

The spirit of open access to information as a key pillar in the African Renaissance

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This chapter explores the future impact of an African Renaissance, with specific emphasis on information ethics to address the needs of the emerging virtual realm. The first of four main focus areas are the technological challenges to deploy information and communication technology (ICT) infrastructure to enable the delivery of information to the people, and to allow for new means of communication. The second focus considers the economic obstacles in the quest to empower average citizens to exercise their right to access information. The third focus addresses the linguistic and cultural realities that hinder the adoption of some ICTs. The final focus considers the legal framework that has to be developed and strengthened to establish citizens' rights of access and privacy in cyberspace.

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Introduction

This chapter explores the role of ethics, and in this case, information ethics as a key factor to sustain and expand the momentum of the pan-African ideal of an African Renaissance.

Africa has had periods in its history when regions on the continent flourished intellectually, economically and culturally. Today, despite many profound challenges, there is a spirit of hope, a deep-felt sense that we have an opportunity to seize in order to bring about a rebirth of the intellectual, economic and cultural potential of Africa. To bring the ideal of the African Renaissance to fruition, the vision has to be propagated in the hearts and minds of Africans, as well as to many others beyond the continent's borders. As we consider the potential ways in which this Renaissance can be expressed and sustained, we have to consider the role of one of the most profound technological changes in human history – the emergence of a new layer of existence, namely the virtual world.

The African Renaissance

If we look at Asia first, we readily recognise how the term “the Chinese century” was a faint whispering in selected circles some decades past. In the 21st century, the emergence of the Chinese economic might has undoubtedly impressed the international community (Fishman, 2004). The awakening in China fuels the growing belief that its economy will become the biggest in the 21st century (Shenkar, 2005; Sing, 1988). The Chinese are demonstrating the ability to nurture this dream. They are demonstrating zeal to infect their people with hope and faith to become powerful and great.

How about Africa? Is there a similar awakening in Africa? Is there a similar sense of greatness and a zeal for the continent to achieve its own greatness?

The soil is everything

To answer the question whether a Renaissance like that of the Chinese can happen in Africa as well, the wisdom of an old French saying offers the following: *Le germe n'est rien, c'est le terrain qui est tout*; which is translated as, “The germ (seed) is nothing, the soil is everything”. In short, to

grow fruit, one needs the right temperatures, fertile soil, humidity, light and time that would constitute an ideal environment. Can the collective faith in the future of Africa be harnessed and orchestrated to germinate this vision and commitment for Africa? Bertrand Russell, British mathematician and philosopher (1872–1970), remarked: “Without civic morality communities perish; without personal morality their survival has no value.”

It can be said that any environment is fertile ground for something, even if for an undesirable element. The magnitude of the challenges Africa is facing imposes a reality check on the current environment in Africa and whether it can be favourable to an emerging Renaissance.

On the one side, there is hope for a Renaissance. Africa is seen to be free from colonial oppression at last. There is zeal to acquire as much education as possible and to fulfil the dreams and aspirations of previous generations whose ambitions were stunted by powers from abroad. Those with hope see Africa for its potential, emerging as an ideal environment that fosters strong socio-economic, cultural and intellectual growth.

On the other side are the sceptics who point to the vexing challenges in Africa – the grave issues of usurped political power, economic instability, infrastructure reversals, a continent-wide brain drain, chronic underfunded education, military overspending, endemic corruption, large deficits, serious health issues, tribalism, and the corrosive impact of high levels of crime (Diallo, 2004; Herbert, 2002).

The digital era

In the midst of this ambivalence about the future of Africa, the emerging digital revolution has introduced variables of great importance, with the promise of profoundly changing every country on the globe. To understand the long-term impact of the digital revolution, there is merit in stepping back for a moment to consider first the global impact of the industrial revolution.

Back then, the surge of new technology changed the way products were designed, created and delivered. Many new products were introduced (e.g. the automobile), which changed habits and cultures, and wants into needs. Some of the new products were also new tools that introduced

new ways of doing, or speeded up or in other ways improved the way things were done. Today, a similar and expanded ripple effect is part of the digital revolution. Improvements in hardware, network technology, throughput, software capabilities, workflow processes and the like happen so fast, that the question is not only how society can transition itself to the use of a new product, but also how to adapt to change as a constant. How to cope and flourish in an environment in which change happens at a seemingly exponential pace is a vital consideration.

Change is no longer a celebrated event only; it is almost routine, a constant process. To make this transition to the required mindset in order to flourish in the digital era requires a break from the past in some respects. The previous (and much of the current) ways of commerce, the ways of learning and instruction, and the means of communication have become dated. The new generation has to blaze the trail in order to develop and engineer new social networking behaviours and a mindset in which average citizens become empowered with previously unimaginable means of information access, communication and social networking. This transformation of the current mindset requires attention to the following two issues:

- An established framework of information ethics to formalise and protect the rights of digital access and privacy of all citizens
- An adaptation in cultural behaviour to harness the affordances of the digital era

This chapter centres on the first issue, namely the establishment of a framework to protect the digital rights of access and privacy of all citizens.

Information ethics: Establishing, securing and opening up the flow of information

Referring back to the French saying, access is like the soil, not the seed – it is everything. As the Americans would say, lacking access is a “show stopper”. If access to information is a right, then the imperative is to empower citizens to exercise this right. The obstacles to exercising this right include technological challenges, economic impediments, cultural and linguistic exclusion, and a legal environment that needs to protect the openness of information.

Technological challenges

There is progress in addressing some of the technological hurdles to access. Keniston & Dumar (2003) point out that:

At one extreme are the United States and the “Nordic” countries like Sweden, Germany, Finland and Iceland, where household telephone connectivity is well over 90%, computer saturation is over 50%, and home-based Internet connectivity averages over 50%. At the other extreme lies most of Africa, most of South America, South Asia, China, Indonesia, and so on – the 80% of the world where telephone connectivity is 3% or less (less than 30 million/1 billion in India), home computer ownership is 1–2% and Internet connectivity less than half of that.

In southern and eastern Africa, several governmental and non-governmental groups are collaborating to address what is called the “missing link”, which is the lack of connectivity of these regions of Africa to the world’s fibre networks. “The ‘missing link’ explains why the region accounts for less than one percent of the world’s international bandwidth capacity” (World Bank, 2007). The East African submarine cable system (EASSy) is one such project to provide a cable network along Africa’s eastern coast line (WBGS, (n.d.). This document further says:

The proposed Regional Communications Infrastructure Program (RCIP) was developed at the request of the NEPAD Heads of State. It will finance a submarine fiber cable along the East Coast of Africa and connect countries in the region to the global telecommunications network, either directly or through terrestrial links.

The World Bank (2007) states that this expansion will bring relief to the region, which has:

... the highest communications costs in the world. International wholesale bandwidth prices are 20 to 40 times higher than in the United States, and international calls are on average 10 to 20 times more than in other developing countries.

These plans will greatly contribute to an infrastructure that will enable the region to have world-class access to the Internet, and will help diminish Africa’s vulnerability to exploitation due to its information and communication deficit. The development of infrastructure has to remain a

top priority. If African governments are not able to overcome inertia due to challenges such as the persistent brain drain, poverty and corruption, the economy will suffer and the region will remain vulnerable to economic, intellectual and cultural exploitation.

The Afrikaans saying *kennis is mag* means “knowledge is power”. In the digital age, if data does not flow, neither does information flow; and if information does not flow, how can knowledge be developed? If knowledge is not generated, where is the power? The grand idea of, and attempts at, an African Renaissance will remain limited in potential unless the African virtual space becomes a reality for Africa to take its rightful place as the materialised and the dematerialised worlds interface in today’s knowledge economy.

Economic impediments

The role of governments to champion the cause of establishing infrastructure cannot be ignored. African governments struggle with internal issues that discourage investment and economic growth, such as nepotism, exclusive contracts, nationalisation, and business under the table. Asia has overcome many of these human frailties and flourishes economically. There is a growing voice within Africa to find solutions to nepotism and corruption. On 2 April 2007, the then President of South Africa, Thabo Mbeki, said:

[Corruption] emasculates development and democracy and undermines the fight against poverty by diverting key resources away from programmes designed to improve the quality of life, especially of the poor, globally [...] As we engage in the global fight against corruption, let us also be fully conscious of the need to work on all the varied tracks and affirm a clear role for the responsive democratic state in the fight to eradicate poverty, unemployment and underdevelopment. As an affirmation of our resolve to defeat corruption and its outcomes, we must work together to deal with market-related and market-induced inequalities. We must provide equality of opportunity to all our citizens. We must work to develop social cohesion. We must promote peace and stability in our countries, as well as regionally and globally.

This kind of resolve in the highest circles needs to trickle down in a new consciousness and resolve

for a better future, where the spirit of *ubuntu* strengthens the commitment of Africans to each other, rather than individuals exploiting a situation for their personal gain.

Cultural and linguistic exclusion

The ability of the majority of citizens in a country to access information depends not only on the availability of such information. The linguistic and cultural factors that promote or impede access greatly impact the success of participation in virtual space. Keniston & Dumar (2003) point out that non-English cultures are at a great disadvantage, as there is so little of relevance on the Internet in their own languages:

To linguistic inaccessibility in India is added the absence of culturally relevant content. The number of web sites in 2000 in India is small in any case, but the number of sites in Indian languages is miniscule.

Governments have to prioritise for the development of content and services in underserved languages. Yet, in much of Africa where literacy is inadequate, that demand is tied to the success of enabling those people to exercise their right of access to information in virtual space.

The second priority of African governments is the instruction of English as a second or foreign language. It is an internationally recognised fact that English has become the lingua franca of the digital era. Learning English does not imply submission to the values and trends emanating from the US and the UK. According to O’Neill et al. (2003), more than 70% of the content on the Web is in English, with no other language having a presence of more than 10%. This indicates the significant loss of access to information if the user is unable to read English. Preparing the new generation to function in English is vital to accessing information and communicating in the international arena more effectively.

Selwyn (2002) states that “access to a technology is useless without the requisite skills, knowledge and support to use it effectively”. As we can already see, the digital divide is not solely about purchasing power and physical access”. Preparing the citizenry at large to migrate into the digital era and integrate ICTs into their daily living is so essential that information literacy has to be a priority in every school. Providing

information that considers the cultural and linguistic realities of ordinary citizens, and facilitates their ability to interact with digital technologies, will promote a faster adoption rate to the point that the migration will drive itself as robust communities of practice take root and grow. Then “locals” will take ownership of their participation and destiny in the virtual infosphere.

Legal barriers – open access, a basic human right

More than a century ago, British historian Lord Acton warned that “power corrupts, and absolute power corrupts absolutely” (Acton, 1887). If certain categories of information are not treated as a public good, and if information is an exclusive commodity, it disempowers the public from knowing. It is the right to information that either confirms good governance or exposes an environment that does not promote the vision of an African Renaissance.

As citizens we will only have this right to access information if our governments and multinational corporations are held accountable to embrace ethics that offer us the lifeline and the countermeasures to that spirit of raw politics and power. Upholding ethics requires a magnanimous collective commitment of society from the top down. It is this commitment by the powerful to accept bounds to the use of their power, and to exercise self-restraint so as not to exploit the power with which they have been entrusted.

Ethical behaviour is the fruit of hope in all sectors of society to act in the best interests of the whole. Ethics offers hope to the poor and is a commitment by the rich and powerful not to exploit the poor. With ethics our main charge is a moral obligation to fairness. It builds trust between those with (especially economic and political) power and the disadvantaged and marginalised. It provides common ground for embracing principles of honesty, respect for others, honour and integrity in our commitments and obligations, compassion, and respect for laws and humanity.

However, there has to be a palpable spirit of valuing open access that underlies any legal framework in order to maintain openness. If not, no law will be able to protect those people who are not vigilant in protecting their rights. This

spirit was well illustrated with the race to complete the Human Genome Project when two former colleagues parted ways. Craig Venter set up a private corporation to map the human genome; Francis Collins stayed on as head of the government-sponsored project. The fear that a private company might withhold this valuable information from the public domain sparked great interest in the publicly funded project. In the end, the race was a duel and today the information is in the public domain (Shreeve, 2004:15). This example reflects the importance of public support not losing unfettered access to information that is vital to society.

Conclusion

The African Renaissance is a most noble pursuit. An observer of Africa will quickly notice the energy of the upcoming generation to learn English, to gain a good education, and to achieve their potential and dreams. For problems of this magnitude, the solutions are complex. This chapter has highlighted the technological challenges, economic impediments, and cultural and linguistic exclusion that have to be overcome as Africa is engaging in the establishment of a legal framework to sustain the needed improvement in education, commercial competitiveness and knowledge building as some of virtual space’s achievable blessings – promises that play a key role in sustaining the already unfolding reality of an African Renaissance.

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