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Information Access in Africa: Problems with Every Channel

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Abstract:

Every information channel within Africa is restricted. Limited budgets cause television stations to produce few shows of their own and to fill airtime with cheap American imports -- imports that are often at odds with local cultural values. Book production is complicated by high production costs. The computer database industry is miniscule by US standards. The World Wide Web opens a new forum for information access, but is complicated by high phone charges.

Two numbers converge in Africa. The first -- phone lines. Africa has twelve percent of the world's population, but just two percent of its phone lines. That number is fairly well known. Here is the second, converging number -- Africa has twelve percent of the world's population but publishes just two percent of the world's book titles. It is the second set of numbers that may be the most troubling because they hint at larger problems on the continent -- barriers to the creation and dissemination of information. To fully understand the many barriers to information in Africa, we should look at television, then take books, computer databases, and the World Wide Web.

Television

It's a Tuesday night in Africa. Here is your evening line-up for Windhoek, Namibia:

5 PM	Sesame Street
6 PM	Casper and Friends
6:30	The Rich Also Cry
7:00	Zoom
7:30	Growing Pains
8:00	News
8:30	Tropical Heat
9:25	Parliamentary Report
9:30	Talking Point
10:30	Sports

Cable subscribers could supplement that line up with "Goof Troop," "Scooby Doo," "The Flintstones" and "Garfield and Friends" as well as "The Wonder Years," "The Simpsons," plus "Don't Tell Mama the Baby-sitter's Dead." What a great way to spend an evening. A mongoose frolicking in the backyard, Kudu steaks on the grill, and American reruns on the tube.

Some version of this evening is occurring all around the world. In Hanoi, "Charlie's Angels" now airs six times a week (Huckshorn, 1995). In the Crimea 500 Russians demonstrated for a return to Russian language dubbing of "Santa Barbara," complaining that the new Ukrainian language version was totally unacceptable. "It's like a friend you've known for years suddenly changing her voice" (Meek, 1995). American television appears nearly everywhere.

As one would expect, the developing world has far fewer TVs than the US. Ghana has just 15 per 1000, India 32, Madagascar 20. For people in the developing world, television is not a common occurrence. But that does not mean it is unimportant, because in relative terms, it still carries significant weight. Consider the table below that compares television ownership to newspaper circulation in the developing world.

Country	Newspaper Circulation	Television Ownership
Algeria	51	74
Bangladesh	6	5
Colombia	61	115
Egypt	57	109
Guatemala	21	52
Iraq	34	69
Kenya	15	9
Madagascar	4	20
South Africa	38	105

(per 1000 population. Statistical Abstracts, 1994:856)

There are exceptions, such as Bangladesh and Kenya, but for the clear majority of developing nations, television is a far more significant source of information than newspapers. Given TV's important place even in the developing world, television programming begins to matter. What are they watching on their TVs around the world? In many cases, they are watching American reruns.

The American dominance of world television probably reaches its most ludicrous end in Cairo. Here in the country where American tourists are followed by heavily armed tourist police to protect them from Muslim Fundamentalists, much of Cairo spent 1993 protesting the removal of "The Bold and the Beautiful" from a daily prime time slot.

Henceforth it will only be seen once weekly, its daily slot taken by "Oskin" the story of a Japanese girl who works her way from rags to riches. Given a choice between beautifully dressed immoral American pap, and long-laboring Japanese morality, Egyptians in droves are calling for American Escapism. Explained one columnist, "We have 30 million Oskins like her. We have our fill of poverty, deprivation and need." (Eltahawy, 1994)

An interesting footnote to this example came from one South African newspaper which covered the Cairo controversy. It couldn't help gloating "Egypt is way behind South Africa in the Bold and Beautiful series. For example, Caroline is dead, Kirsten has left the show, and Clark has remarried." Poor, backward Egypt, it just can't keep up with South Africa on American soaps.

What is there about television that leads to such overwhelming American programming dominance? Money and language. Let's start with money. For established studios, television is a marvelous industry. They have heavy investments in creating a product, but once that product is completed, it is one of the most unique products ever made -- you can make copies of it for almost nothing, and transport it practically for free. The product seems designed for export.

Economics works the other way for newer and less developed television stations. Put yourself in the position of Nahum Gorelick, Managing Director of the Namibian Broadcast Company. He has air time to fill -- about eight hours a day. He also has a

limited budget. What can he use to fill his time slots? "Baywatch" Not exactly a cultural export, "Baywatch" consists mostly of people wearing very little, doing little of consequence on American beaches. Namibia has beaches, but not idle adolescents for whom the show was written. But it is cheap. One hour costs NBC \$450. They have gotten complaints about the show from rural viewers. Gorelick says "Baywatch is more embarrassment than entertainment for people there [in rural areas]. The nudity, the physical contact..." But he has airtime to fill and a limited budget so his African viewers get a steady diet of nearly-naked Americans.

By Gorelick's estimates, an hour of local content would cost \$1200 if it were undirected (like local soccer matches), and well over \$2000 if it involved actors and directors. To get up to export standards, his costs would be even higher. By one estimate, export prices represent less than 1% of local production costs (Lent, 1993). Gorelick has a limited budget, so he goes with the cheap American product. This programming choice is repeated over and over as Gorelick and his colleagues around the world try to fill time slots. American TV may not be very good, but it is cheap.

Not all world television is American. Brazil has arrived at a compromise. In order to stay on the air 20 hours a day, TV Globo shows early morning cartoons and late night feature films from the US, but puts their locally produced soaps -- *telenovelas* -- in prime time. Audiences much prefer the local shows, with one rating of American television shows by university students giving the imported shows just a 1.6 on a 10 point scale (Oliveira,

1993), but the cost of local production is too high and the cost of imports too low, so some American content is inevitable.

Can local cultures respond? One reaction is local content laws. For instance, South Africa is rewriting its broadcasting laws to demand 50 percent local content on its public television station and 30 percent local content on private TV stations (Pearce, 1995). But local content laws are anachronistic in the age of satellite networks. With one satellite network setting up in neighboring Swaziland and broadcasting to all of South Africa from there, national content laws don't have any effect. Cheap imports rain in unchecked.

Besides cheap prices what makes the US such an important player in world television? A good case can be made for the accident of our national language. English is spoken as a first or second language in countries all over the world. Add in the business and technical strength of the US, and you have a language worth learning.

American companies can trade on that advantage. Unlike their competitors in Berlin, Tokyo, or Moscow, the American product comes factory fresh with the "right" language. No costs or delays for translating, no laughable dubbing or illegible subtitles -- you get good old English in the original. Of course this is also true for the people who created the language in the first place, the English. It is interesting to see how they have played to that advantage.

England, and especially the BBC, has not been sitting idly by watching the US take over world TV. Creating a world television service in 1991, its 24 hour news and information channel reaches the Pacific, the Middle East, Eastern Europe, and Canada. One jingoistic English columnist described the importance of the TV channel to England. "Where the fight was once for territory and "zones of influence," in future it could be for air-space" (Walden, 1994). He went on to describe how the BBC might prevail in such a fight:

Hundred of millions of people who have hitherto been starved of entertainment and subjected to Victorian sexual taboos, will be easy meat for the international purveyors of low pictorial diversion in all its forms, soft-porn included [read "Hollywood"]...as international audiences tire of pap [read "Hollywood" again] and become more educated and discriminating, the world market for more sophisticated and demanding television will grow [read "BBC"].

Does this mean "The Bold and Beautiful" competing for air time with "Monty Python" is the moral equivalent of war? If so, we face an interesting century.

Whether sophisticated programming will make the BBC a serious contender with American efforts is still up in doubt. What is not in doubt is the dominance of the English language. As one commentators noted, "the Anglo-Saxons will retain a global advantage as decisive in its sphere as "the oil weapon" used to be: the English language." (Walden, 1994).

What is the consequence for Africa? While television is a growing medium of communication, the content of the medium is foreign. What must it be like to be a sophisticated viewer in a major capital city but never see a television show that reflects upon one's experience? To see every action or emotion of near-naked Americans portrayed nightly, but to have no sense of how one's compatriots are dealing with their lives? That is the television experience of much of Africa.

Books

In 1990, over 650,000 different books were published world wide (Bowkers, 1993). The sheer number of titles might imply that the world is awash with books. It is certainly true that parts of the world are awash with books. For instance, US publishers sold over two billion books in 1991(Statistical Abstracts, 247). But here, as in every other form of information, production is uneven. The table below demonstrates the huge differences in book production by country.

Number of book titles published in 1990

Bangladesh	2,795
Canada	8,126
China	73,923
India	13,837
Korea, South	39,330
Norway	3,712
Philippines	1,112
South Africa	4,950
United Kingdom	63,980
United States	48,146

While North America was publishing 461 book titles per million people, Africa was producing 29. The differences are even clearer when we look at particular countries. The United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) monitors both the number of books published per country and the kind of books being published. Some kind of books (such as "Pure Science") would seem to be difficult for developing countries, but one would expect that all countries would write books about geography and history. Such books would be an important part of a country's self-awareness. Yet differences here are great. Consider these figures from 1980:

Country	Geography/History books published
Nigeria	230
Tanzania	0
Canada	932
Cuba	18
Mexico	203
US	2,673
Columbia	340
Japan	2,919
Sri Lanka	62
Germany	4,332
United Kingdom	4,024

(Curwen, 1986: 273-276)

Among developed nations there are substantial differences in publication rates, but all are publishing large numbers. For poorer nations like Tanzania, Cuba, and Sri Lanka, local production is minor. Tanzania, with no production of history books at all in 1980, poses a problem typical for the very poor. If citizens want to learn about their nation, they have to learn from outsiders. How would we Americans feel if every book about American history were published in foreign countries? It would seem odd indeed. Even if

every foreign publisher had the best intentions, we would probably be somewhat nervous about such a situation.

Yet publishing in a developing nation can be a daunting task. Jane Katjavivi, President of New Namibia Books illustrates the problems such publishers face. She established her company in 1990 and has been very successful in bringing out a range of trade and educational titles. But it hasn't been easy. Production costs are high. Part of the costs come from high paper prices (it must all be imported), high printing costs (all of the local presses are small and slow), and high editorial expenses (few people in Namibia have editorial or design experience). So it costs her more to produce a book in Namibia that it did when she was working as a publisher in the UK.

Despite the efforts of publishers like Katjavivi, it appears that book publishing will continue to be largely dominated by the US and Europe. When Africa produces less than 2% of the world's book titles, and Latin America just 5%, it is clear where the book industry is concentrated. For Jane Katjavivi sales figures reinforce the point. Her best selling book had "good" sales when it reached 2000. It hit 2000 the same year the US market sold 2 billion books. Put another way, her biggest winner sold just 1 millionth of the US market. She and her African colleagues understand where they stand in the book world.

Databases

Commercial databases are a growing industry. A recent Information Industry Directory lists 4,700 organizations world-wide in the information business. They range from the International Potato Center in Lima, Peru to the Metals economics Group, Ltd. of Halifax, Nova Scotia. The Directory provides staffing information about each organization ("4 information professionals, 4 management professionals, 2 technicians, 2 sales and marketing, 1 clerical, 2 other.") (Morgan, 1992), address, phone, and year founded. In two thick volumes the directory details the industry.

In her history of the commercial database industry, Martha Williams of the University of Illinois provides a clear sense of just how fast this industry is growing. "Over the 16-year time period from 1975 through 1991, database records have grown by a factor of 77 -- the number of records increased from 52 million to 4,060 billion, while the number of databases has grown from 301 to 7,637 -- a factor of 24." (Williams, 1992). This kind of growth in databases has led to a similar growth in database companies -- from 105 in 1975 to 933 in 1991.

The other aspect of data collections that has changed over the years is US dominance. In 1975 the US has more databases than the rest of the world combined, but not much more (177 to 124). Sixteen years later the rest of the world has vastly increased its collection of databases (to 1893) but still hasn't been able to keep up with the explosion of growth in the US (to 4368). Here is the breakdown by region:

Region	Databases
Africa	8
Asia	34
Australia	146
Far East	189
East Europe	13
West Europe	1797
North America	5396
South America	54

(Williams, 1992:vxiii)

Africa's share of this industry? One tenth of one percent. South America? Seven tenths of one percent. Eastern Europe? Less than two tenths of one percent. This is a very profitable business, and the information is all flowing in one direction.

The World Wide Web

The best Web page in the world may be Zambia's (<http://www.zamnet.zm>). It starts out unimpressively with the usual tourist pitch:

“Discover Zambia, a land of many contrasts... Prolific wildlife, birds in abundance, fertile valleys, spectacular waterfalls, huge lakes and winding rivers, swamps and wetlands, hot springs and vast golden plains. Famous for their friendliness, Zambians are ready to welcome you to their beautiful country.”

If you wished, you could take out “Zambia”, insert the name of any island in the Caribbean, or any resort in the US, and you would have the standard Chamber of Commerce pitch for anywhere. But the next menu selection on their home page breaks

with tradition. They have put one of their major independent newspapers on-line. The Post is hardly a government lackey, and giving them access to the electronic public takes some real courage. Consider one article from June 23, 1995:

PLOT TO KILL FORMER PRESIDENT KAUNDA EXPOSED

By Staff Reporters

Secret Intelligence correspondence has revealed that an MMD official has offered to arrange for the assassination of former President Kenneth Kaunda. A letter from the Mansa office of the Zambia Intelligence Security Service (ZISS) dated May 29, 1995 and addressed to the director general for the attention of the director 'B' branch reveals that a National Campaign Committee for the re-election of President Frederick Chiluba has been formed and is prepared to assassinate the former president.

This is not exactly an advertisement for the country, and certainly not an ad for the ruling party. Our first reaction might be to write off Zambia as just another African country with a bad government. But give some thought to what they have done.

Consider if you will, the odds of some American corporation creating a Web page in which sales literature was presented, but so was their latest OSHA inspection results, or a listing of the current complaints coming in from consumers. Try to find a US university that would post data on student attrition or the campus crime rate. Find one state Web

page that has one word critical of the governor. Isn't it odd that we have to go to Africa to find an example of freedom of information?

The problem is we won't be seeing many such examples of freedom of information. First, there isn't much information, and second, it is neither economically or politically free.

Let's start with quantity. Even on the World Wide Web, information has to come from someplace. At American universities it comes from professors publishing their research, and from the dorms with thousands of students entertaining each other with their personal Web pages. Off campus we have corporations, nonprofits, every group with a cause, libraries, professional bodies... Thousands of new pages come onto the Web every day.

Where are the equivalent sources in Africa or India or South America? The universities?

The University of Namibia has fifteen computers for two thousand students. The universities in South Africa are better off, but nowhere outside of America is there the ready access to machines that lets eighteen year olds create pages in honor of their favorite TV shows or in honor of their academic passions. Corporations? Organizations? Libraries? Professional groups? The same people who aren't writing books and aren't producing television shows also aren't creating Web pages.

Even if they had the time, the expertise, and the computer access, they would be up against tremendous costs. In its preparations for the Leland Initiative, USAID investigated current costs for Internet access in Africa. What it found is the standard information age irony -- the richer an African nation was, the lower its Internet costs. The poorer a nation, the more it has to pay for information.

USAID computed its costs around the monthly expenses of a small organization. What would it pay if it send 10 pages of data (or ten email messages) a day? What would it pay for fifty? Here are the results for several countries:

	10 pages	50 pages per day
Angola	100.00	100.00
Ivory Coast	182.14	877.38
Ethiopia	48.45	222.26
Mali	188.81	884.05
Namibia	62.81	62.81
South Africa	13.97	13.97

(USAID Web site, 1996)

South Africa is by far the richest nation in Africa, and it has Internet rates similar to those in the US. In countries like Mali and the Ivory Coast where daily life is a struggle, just modest daily use of the Internet costs over 800 dollars each month. Will university professors in Mali start putting their research on the Web? Not when Web charges exceed their salary. Will the local unions create a Web page? The local chapter of Rotary International? A group of retailers? Costs to “publish” on the web are just too high.

And money isn't the only cost. While Zambia displays the potential of this medium, it also demonstrates its danger. The Post may have its daily paper on the Web, but only when the editor and his reporters are out of jail. Periodically they are arrested on one charge or another by a government that really doesn't like them. Putting out the paper is a battle that takes energy and courage. Few people are willing to follow in their footsteps. Opposition newspapers are being closed around Africa, not opened. When they are all gone, where will the reporters come from to gather the information, write the stories, and post the facts? There is no Internet fairy that produces Web pages magically during the night. Someone has to go out into the street, gather the news, risk the jail time, and gather the economical and political support necessary to keep information freedom alive. There are not huge numbers of volunteers for this duty.

In Africa it appears that every information channel is at least partially blocked. Little original television production, few books, few entries in databases, few Web pages -- each channel that matters is underdeveloped. That is a problem for them. But it is also a problem for us. The value of information channels comes in large measure from the ability of the those on the other end to add insight and information. So far that isn't happening and we have yet to start looking at what it would take for those channels to be developed.

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