Chapter 1.38
The State of Internet Access in Uganda

Peter G. Mwesige
Makerere University, Kampala

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, Uganda has witnessed an astronomical growth in the information and communications technology (ICT) sector. For example, between December 1996 and December 2003, the number of cellular phone subscribers rose from 3,000 to 777,563, Internet subscribers grew from 504 to 7,024, Internet Service Providers (ISPs) increased from two to 17, and public pay phones increased from 1,258 to 3,456 (UCC, 2004).

The late 1990's witnessed the proliferation of private and public initiatives to get more Ugandans online. Private entrepreneurs established Internet or cyber cafés in several parts of the country-mainly in major cities and towns—and the government and international development agencies started several public projects, such as Multipurpose Community Telecentres, aimed at increasing universal access to ICT. By December 2003, there were at least 24 registered cyber cafes in Kampala alone and four telecentres were operating at Nakaseke in Luwero district, Buwama in Mpigi, Nabweru in Kampala, and Kachwekano in Hoima district (Mwesige, 2004; Mwesige & Lugalambi, 2003).

This article examines the prospects and problems of Internet use and access in this East African country, focusing on the users of the two major public access points: Internet cafés and telecentres. While more Ugandans are getting online, the risks of exclusion of large sections of the population from the information society may still remain. Recent initiatives to address the digital divide between the industrialized countries of the "North" and the developing countries of the "South" may have improved Internet access in Africa, but they also appear to have created growing national digital divides within the region.

BACKGROUND

The Internet has come to be viewed as the epitome of the future global information infrastructure. Not only is the Internet now considered an integral part of national information infrastructures, it is also regarded as a valuable tool in the improve-

ment of education, health, as well as governance (Braga et al., 2000; Wei, 1999).

An ever-increasing body of academic and policy literature proposes a strong correlation between Information and Communication Technologies (ICT), such as the Internet, and development (Braga et al., 2000; Rodriguez & Wilson, 2000; Rogers & Shukla, 2001). For instance, the United Nations system has declared that "the introduction and use of ICT and information management must become an integral element" of its "priority efforts to promote and secure sustainable development for all" (Hilliard, 2002). Several other international agencies as well as national governments have also embraced the objective of establishing "universal access" to ICT for all.

In Uganda, the recent liberalization and deregulation of the telecommunications sector broadened access to ICT. In line with its broader policy of liberalization and privatization in the early 1990's, the Ugandan government liberalized the telecommunications sector in 1997, following the enactment of the Uganda Communications Act. The new legislation sought to "develop a modern communications sector" by, among others, "enhancing national coverage of communications services and products; expanding the existing variety of communications services available in Uganda to include modern and innovative postal and telecommunications services; introducing, encouraging and enabling competition in the sector through regulation and licensing competitive operators; and establishing a fund for rural communications development" (Uganda Communications Act, 1997, pp. 8-9).

Uganda has since registered stunning progress in increasing access to telephony in recent years (Shanmugavelan & Warnock, 2004, p. 18). Although telephone penetration still remains low, a recent study found that a majority of Ugandans, 81%, now use telephones-especially cellular phones-regularly (McKemey & Scott, 2003, p. 4).

Unlike the tremendous growth, especially in cellular telephony in recent years, there has been no such dramatic increase in Internet access and use. The most recent available figures indicate that Internet users rose from 600 in 1995 to only 60,000 in 2001 (Uganda Communications Commission, 2004; World Bank, 2004). McKemey et al. (2003) also found that less than 10% of Ugandans had regular access to the Internet. This is disturbing not least because much of the success of ICT as the engine of growth in the new information economy depends on affordable near-universal access (Rao, 1999), particularly to the Internet. While basic telephony eases personal and business communication, access to the Internet promises additional benefits, especially the delivery of vast amounts of information and a broad array of electronic services.

Numerous projects such as Internet kiosks, cyber cafés, and multipurpose community telecentres that have been launched in developing nations are often touted as the harbingers of universal access to the Internet in countries where there are still too many barriers to access from the comforts of home or the workplace (Minges, 2001; Rao, 1999; Rogers & Shukla, 2001). Although Uganda has made some progress on this front in recent years, especially in terms of improving the basic telecommunications infrastructure—wiring up, as some call it—current Internet access indicators are still poor by international standards.

INTERNET ACCESS AND USE

This article on cyber cafés and community telecentres in Uganda suggests that the ICT revolution remains largely a preserve of educated sections of the population with the disposable income and cognitive wherewithal required to take advantage of the available electronic information and services (Mwesige, 2004). The majority of the population is still excluded from the new electronic frontier

Related Content

Factors Affecting Citizen Adoption of E-Government in Developing Countries: An Exploratory Case Study From Indonesia
Alvedi Sabani, Vinh Thaiand Mohammad Alamgir Hossain (2023). *Journal of Global Information Management (pp. 1-23).*
www.irma-international.org/article/factors-affecting-citizen-adoption-of-e-government-in-developing-countries/318131

Dream and the Reality: The Adoption of "Digital Concept" in an Emerging Country
Mohammad Nurunnabi, Ella Pereiraand Abdul Hannan Chowdhury (2012). *Disruptive Technologies, Innovation and Global Redesign: Emerging Implications (pp. 357-376).*
www.irma-international.org/chapter/dream-reality-adoption-digital-concept/63840

Research on Disruptive Technology Recognition of China's Electronic Information and Communication Industry Based on Patent Influence
Weifeng Jia, Yongping Xie, Yanan Zhao, Ke Yao, Hui Shiand Dazhi Chong (2021). *Journal of Global Information Management (pp. 148-165).*
www.irma-international.org/article/research-on-disruptive-technology-recognition-of-chinas-electronic-information-and-communication-industry-based-on-patent-influence/272664

Social Structures and Personal Values That Predict E-Mail Use: An International Comparative Study
Mark F. Peterson, Stephanie J. Thomason, Norm Althouse, Nicholas Athanassiou, Gudrun Curri, Robert Konopaske, Tomasz Lenartowicz, Mark Meckler, Mark E. Mendenhall, Andrew A. Mogajiand Julie I.A. Rowney (2010). *Journal of Global Information Management (pp. 57-84).*
www.irma-international.org/article/social-structures-personal-values-predict/42089

Metastructuring for Standards: How Organizations Respond to the Multiplicity of Standards
Ronny Geyand Andrea Fried (2018). *Corporate and Global Standardization Initiatives in Contemporary Society (pp. 252-276).*
www.irma-international.org/chapter/metastructuring-for-standards/197468