE DIGITAL

ERRATIC ELECTRICITY SUPPLY, LIMITED BANDWIDTH, HIGH DEMAND AND CENSORSHIP MAKE THE DAILY EFFORT OF EDUCATION AND ANY REAL ATTEMPT AT MEDIA CONVERGENCE DIFFICULT, WRITES ALICE KLEMENT

THE 'IMPRISONED' INTERNET OF ADDIS ABABA UNIVERSITY

By Sileshi Yilma

Student A, who requested anonymity because the issue of access to the internet is sensitive, recently joined the Graduate School of Development Studies at Addis Ababa University. He often prays that his teachers will not give him an assignment that requires online research.

The reason is not because of the shortage of computers at the university, or because Student A, who recently joined the Graduate School of Development Studies, hates visiting computer laboratories; rather it is due to the reported blockage of websites related to his field of study. "The field I am studying is related to variety of disciplines such as politics. However, it is very difficult to conduct online research on sensitive local political issues." The student blames the government for censoring some websites.

Student B, who also requested anonymity, is a post-graduate student at AAU's Institute of Language Studies. He echoes Student A's concern: "Our teachers always give us assignments which require thorough online research. For instance, if the issue is about literary criticism of the Ethiopian government, it is difficult to have an access to such topic on the internet."

The Open Net Initiative (ONI), an internet monitoring and surveillance project, recently identified Ethiopia as one of two countries in sub-Saharan Africa to carry out widespread internet blocking. The other is Zimbabwe, according to *Fortune*, a local weekly English newspaper. In a 2006 report on the region, ONI condemned Ethiopia's internet censorship: "The government blocks websites of opposition parties, sites representing ethnic minorities, sites for independent news organisations, and sites promoting human rights in Ethiopia."

The Ethiopian Telecommunications Corporation (ETC), however, does not acknowledge any censorship. Such silence does not satisfy some students. Says Student B: "ETC monopolises the telecom industry in the country. Since it is the only operator of telecom pipes in and out of the country, ETC has the capacity to block access to websites linked to opposition blogs."

Andrew Heavens, journalist and blogger based in Khartoum, Sudan, doubts Student B's explanations. On his blog www.*meskelsquare.com*, Heavens (2007) writes: "It is never certain that a site has been blocked because – given the state of ETC's overloaded circuits – who knows, it might still be a technical glitch."

AAU's Information and Communication Technology Development office says it is responsible for computer and internet-related services at the university. The office, with 36 employees, administers and provides information technology support for the five AAU campuses.

Sources at the ICTD office, who also requested anonymity because they are not authorised to discuss such issues, say the office does filter some websites. However, they say the office does not have the authority or personnel to block political websites. "We have special software that is an open source for academic institutions. The software filters dating and pornographic sites we think are not appropriate for our students," says one ICTD source.

According to this person, if AAU students encounter censorship of crucial websites for their online research, the ICTD office swiftly entertains such complaints and is collaborative in granting access.

Many AAU students say conditions prior to the nation's controversial 2005 general election were relatively better for browsing. However, as Student A notes, after the election ended in bloodshed, internet censorship triumphed all over the country. "Some sites started to appear either as 'the page cannot be displayed' or 'this site is blocked,'' recalls Student A.

According to ICTD sources, prior to the 2005 election, AAU students could browse websites critical of the Ethiopian government. Examples included organisations such as the Committee to Protect Journalists, Human Rights Watch, and Amnesty International. These organisations now say their sites are blocked or difficult to access inside Ethiopia.

At AAU, even students conducting online research about internet censorship face challenges. The irony, as Student B says, is that it is difficult to access websites that provide information on internet censorship.

Despite his prayer, Student A's teachers continue to give him assignments that require online research. This student and others do not know for sure when they are going to be freed from such censorship. As Student A observes: "Only God knows."

References

Heavens, A. 2007. *You block Blogspot, I block Boing Boing.*

Open Net Initiative (n.d.) *Sub-Saharan Africa*. http://opennet.net/research/regions/ssafrica.

ONI's specific report on Ethiopia is at http://opennet.net/research/profiles/ethiopia

On August 29, a statement by the New York-based NGO Center Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ) stated that reliable sources reported that its servers were inaccessible to users, and that emails were not coming through to CPJ. These reports emerged at the same time CPJ was investigating the detention of The *Reporter* editor Amare Aregawi. The *Reporter* also alleged blocking of its website for four days during this time. CPJ's website was also inaccessible at other times during the year.

AAU's graduate programme, funded from the start by Norwegian aid, may have experienced its first real challenge to theoretical convergence with its fifth batch of students selected for the academic year 2007-2008. In August, after the governments of Norway and Ethiopia squabbled, Ethiopia asked some Norwegian diplomats to leave. They took with them almost the programme's entire faculty and funding. So the journalism programme's only hope for immediate survival was to converge 33 broadcast and print students into one class on reporting and writing for print, broadcast and online.

Oddly enough, under circumstances perhaps unacceptable in more rigid academic circles in Europe or the United States, students came to understand and practise the broad range of skills necessary for successful media convergence.

The benefits became obvious during internships, when broadcast students traditionally assigned to ETV crossed media to print at the daily newspaper *Addis Neger*, for example.

Africans understand the battles they face in practising and teaching even the least technologically complex journalism. Earlier this year, Emevwo Biakolo, dean of the School of Media and Communication at Pan-African University in Lagos, Nigeria, announced a conference on Journalism and New Media Technologies in Africa: New Technologies, New Practices and the Renewal of Media Training in Africa.

While the professor observed what he says is "a paradigm shift in the global practice of journalism," he suggested that "in Africa, the changes are less noticed".

Yet Biakolo identified the key theme of the August conference as the transforming role of ICT (Information and Communication Technologies at www.eictda.gov.et/) in journalism practice: problems of funding, capacity, and inadequate infrastructure.

And, he insisted: "No less germane are questions of policy as governments struggle to come to terms with the aspirations of industry in virtually all African countries. From the point of view of the academy, inadequate training facilities conspire with inadequately prepared faculty and out-of-date curriculum to keep the continent playing catch-up."

This originally appeared in the Convergence Newsletter of the Center for Mass Communications Research at the University of South Carolina, College of Mass Communications and Information Studies in June 2009.