

Africa online



Roland Stanbridge surveys some of the Internet initiatives across the continent...

Until quite recently African journalists had little opportunity to contact colleagues even in neighbouring countries, let alone elsewhere on the continent. Telephone calls and faxes between African states are still often routed via London or Paris, and are prohibitively expensive.

This is changing dramatically with African media organisations increasingly embracing the Internet. Several innovative collaborative projects are under way. A growing number of individual journalists or small freelance collectives are also benefitting from email communication, access to global information resources and being able to market their articles internationally.

RADIO ONLINE

One such project is a digital audio database established in 1998 and originally shared by privately owned radio stations in eight French-speaking African states. Most are in West Africa, but Madagascar is also a participant. The project now has a network of correspondents in 20 African countries, and nearly 100 private and public radio stations receive the programmes free.

While I was visiting one of the member stations, Radio Sud FM in Dakar, Senegal, audio contributions from the New York correspondent began arriving as compressed email attachments. "This works just fine," says Daouda Toumbou, an editor at Sud. "A four-minute contribution takes less than two minutes to arrive here. Within Africa, where there is often poor bandwidth and many technical problems, it is not always so straightforward. But we are succeeding. The members are contributing to the radio bank, and increasingly they exchange digital audio files among each other."

Toumbou says that using the Internet to store and exchange radio programmes is much faster and less expensive than mailing audio cassettes via postal systems, which were often damaged, lost, stolen or late in arriving. "Most importantly, radio stations are getting very positive feedback from listeners who feel enriched by the increasing amount of regional content."

The Bank of Radio Programmes is a collaborative project between the Panos Institute and OneWorld, and grew out of a call in the Dakar Declaration of 1997 for information technologies to be used to promote interaction between African radio stations. Project leader Johan Deflander, based at the Bamako, Mali office of Panos, says several of the stored African radio programmes are now being offered to any radio station in the world, through the use of Real Audio software at the website http://www.oneworld.org/panos_audio.

"The network's intention is to promote the decentralisation of production capacities and to ensure access to a large bank of programmes stored on this particular website," Deflander says. "The radio stations involved in the project graciously offer the best of their programmes on the website. This should hopefully enhance the role of private radio stations in French-speaking Africa."

"Radio today represents the most important means of information dissemination in large cities and rural regions. There is a particularly high number of stations on the continent, with more than 200 independent stations in West and Central Africa and about 100 in the Indian Ocean area."

DEVELOPMENTS IN THE EAST

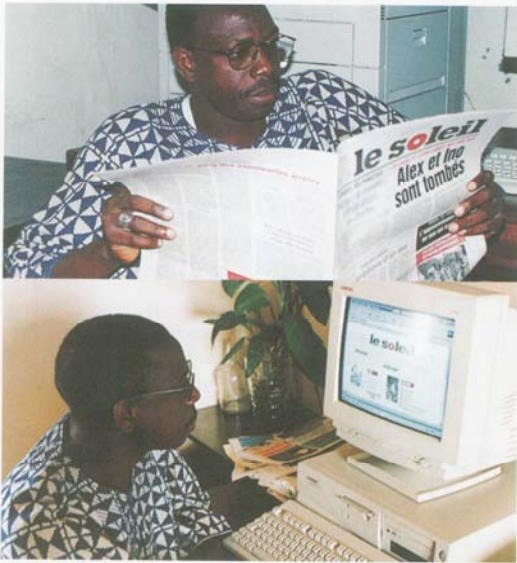
Africa Online in East Africa (www.africaonline.com) has taken yet another approach. It hosts several online newspapers at its site, presently from Swaziland, Kenya, Zimbabwe, Tanzania, Uganda, Ivory Coast and Ghana.

One plan the company has is to create an all-African media search engine. It is presently working on a search engine that will address those online media at its website.

Africa Online business manager Nosipho Nkiwane, based in Zimbabwe, says there are crippling obstacles in Africa to reaching desirable levels of Internet utilisation.

"Where African media do venture onto the Internet, it is more as a research tool for the journalists and a distribution mechanism for the newspaper companies," he says. "And certainly email has been important to journalists in overcoming censorship. But state control of telecommunications, poor infrastructure and exorbitant costs of related equipment such as computers present long-term obstacles to the development of the Internet as a mass medium in Africa."





M. Seydou Sissouma, editor of Senegal's *Le Soleil*, describes his paper's "global information strategy".

NEWSPAPER INTERNET EXCHANGES

Another growing West African project is an information exchange between newspapers in nine French-speaking states. The idea was the brainchild of M. Seydou Sissouma, editor of the influential government-owned Dakar daily, *Le Soleil*. "When *Le Soleil* went online in April last year – the first in Senegal – I quickly perceived the need for an Internet strategy, to reach audiences in Africa and globally, and to give my news team access to regional and global information resources," Sissouma says. "We actually needed a global information strategy."

"Before the development of online media here, Senegalese citizens living abroad were generally excluded from participating in important societal debates, which were confined within our borders. Now we find that debates are often sparked by comments from citizens elsewhere in the world," he says. "Being online is a big advantage in Africa, which is getting increasingly connected to the Internet. Now we can be read anywhere in French-speaking Africa, with no distribution costs, no postage costs."

Sissouma says that he soon perceived that *Le Soleil Online* had to differ from the print edition, addressing an African, rather than an exclusively Senegalese, audience. "We quickly began to realise the benefits of electronic interaction and collaboration, and set out to create an online network of Francophone journalists and media. Now we have ten newspapers and many other journalists collaborating. Our final aim is to collaborate all over French-speaking Africa. Presently we help each other with research, background information, useful contacts and so on.

"And we are reaping many benefits," he adds. "As an example, there was recently a brief report by the news agency Agence France Presse (AFP) that a judge had been killed in neighbouring Mali by members of a religious sect. There was no context, no details, no explanation. And we could learn no more from AFP.

"Liaising by email with media in Bamako, the capital of Mali, we were able to get court documents, tips about who to speak to, more details of the events, pictures and so on. This was obtained rapidly, cheaply and from credible sources. How could this have been possible before the Internet?"

A powerful new form of collaboration, Sissouma says, is for media in several countries to work simultaneously on the same issue. Then each has their own story, enriched with up-to-date contextual regional information.

"Our common website is presently under development, and will soon be launched on the net," he says. "There all members will continually contribute material. They will each bear legal responsibility for content they put on the site. It should quickly become an invaluable pool, and archive, of information about the region.

"I think these developments are quite frightening for governments. These initiatives will inevitably make it far more difficult for states to curb the free flow of information."

TAKING ON THE CONTINENT

Quite a different form of online collaboration has been initiated by Africa News Online (ANO – www.Africanews.com), an invaluable resource for keeping informed of developments across the continent. ANO began operating on the web in 1995 and has been growing steadily since.

Commenting on its rapid success, the London *Financial Times* wrote recently: "The idea is simple. African newspapers are invited to post a selection from their pages on the Africa News website, allowing worldwide electronic access to items that were formerly available only to local newspaper readers in Ghana, Kenya and elsewhere. The newspaper publishers receive a share of earnings calculated according to the number of their stories transmitted as daily news feeds to various organisations, as well as a share of revenue from advertising and royalties on the electronic pages."

All Africa News stories have links to the websites, if any, of the featured publications. About 200 stories are added to the site each day, coming from more than 40 African news organisations and another 20 international news sources.



CONNECTING SOUTHERN AFRICA

Down south the most famous example of Internet collaboration is the experience of MISA, the Media Institute of Southern Africa, established in the early 90s with a call for media plurality and diversity. Until 1994 the head office in Windhoek, Namibia communicated with members in the Southern African Development Community (SADC) region by telephone and fax. Postal services were too slow and inefficient for MISA's needs. The organisation's telephone costs were exorbitant and it began to seek alternatives. Email, still a relatively new concept in Africa at the time, seemed the best possibility, although few newsrooms had computers and almost none had modems.

MISA found donor funding for a connectivity programme, still ongoing today. In spite of enormous impediments, such as poorly developed telecommunications infrastructure in some countries, through MISA an unprecedented communications network developed between media organisations throughout the SADC region.

Named MISANET (www.misanet.org), the network has now grown into the most comprehensive online source of southern African news and information. Today 20 newspapers and news agencies contribute to the MISANET News Service, which currently carries between 300 and 400 stories a week. As MISA continues to hook up more of its members to the Internet, so the number of news sources increases. Placed at the hub of this southern African news pool, the MISANET News Service provides subscribers with a unique perspective of events in one of the world's fast-emerging markets.

OTHER INTERNET ENTERPRISES

A growing number of African journalists are finding that they no longer have to join a major media organisation to ply their trade. The Internet has opened up many new opportunities for them. A small sample:

- In Uganda two years ago writer Wairagala Wakabi began Newsline, a local news agency using email only to interact with clients. He soon found markets both inside and outside of Africa.

- In Malawi journalist Raphael Tenthani, who has no computer of his own, uses a Blantyre CyberCafe to send his email copy. Through being wired in this way, he has become the local correspondent for the Pan African News Agency (PANA) and the BBC.

- In South Africa's rural Eastern Cape, Port Alfred-based journalist David MacGregor gave up his newsroom job to work at home, hoping that online interaction would open up opportunities. He and friends created @LiveWire Media (www.livewire.co.za), now a small cooperative of creative writers who sell their stories and photographs all over South Africa and elsewhere in the world. They send all pictures, audio files and texts via the Internet, and communicate with editors worldwide via email.

Although in Africa we may still be at the level of information cowpaths, rather than superhighways, the few examples given above show that the Internet is inevitably changing how the media work and opening new possibilities for interaction. This can only benefit democratic trends.

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