

Jacques C. du Plessis

The Spirit of Open Access to Information as a Key Pillar to the African Renaissance

Abstract:

This article explores the future impact of an African renaissance with a specific emphasis on information ethics to address the needs of the emerging virtual realm. The four main focus areas include the technological challenges to deploy 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 that need to be considered 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 citizen's rights of access and privacy in cyberspace.

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Author:

Dr. Jacques C du Plessis:

- School of Information Studies (SOIS), University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, 580 Bolton Hall, 3210 N Maryland Ave, Milwaukee, WI 53211, USA
- ☎ +414 229 2856, ✉ jacques@uwm.edu 🌐 www.sois.uwm.edu/jacques/

Introduction

This paper 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 an opportunity 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 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: the virtual world.

The African Renaissance

If we look at Asia first, we readily recognize 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)¹. There is an awakening in China. There is a growing belief that their economy will become the biggest in the 21st century (Shenkar, 2005²; Sing, 1988³). The Chinese are

¹ Fishman, Ted (2004). The Chinese Century. (Online) Available at <http://www.nytimes.com/2004/07/04/magazine/04CHINA.html?ex=1246680000&en=127e32464ca6faf3&ei=5088&partner=rssnyt>

² Shenkar, Oded (2005), The Chinese Century – The rising Chinese economy and its impact on the global economy, the balance of power, and your job. Wharton School Publishing, Upper Saddle River, NJ

³ Sing, S.K. (1988). China: Will the 20th century giant become a 21st century superpower? [Online] Available at <http://www.globalsecurity.org/military/library/report/1988/SSK.htm>

demonstrating the ability to nurture this dream. They are demonstrating zeal to infect their people with hope and the 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 this question whether the Chinese Renaissance can be done 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;" translated as, "The germ (seed) is nothing, the soil is everything." In short, to grow fruit, one needs the magic of 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) said, "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 it is for the undesirable. The magnitude of the challenges that faces Africa imposes a reality check about the current environment in Africa and whether this environment can be favorable for an emerging renaissance.

On the one side there is a hope for a renaissance. At last Africa is now seen as free from colonial oppression. There is zeal to acquire as much education as possible and to fulfill the dreams and aspirations of previous generations whose aspirations 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 skeptics that point to the vexing challenges of 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 crime. (Diallo, 2004⁴; Herbert, 2002⁵).

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 to profoundly change 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 first consider the global impact of the industrial revolution. The surge of new technology changed the way products were designed, created and delivered. Many new products were introduced (e.g. the automobile) that 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. The pace of improvements in hardware, network technology and throughput, software capabilities and workflow processes, etc. happens so fast, that the question is not only how society can transition to the use of a new product, but it is vital to also consider how to adapt to change as a constant – how to cope and flourish in an environment wherein change happens at a seemingly exponential pace. Change is not only a celebrated event anymore; it is a routine, a constant process. To be able to make this transition to the required mindset 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 develop and blaze the trail to develop and engineer new social networking behaviors and to develop a mindset in which average citizens become empowered with previously unimaginable means of access to information and means of communication and social networking. This transformation of the current

mindset requires attention to the following two issues: (i) an established framework of information ethics to formalize and protect the digital rights of access and privacy of all citizens, and (ii) an adaptation in cultural behavior to harness the affordances of the digital era. This paper centers on 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 the soil, not the germ – it is everything. As the Americans would say, lacking access is a show stopper. If access to information is a right, then there is an imperative 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 and Dumar (2003)⁶ 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

⁴ Diallo, Mamadou (Aug, 2004) *Memorandum on the Guinean Paradox*. [Online] Available at <http://www.guinea-forum.org/Analyses/index.asp?ana=20&Lang=A>

⁵ Herbert, Ross (2002). *Implementing NEPAD: A Critical Assessment*. African Report: Assessing the New partnership. pp 93-134. [Online] Available at http://www.nsi-ins.ca/english/pdf/africa_report/ch5_herbert_e.pdf

⁶ Keniston, Kenneth and Deepak Dumar, eds. (2003). *The Four Digital Divides*. [Online] Available at http://web.mit.edu/~kken/Public/PAPERS/Intro_S_age.html

to address what is called the 'missing link', which is the lack of connectivity of Southern and Eastern Africa to the world's fiber networks. "The 'missing link' explains why the region accounts for less than one percent of the world's international bandwidth capacity" (World Bank, April 2, 2007⁷). The East African submarine cable system (EASSy) is one such project to provide a cable network along Africa's eastern coast line (World Bank Group Support (n.a)⁸). 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." This expansion will bring relief to the region where the region 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" (World Bank, April 2, 2007⁹). These plans will greatly contribute to an infrastructure that will enable the region to have world-class access to the Internet and help diminish Africa's vulnerability to exploitation due to its information and communication deficit.

The development of the infrastructure has to remain a top priority. If African governments are not able to overcome inertia due to Africa's 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," translates to "Knowledge is Power." In the digital age, if the data does not flow, neither does information flow; and information does not flow, how can knowledge be developed? And if knowledge is not generated,

where is the power? The grand idea and attempts at an African renaissance will remain limited in its potential unless the African virtual space does not become a reality for Africa to take its rightful role as the materialized and dematerialized worlds interface in today's knowledge economy.

Economic Impediments

The role of governments to champion the cause of establishing the infrastructure cannot be ignored. African governments struggle with internal issues that discourage investment and economic growth like nepotism, exclusive contracts, nationalization, and business under the table. Asia has overcome many of these human frailties and flourished economically. There is a growing voice within Africa to find solutions to nepotism and corruption. On April 2, 2007¹⁰, President Thabo Mbeki of South Africa said that 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." anticipation is that much is of this space in conducting commerce, competing, generating and sharing knowledge, and connecting the key stakeholders in virtually every international endeavor."

In the same speech, Mbeki concludes that

"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."

⁷ World Bank (2007). *Addressing Africa's 'Missing Link'*. [Online] Available at <http://go.worldbank.org/DGMGL3AB40>

⁸ World Bank Group Support (n.a) *The Africa Regional Communications Infrastructure Program*. [Online] Available at http://siteresources.worldbank.org/EXTAFRREGINI/COO/Resources/RCIP_WSIS_Briefing_nov.pdf

⁹ World Bank (2007). *Addressing Africa's 'Missing Link'*. [Online] Available at <http://go.worldbank.org/DGMGL3AB40>

¹⁰ MBeki, Thabo. (April, 2007) *Fighting Corruption And Safeguarding Integrity*, Address given at the opening ceremony of the UN Global Forum, Sandton, South Africa. [Online] Available at http://www.sarpn.org.za/documents/d0002472/Fighting_corruption_Mbeki_Apr2007.pdf

This kind of resolve at the highest circles need 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 the individual exploiting a situation for 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 information. The linguistic and cultural factors that promote or impede access greatly impact the success of participation in virtual space. Keniston and Dumar (2003¹¹) point out that non-English cultures are at a great disadvantage to access on the Internet, since there is so little of relevance in their own languages. They say, "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 prioritize for the development of content and services in underserved languages. Yet, in much of Africa where literacy is inadequate, that demand is tied 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 recognized fact, that English has become the lingua franca in the digital era. Learning English does not imply submission to the values and trends emanating from the USA and the UK. According to O'Neill, Lavoie, and Bennett (April, 2003¹²), more than 70% of the Web is in English, with no other language having more than 10% of the Web. This indicates the significance of a loss to access to information it signifies if the user is not able to read English. Preparing the new generation to function in English is a vital to more effec-

tively access information and communicate in the international arena.

Selwyn (2002¹³) said, "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 to the digital era and to integrate ICT's in 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 facilitating 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 the 'locals' will take ownership of their participation and destiny within the virtual infosphere.

Legal Barriers – Open Access, A Basic Human Right

More than a century ago, Lord Acton warned that "power corrupts, and absolute power corrupts absolutely." (Acton, 1887¹⁴). If certain categories of information is not treated as a public good, if information is an exclusive commodity, it disempowers the public to know. It is the right to information that confirms good governance, or exposes an environment that does not promote the vision of the African Renaissance. As citizens we will only have this right to access information if our governments and multinational corporations are held accountable to embrace of ethics that offers us the lifeline and the counter measures 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 not to exploit the power with which

¹¹ Keniston, Kenneth and Deepak Dumar, eds. (2003). *The Four Digital Divides*. [Online] Available at http://web.mit.edu/~kken/Public/PAPERS/Intro_Sage.html

¹² O'Neill, Edward T., Lavoie, Brian F., and Bennett, Rick (April, 2003) *Trends in the Evolution of the Public Web 1998 - 2002*, D-Lib Magazine 9(4). [Online] Available at <http://www.dlib.org/dlib/april03/lavoie/04lavoie.html>

¹³ Selwyn, Neil. (2002) *'Defining the Digital Divide: Developing a Theoretical Understanding of Inequalities in the Information Age'* Cardiff University School of Social Sciences Occasional Paper 49, ISBN 1-872-330-967, 36 pages. [Online] Available at <http://www.cardiff.ac.uk/socsi/ict/definingdigitaldivide.pdf>.

¹⁴ Lord Acton, letter to Mandell Creighton, April 5, 1887.—Acton, *Essays on Freedom and Power*, ed. Gertrude Himmelfarb, pp. 335–36 (1972).

they are entrusted. Ethical behaviour is the fruits of hope by all sectors of a society to act in the best interest of the whole. Ethics offers hope to opportunity the poor, and it 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 a trust between those with power (especially economic and political) and the disadvantaged and marginalized. It provides common ground to embrace 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 valuing open access that has to underlie any legal framework in order to maintain openness. Otherwise, no law will be able to protect the people who are not vigilant to protect their rights. This spirit was well illustrated with the race to complete the human genome project. Two former colleagues parted ways. Craig Venter set up private corporation to map the human genome. Francis Collins stayed on as head of the government sponsored Human Genome Project (HGP). The fear that a private company might withhold this valuable information from the public domain sparked great interest for the publicly funded project to win. 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 to not lose unfettered access to information that is vital to society.

Conclusion

The African renaissance is a most noble pursuit. The observer to Africa quickly notices 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 paper highlights the technological challenges, the economic impediments, cultural and linguistic exclusion that have to be overcome as Africa is engaging in the establishment of 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 this already unfolding reality of an African renaissance.

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