Alan Nambiar/Africa Media Online

The rise of social media
IN AFRICA

Mwangi Nahashom works at a small pharmacy in the village of Olekasasi, close to Nairobi National Park in Kenya. Newspapers do not get delivered there, though it's only an hour or two from the capital city. Even so, the morning I met him, he had already read the day's news. He gets it on his mobile phone.

By Indra de Lanerolle

His routine is to look at the *Daily Nation* Facebook page and from there click through to their website if anything interests him. He also uses social network services to keep up with his friends. For the first time in his life, he can get information on the country, on his community, and his friends, at an affordable cost.

A large scale survey conducted by Research ICT Africa (RIA) – a network of researchers in over 20 African countries headquartered in Cape Town – shows that Mwangi is part of a new wave of mostly-mobile internet users on the continent (Calandro, Stork and Gillwald, 2012).

According to this research, over one in three South Africans now use the internet, as do more than a quarter of Kenyans. The RIA household and individual survey 2011/2 was conducted in 12 African countries. It is a representative survey of adults aged 15 and over conducted face to face in rural and urban areas. It follows a similar survey conducted in 17 countries in 2007/8. The chart shows the growth in internet use in nine countries that were included in both surveys. In most of the countries internet use has at least doubled over the period.

Access and affordability
At the South African Network Society Project at the University of Witwatersrand, we collaborated with the RIA team in developing detailed questions on internet use and working with them in analysing the internet data from the survey. Our research
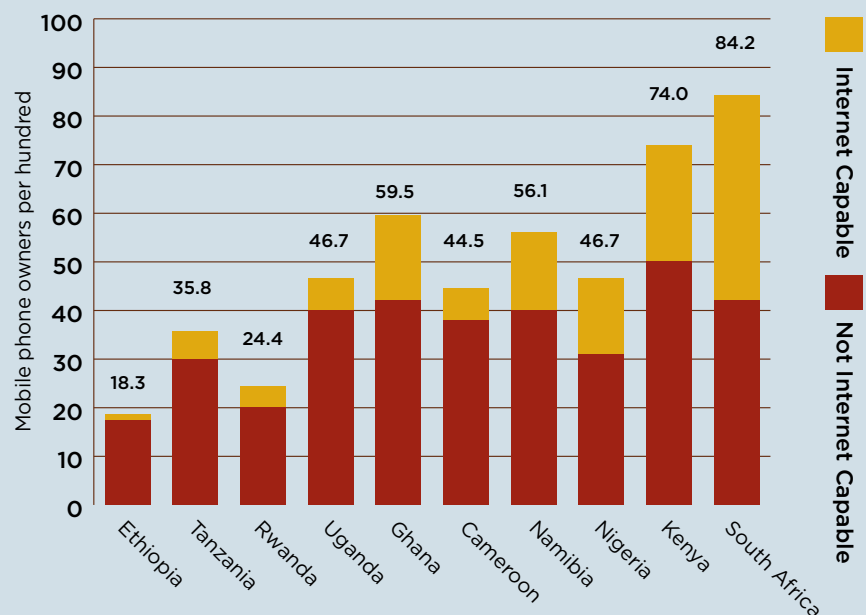
INTERNET ADOPTION IN AFRICA
Source: Research ICT Africa. Household and Individual Surveys 2007/2008 and 2011/2012
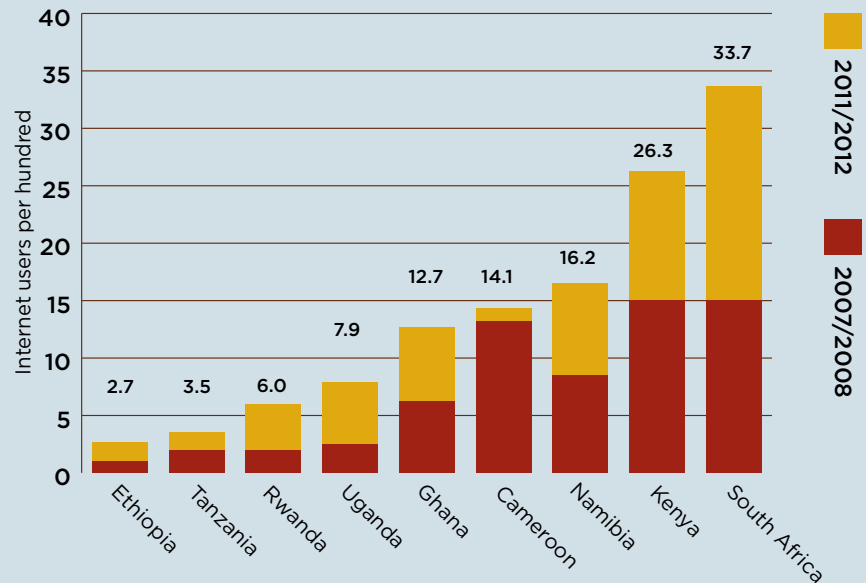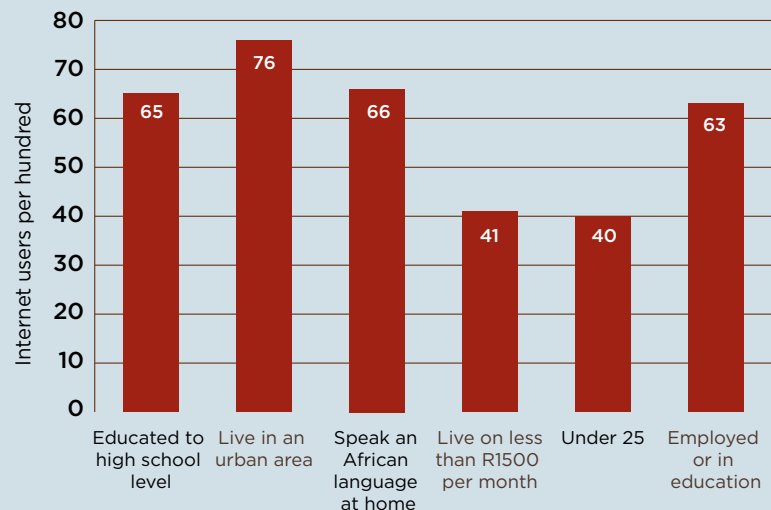

MOBILE PHONE OWNERSHIP IN AFRICA
Source: Research ICT Africa. Household and Individual Survey 2011/2012

SOUTH AFRICAN INTERNET USERS PROFILE
Source: De Lanerolle (2012)

suggests a combination of reasons for this growth. The first factor is accessibility – in many countries most people now have access to mobile networks and more and more phones are internet capable – you don't need a so-called smartphone to go online. Even in those countries where the minority own mobiles, mobile phone ownership far exceeds computer ownership and mobile phone connections are many times greater than fixed line connections. In the countries with the highest levels of internet use, at least a quarter of all mobile phones are capable of connecting to the internet. And this is likely to increase in the near future. Nokia today sells only four models in Africa that are not capable of accessing the Internet[1].

The second factor is affordability. In many countries, data costs are falling. In South Africa, mobile data costs have fallen from two rand per megabyte (MB) to less than 20 cents. And mobile operators (unlike almost all of their fixed-line counterparts) offer this data pre-paid and often in small bundles. In Kenya, Mwangi can buy a voucher for around three cents (US) that gives him 5MB of data. He checks Facebook up to 20 times per day and spends about 15 cents a day on data.

As a result, social network services like Facebook and local online information services provided by news organisations like the *Daily Nation* offer compelling value for low income users, enabling many of them to access relevant information and to communicate comparatively cheaply with their friends and family.

A new wave of internet users

This possibility has not been realised for most Africans yet. Mwangi is an early adopter in a country with high levels of internet use. Networks need to be expanded and prices need to fall in order for growth rates to be maintained. Internet adoption in Ethiopia for example is only a tenth of the rate in Kenya. But the trend is clear. Thanks to mobile wireless networks, mobile phone ownership, and shared access facilities in schools and colleges, workplaces and internet cafes, the internet in Africa is no longer for the elite. Our analysis of South African internet users shows that four out of 10 users have incomes of less than R1 500 per month. Most are not educated above high school level and one in three is neither employed nor in education.

Mass media for Africa?

In Europe and the US, many see the internet as a threat to journalism. There are concerns about the collapse of the existing mass media news and information networks, their business models made unsustainable by the internet (Pew, 2013). Others worry about the social and political impact of the fragmentation of mass media into online political echo-chambers (Sunstein, 2007). In Africa, we cannot simply import these perspectives uncritically. We need a more reflective, reasoned and specific historical view of the journalism that may be threatened on the continent. In many countries, Africans have never had affordable access to independent journalism. State interests have often dominated broadcast journalism and print journalism usually has been restricted and tailored to urban elites. In South Africa already, more people go online daily than read a newspaper (De Lanerolle 2012). But the reality is that less than one in five South Africans read a newspaper every day (De Lanerolle 2012).

Journalism in Africa has played a role in calling those in power to account. In many instances it has spoken truth to power. But it has not succeeded in providing timely diverse and relevant information to most Africans. Mobile wireless networks may be the first distribution channels that offer the possibility of diverse news and information sources available to the majority of Africans and people are moving to it in part because of the failures of the journalism channels of the past and present.

References

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Endnotes

1. http://www.nokia.com/mea-en/products/products/?action=catalogsearch&ps=mobilephone#nk-main_menu_component, accessed 14 April 2013