

Confidence trick?

The pros and cons of the Internet in Africa



A group of African journalists debate whether the Internet is just a 'con', or if it really brings benefits to the continent...

Miriam Zimba (Zambia):

Africa needs the Internet. Africa jumped on the bandwagon realising how effective phones, T.V. and radios were for the dissemination of information. But while we appreciate telephones and faxes as a mode of communication, these tools are very expensive for most Africans. That is where the Internet comes in – it is cheaper.

Daliso Mwale (Zambia):

Africa does not need the Internet. The evolution of the Net was necessitated by the fact that the West, with its fears of the Cold War, wanted a system where data could be communicated at any point even if one point was done in. That was a typical military approach and it has not changed much.

With the coming of the Internet, it is no longer necessary for the West to have costly operatives in different countries. All they have to do is encourage the whole world to put their vital statistics on the Net, and access them without having to pay anyone. In that light, the Internet is a tool to propagate neo-colonialism.

Miriam Zimba:

Why don't we as Africans make an impact as well on the Internet, make our presence felt, and become information providers? If Africa participated fully on the Internet by putting up its own information, the West could end up embracing African values.

Frazer Mweemba (Zambia):

The reason Africa needs the Internet is not because the West is dictating to Africans what they should do. When you look at the African family, you'll find that there is a web type of communication. Let me cite an example from where I come from: I'm weTonga, and wherever I am in Zambia if I come across someone with a name heard in the area where I come from, I would be interested to find out more about that person. When I find out more about that person, I'll link him or her to somewhere where I come from. It is the same model as the Net.

Africa can use the Internet to do so many things. For instance, let us look at our universities in Africa which are deprived of materials and books. With the Internet, we can do all forms of research which before was difficult.

Daliso Mwale:

But the Internet is a system which dilutes human interaction. People just talk over the computer and do not meet face to face to put human feelings in what they agree to do.

Therefore, going back to our Africanness, our African values, the Net does not promote Africanness. I want to believe that Africa has potential to develop a parallel system of communication that is going to work for Africa without having to deal with the Internet.

Catherine Mwewa (Zambia):

At the level we've reached, the Internet is not a priority. We have a lot of vices we need to deal with before we can spend our small resources on the Internet just for the sake of communication. When we look at the way people are suffering in the rural areas, it would be unfair to import computers just to meet the standards of the West.

Furthermore, if you look at the Internet it's too Americanised. When you are doing research, when you are looking at information about Africa, you won't easily access it.

Frazer Mweemba:

The Information Revolution offers Africa a dramatic opportunity to leap ahead into the future, breaking out of decades of stagnation or decline. If African countries cannot surf this great wave of technological change, we may be crushed by it and become more economically stagnant than we are today.

Human rights and democracy also thrive on a good telecommunications infrastructure. If you go on the Internet, you find different organisations, different governments, parties trying to air themselves. UNITA, people whom we label as rebels, have a site on the Internet.

Raphael Tenthani (Malawi):

The Internet is not one of our priorities because its impact is negligible. The majority of those with access to the Internet in Africa are not actually Africans. In Malawi, of every 20 Internet users, roughly 15 are aid workers and people like them. So although the Internet has come to Africa, it has not necessarily benefitted Africans themselves.

Raphael Mweninguwe (Malawi):

The danger with this Internet animal is that it has brought some immoral behaviour amongst our cultures – spurred in part by Internet porno which is corrupting the minds of Africans.

What the West is doing is just creating employment for its citizens. Each time they come up with a new technology that is exported to Africa, they send their staff here.

Herbert Macha (Zambia):

It is very clear that a country with high levels of technology and communication is far more economically developed than one that is less advanced in communications. Let us look at communication as a tool for development. You may argue that only the elite would benefit – that is not true. The fact that the economic development can trickle down to the lowest levels is a benefit.

Jerome Ngitu (Tanzania):

We all know that information is power. He who has information has got power over others who have not. Since this technology is highly elitist, the elite will have this information which they will use to exploit the majority of the people.

Herbert Macha:

It's utopian to think that the Internet would be accessible to every African. But we should think about the multiplier effect that the Internet is going to have for Africa. The more people have access to this Internet, the more we will get information disseminated.

Miriam Zimba:

Africa's level of education is already low. By completely shutting out the Internet, the African won't have access to the outside world. In my language, we have a saying: "The child that never travels thinks that mum is the best cook." When you talk about retardation of African culture you must look back to where we've come from. With the advent of certain Western cultural values, we have done away with some of the archaic African cultures where women were being sold.

Catherine Mwewa:

The Internet can enhance democratic principles. In Zambia, the paper that was first to go onto the Internet was a privately owned newspaper. And what did the government do? They had to try to ensure that the state-owned newspapers were also on the Internet. African governments have not taken a pro-active role in promoting information technologies. But if they want to enhance democracy, they should go ahead and promote the Internet.

(This debate occurred as part of the Rhodes New Media Lab's Computer-Assisted Reporting Programme held in Grahamstown and organised by the Nordic-SADC Journalism Centre in Maputo.)