The State of Internet Access in Uganda

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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 improvement 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 mainly on account of socio-economic factors (Mwesige, 2004; Mwesige & Lugalambi, 2003). Public Internet access in Uganda is still not in what Lee (1999) calls "the realm of the educationally and economically disadvantaged" (p. 346).

According to a survey of Internet cafés in Uganda, the typical user is a single male, who is under 30 years of age and has completed high school at the very minimum. This user not only has the disposable income required to have access, but also the requisite requirement of the English language, which remains the language of the Internet in Uganda as in many developing countries, and at least some knowledge and awareness of ICT (Mwesige, 2004).

A majority of Ugandan cyber café users appear to be already advantaged in terms of access not only to the Internet, but also to other ICT infrastructure such as computers and telephones. For example, 66% of the respondents had access at the workplace, 68% had and used computers at the workplace, and 77% said they had mobile cellular phones. In many cases, cyber café users had also had some prior exposure to the Internet, either at school or the workplace (Mwesige, 2004).

Use of the Internet by elites is not limited to cyber cafés. Collaborative work on Ugandan telecentres also suggests that these public facilities mainly benefited a small class of educated citizens in their communities (Mwesige & Lugalambi, 2003). Potential users of the telecentres, farmers and petty traders who have had little or no formal education, not only stayed away from the facilities, they were in many cases not even aware of their existence. (Also see Minges, 2001.)

These data suggest that the Internet is still an elite phenomenon in Uganda. Such evidence seems to contradict utopian definitions (Rao, 1999; Wakeford, 1999) of Internet cafés and community telecentres as public access points for "ordinary people." While these facilities have become principal access points for most Ugandan Internet users, the people who frequent them are by no means ordinary. In fact, according to some observers, public access points have created "the same sort of 'digital divide' that they were supposed to overcome" (Minges, 2001, p. 26).

Despite the glaring online inequality, the improvements in recent years are still worth celebrating. At least, public access points such as cyber cafés and community telecentres have opened opportunities for those who are able, mainly on account of income and knowledge, to take advantage of the services they offer. While only small advantaged sections of the population have access, these cyber elites sometimes share information with and act as proxies for others in the community who do not have access.

Barriers to Universal Internet Access

Perhaps the biggest barrier to Internet penetration in Uganda, as in the rest of sub-Saharan Africa, is the dearth of telecommunications hardware and infrastructure, which is crucial to connectivity. Despite the recent growth in telephony, there are only three telephone landlines per 1,000 people and about 32 cellular phones per 1,000 people. Computer penetration also remains low, with only about three computers per 1,000 people (Uganda Communications Commission, 2004; World Bank, 2004). Moreover, most of this hardware remains in the capital, Kampala, and a few major towns and urban centers.

Moreover, ICT costs remain very high. For instance, on average cyber cafés, which have become the principal access point for most Ugandan Internet users, charge the equivalent of U.S. $1 for 30 minutes. In a country where about 40% of the population lives below the poverty line, and where the average annual personal income (per capital GDP) is only about U.S. $300, only an economically advantaged minority can afford the costs associated with getting online.