Chapter XXIX
Africa and the Challenges of Bridging the Digital Divide

Esharenana E. Adomi
Delta State University, Nigeria

INTRODUCTION

Much of the developed world has, over the past two decades, been transformed by what are now termed information and communication technologies (ICTs). These technologies exert great impact on most aspects of our lives—in economic activities, education, entertainment, communication, travel, and so on. Also they have inextricably linked with economic prosperity and power (Davison, Vogel, Harris, et al., 2000).

At present, **Africa** is at the bottom of the ICT ladder. This has serious implications both for the continent and the entire world. This is because ICTs are enhancing the economies of those countries that are **ICT-rich** faster then those that are **ICT-poor**, thus further widening the development gap between Africa and the industrialized world (Ya'u, n.d.)

The realization of the importance of ICTs in economic advancement led the United Nations Commission on Science and Technology for Development (UNCSTD) to devote the 1995 through 1997 to the study of the linkages between ICTs and development. One of the important results of that effort was the placing of the digital divide on global development agenda. Since then, there has been an internal consensus that there is the need to bridge the digital divide. As a result of this consensus, there has evolved various bridging strategies, actions and initiatives at international, regional, continental and local country levels. Learning from these efforts, African countries have, under the leadership of the United Nations Economic Commission for Africa (ECA), been developing national, sub-regional, and continental initiatives to overcome the digital divide and to promote the greater inclusion of Africa communities into the cyberspace (Ya'u, n.d.)

In this chapter, efforts are made to define digital divide, unravel the status of Africa in the global digital map, enumerate the causes of low level of ICT diffusion in Africa, efforts at bridging the divide, discusses future trends, and concludes with steps that can address the divide.

BACKGROUND

The digital divide is regarded as the gap existing between those with regular, effective access to **digital technologies** and those without it (Wikipedia, 2006). The concept of the digital divide is used to express the gap in access to information

resources in some countries compared with those with state-of-the-art networks such as telephone, radio, television, Internet, satellite, in short, anything that can be classified as ICT. Thus, the digital divide is used to express the difference in facilities for people to communicate, relative to their geographic location, their living standard and their educational level. It is ultimately an indication of a country's economic and social situation (Marine & Blanchard, 2004).

The digital divide is related to social inclusion and equality of opportunity, is seen as a social and political problem, and has increasingly become relevant as the industrialized nations have become more dependent on **digital technologies** in their democratic and economic processes (Wikipedia, 2006.). The wide **acceptance of computers** and the phenomenal growth of the internet in the 1990s has also drawn attention to their grave implications for existing socio-economic gaps within and between countries. The concern essentially is that the **telecommunication revolution** may widen existing social gaps creating two clear cut classes of **information haves** (information rich) and **information have nots** (information poor) (Sonaike, 2004). The divide is deepening and the differences in the usage of communication resources and services between countries and regions intensifying. The digital divide, however, exists not only between countries but also within countries, between "rich" urban regions and "poor" rural regions. This regional divide is more evident within the developing countries (particularly Africa countries), even though rural areas have benefited to some extent from the boom in access to communication services (Marine & Blanchard, 2004).

The provision of communication services in developing regions (like Africa) is an essential aspect of enhancing and facilitating the rate of economic and social development (Yavwa & Kritzinger, 2001). There is thus the need for African countries to make frantic efforts to ensure that ICTs are provided adequately and consistently to close the divide and reap the benefits of economic and social development.

AFRICA AND THE DIGITAL DIVIDE

Digital divide is strongly related to globalization and we have digital divides in industrialized as well as developing countries. However, the most pressing problem is that the gap between the industrialized world and developing countries is widening. The worst situation is the African continent, which is the most underdeveloped region in use of ICT (Hietanen, n.d.). Developing countries, especially

Table 1. World internet usage and population statistics (Source: Internet World Stats, 2006)

World regions	Population (2006 Est.)	Population (percent) of world	Internet Usage, Latest Data	Population percent (Penetration)	Percent of World users	User growth 2000-2005
Africa	915.210,928	14.1	23,649,000	2.6	2.3	423.9
Asia	3,667,774,066	56.4	364.270,713	9.9	35.6	218.7
Europe	807,289,020	12.4	291,600,898	36.1	28.5	177.5
Middle East	190,084,161	2.9	18,203,500	9.6	1.8	454.2
North America	331,473,276	5.1	227,303,680	68.6	22.2	110.3
Latin America/ Caribbean	553,908,632	8.5	79,962,809	14.4	7.8	342.5
Oceania/ Australia	33,956,977	0.5	17,872,707	52.6	1.7	134.6
WORLD TOTAL	6,499,697,060	100.0	1,022,863,307	15.7	100.0	183.4