African Web Portals

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INTRODUCTION

The World Wide Web (WWW) has led to the advent of the information age. With increased demand for information from various quarters, the Web has turned out to be a veritable resource. Web surfers in the early days were frustrated by the delay in finding the information they needed. The first major leap for information retrieval came from the deployment of Web search engines such as Lycos, Excite, AltaVista, etc. The rapid growth in the popularity of the Web during the past few years has led to a precipitous pronouncement of death for the online services that preceded the Web in the wired world. Though everyone lauds the Web for offering unlimited opportunities to explore and discover new things, many still want someone else to aggregate a variety of interesting and useful content in one place instead of creating massive and unwieldy bookmark files in their browsers. These new online services are Web sites, which deliver the old formula of content, community, and core services, but in a new package and transformed as Web portals (Rao, 2001). Though these tools (Web portals) are not yet available everywhere in the developing world (in Africa particularly), they are spreading rapidly and present a unique opportunity for developing countries (like African countries) to benefit most from the current unfolding technological revolution (Denning, 2004). This article sets out to give an overview of African Web portals. After giving background information of Web portals, it goes further to briefly describe evolution of African Web portals, their roles, types/categories, problems of the continent's portals, as well as future trends, then suggests strategies for enhancing portals development in the continent. The article intends to introduce readers to African Web portals and enable them to know where to access conglomerate information about the continent.

BACKGROUND

There are various definitions of a portal. A portal is a derivative of the Latin word *porta*, which means a gate. Consequently, Daigle and Cuocco (2002) define a portal as "a gate, a door, or entrance" (p.109). The word portal refers to gateway, and in the context of the Web, a site that is, or proposes to be, a major starting site for users when they get connected to the Web or one that users tend to visit as an anchor site, which hosts content from multiple Web sites. Portals need not necessarily create content themselves, but host it by packaging content from third party providers, organize it to suit their target audience, and make revenue through advertisement (Rao, 2001). According to Georgick (2004), several sites that serve as a clearinghouse for a particular service or interest group call themselves portals, but can be more appropriately described as a collection of links; that in a stricter sense of the term, porter must integrate a mix of services and deliver to the end user as one seamless package.

Services must be more than discovery—more than just links. Portals need to provide integration of information sources for both searching and for the location and delivery of materials; this content (sources) may be located anywhere--within the site, other sites on the Web, inside or outside the organization, and may be in any format (Murray, 2002). A portal "provides personalized access to information, applications, business processes, and much more" (Microsoft Corporation, 2005 p. 1). Portals are generally content aggregators and provide Web users personalized access to personalized information. They provide search capabilities and allow users to customize the content of the aggregated information displayed in a single Web interface. There are various types of portals. There are information portals, enterprise portals, community portals, services portals, corporate portals, general portals, specialized portals, vertical portals, horizontal portals, regional portals, education portals, library portals, etc.

AFRICAN PORTALS

There has been tremendous growth in the diffusion and adoption of the Internet in the African continent in the past decade. For instance, in 1996 only 11 of the African countries were online, but by the end of 2000 all 54 countries had achieved permanent connectivity, although this is mainly confined to the capital cities with very few secondary towns and cities being connected (Gyapong, 2002). This growth has been mainly due to the proliferation of cyber cafés, which are used by those who have no other means of accessing the Internet (Adomi, Okiy, & Ruteyan, 2003; van Brakel & Chisenga, 2003).

African Internet user growth rate ranks first in the world (429.8%) (Internet World Stats, 2005). With the number of African Internet users growing steadily, there has been need for African portals (Afrol.com, 2000) to meet their needs.

Accordingly, Web portals have been spreading across Africa in large numbers offering diverse free information about the continent. Portals devoted to African continents have been on the increase for over a decade. Though there was only one known African Web portal—Mbendi (http://www.mbendi.com) founded by Mbendi Information Services, Cape Town, South Africa in 1995 to enable business people to access African business opportunities (Mbendi Information Services, 1995)—Afrol.com (2000) states that there are at present, tens of thousand of sites and home pages from Africa on the Internet.

ROLES OF AFRICAN WEB PORTALS

African Web portals are intended to play some significant roles to the African and other Web users in various ways:

- **Coping with the Mass of Web/Internet Resources around Africa:** African portals are aimed at assisting Africans and everybody else interested in Africa coping with the Internet and locating reliable information about the continent. This is more so as there are thousands of sites and home pages from and around Africa on the Net and there is steady stream of new sites from all parts of Africa. A portal helps the user find his or her way as it has links to the most basic places easily accessible and gathers, sorts out, and categorizes the information that is of interest and offers needed service (afrol.com, 2000).
- **Solution to the Problem of Paucity of Local Content:** Mutula (2004) laments that there is little African local content available and people therefore resort to content generated from outside Africa that is published and contains values that are peculiar to their cultural practices. African research is suffering because the means to publish research results have been lacking and the results on which to develop further research are not disseminated but indigenous publication is essential to the emergence of the African academic community enterprise (Rosenberg, 2002). However, the advent of electronic publishing over the Net has provided opportunity to improve distribution of accessibility to research from developing countries (Chan, Kirsop, Costa, & Arunachalam, 2005). African Web portals provide means for publishing the continent's local contents/research and for making them accessible to the African and international community.
- **Provision of Free Means of E-Communication to African Web Users:** It has been discovered by Akinseinde and Adomi (2004) that most technical education students in Nigerian universities have free Web-based e-mail addresses/accounts. Reasons adduced include that free Web-based e-mail services/accounts are accessible from any part of the world, they are free and can therefore be used without financial stress, they are more reliable than institutional/commercial based e-mail services, and that students do not even have access to institution e-mail services. Though this research is on students and conducted in Nigeria, the findings reflect other categories of Internet users in Africa. Since the Web portals include free e-mail services, most users take advantage of them in Africa and use them for communication purpose.

TYPES/CATEGORIES OF AFRICAN PORTALS

African Web portals can be categorized in two ways. The first category is based on geographical coverage while the second is based on content/subject coverage.

Geographical Coverage

There are three types in this category (clickafrique.com, n.d.):

- **General Portals:** These are portals that focus on the whole of the African continent. Some of them are listed in Table 1.
- **Regional Portals:** These are portals that focus on regions of Africa. An example is Le Monde du Mahgreb, which is a portal for the Mahgreb (North Africa).
- **Country/National Portals:** African country/national portals devote their contents to the countries they originate from. Some country portals are depicted in Table 2.

Content/Subject Coverage

Two types exist in this category: General and specialized.

- **General Portals:** General subject African portals focus on different topics on Africa. That is general African information-politics, business, education, entertainment, free e-mail, forums, etc.
  Examples include Warm Africa (http://www.warmafrica.com), AllAfrica.com (http://allafrica.com), and Afrionline (http://www.afrione.com).
- **Specialized African Portals:** Specialized portal focus on an aspect of life, that is they restrict themselves to one subject coverage. Some examples are Mbenidi (http://www.mbendi.com), this portal is on African business opportunities and AfricanPoliticsOnline (http://www.africapoliticsonline.com), an Internet resource for African politics.

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