

Internet Connectivity: A Must For Nigeria

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Abstract

The question being asked in the developed world is whether the developing countries can harness the Net to their advantage without fostering new forms of North-South despondency. They are worried about us in the developing countries but we seem to be mindless of it. The paper reviews the Internet - Its prospects and opportunities. Few impediments against the spread of Internet activities in Nigeria are discussed and some suggestions are made to remove the impediments.

1. Introduction

Internet - the prime mover of the Information Age -, which has been sending revolutionary waves across the industrialized nations of the world, is yet to be given attention in many African countries, including Nigeria. This is truly pathetic, for while the developed world is struggling to dwarf the world, to make the world a global village as it is fashionable to say in Internet circle, Africans are, by their lukewarm attitude, wanting to widen the gap between the developed and the developing countries.

Organized discussions on Internet in Nigeria, for instance, started around 1994 which later gave birth to Nigeria Internet Group in 1995, but through the Federal Government of Nigeria in August 1998, directed the Ministries of Science and Technology and Communication to work out the necessary policy guide lines to enhance Internet connectivity in Nigeria but not much progress has been reported in that direction. A few individuals and much fewer corporate organizations have, however, been connected and are enjoying the 'magic' of the Internet.

2. What is Internet?

There are many distinguished experts present in this International conference, but as it is the first in the country, it may not be out of place to answer such a significant question that many others are still going to ask in Africa long after the conference. This is so because, whereas the awareness is growing exponentially in the developed world, the rate is embarrassingly low in Africa.

Jon R. Levine and his friends talked about the Internet as "a brand-new world with its own language." The Internet is a computer network of networks. It is a vast information superhighway that facilitates communication between computer users both nationally and internationally. It enables computers of all kinds to share services and communicate directly as if they are part of a giant global computing machine.

One frequently asked question is on the benefits and capabilities are enormous when viewed in the light of:

- a. Electronic mail (e-mail)
- b. The World Wide Web (www)
- c. Information retrieval
- d. Electronic Commerce
- e. Newsgroups
- f. Intranets
- g. Recreation and Entertainment

1. **The Electronic Mail (e-mail)**

The electronic mail or simply e-mail is the most widely used service of the Internet. E-mail replaces paper mail, telephone and even fax and does so with utmost certainty and ease. It is the fastest courier service, the surest telephone that works even when the receiving end set is not in use at the time of sending a message. The e-mail can deliver any printed matter, photographs and drawings inclusive, at the fastest rate and at the cheapest rate.

Unlike with paper mail, one is able to send and receive mails without touching paper and unlike the telephone, every communication through the e-mail is stored and can be retrieved at will.

2. **The World Wide Web**

The World Wide Web is a multimedia hyper-linked database that spans the globe. It was established in 1989 and today combines text, pictures, sound and even animation. It lets one move around with a click of the computer mouse. There are millions of web sites and the number is increasing by leaps monthly.

3. **Information Retrieval**

Many computers around the globe have files of information that are FREE for the taking. Such files range from U.S. Supreme Court decisions and library catalogs to the text of old books, digitized pictures and an enormous variety of software, from games to operating systems. Special tools known as SEARCH ENGINES, DIRECTORIES and INDICES help to find information on the Net.

4. **Electronic Commerce**

Electronic commerce is a fancy word for buying and selling stuff over the Net. Software is available for sending credit card numbers over the Net to enhance purchase of anything from books to stock at the National Stock Exchange. It provides the fastest means to purchase stuff.

5. **Newsgroups**

A system called Usenet, founded in 1979, is an enormous, distributed online bulletin board with over 700 million characters of messages in more than 20,000 different topic groups flowing daily. Online bulletin boards are systems set up for people of like interests for discussion via e-mail, message areas, and real-time chat. The most widely read Usenet newsgroup is one that features selected jokes, most of which are pretty funny.

6. **Intranets**

An Intranet is a bunch of services, such as web pages, that are accessible only within an organization. It is an Organization Wide Web (OWW), e.g. the NUNET for Nigerian Universities. By means of the Internet, useful information that would have been locked up in files in one section of an organization are made available to the rest of the organization.

7. **Recreation and Entertainment**

The idle mind has been said to be the devil's workshop. Games on net offer possibilities for players located at different parts of the globe. Also the Internet Relay Chat (IRC) is a party line over which conversation may be held with other people all over the world.

2. **Internet Awareness in Nigeria**

Of over 140 million people worldwide that are hooked onto the Net, Nigeria may claim to have less than 5000. If one checks this against a population of over 100 million, one may say that Nigeria is hardly on the Internet map. The reasons for this low level of Internet activity are not far fetched. Firstly, telephone is not for the 'common' man in Nigeria. It is a status symbol for those who have 'arrived' financially. The real connection fees and service charges are beyond the reach of even a University Professor, who otherwise is an elite in any society of this globe.

NITEL's general performance discourages people from investing on Internet. Most phones are idle all the year round. Many people do not want to increase idle gadgets around them, or waste time chasing NITEL servicing personnel who are royal brides.

The third reason is the fact that there is no 'backbone' in Nigeria to enhance Internet connectivity. Internet Service Providers have to lease lines from Europe and America at very exorbitant costs, which are transferred to the subscribers. Thus whereas a European

or an American subscriber pays US\$ 150 per annum, a Nigerian subscriber is expected to pay US\$ 1000 (about N82,000) per annum.

The fourth reason and probably the most worrying is the fact that Nigerian Government has not come up with an Internet Policy. After the August 1998 workshop on the solution to the Year 2000 Computer Time Bomb organized by the Federal Ministry of Science and Technology, at Abuja, the Federal Government directed that Ministry to liase with the Ministry of Communications to initiate action on a policy. The Internet public is still awaiting the outcome.

The fifth reason is the low level of Internet awareness in the country. The Nigeria Internet Group started its awareness campaigns in 1995 but such campaigns have been limited to Lagos and Abuja. Telecomms Answers associates, a Lagos based company also handles Internet literacy campaigns through its Internet Club but such campaigns have also been limited to the western axis of the country. The Internet Society Nigeria Chapter has carried the campaigns from Port Harcourt, Abuja, Lagos and Maiduguri. Both the Nigeria Internet Group and the Internet Society Nigeria Chapter have web sites but access is open to only those who are linked to the net or are already aware. The campaign needs to be intensified by relevant government agencies.

3. **Advantages of the Internet**

We are living in an Information Age. The main advantage of the Internet is the ease and speed with which information may be communicated. We are here talking about the information that concerns everybody in one way or another. We may consider the advantages of Internet under location of businesses, products and services; education and research; marketing and sales; investing; healing; locating people; travel; love; organizing events.

4.1 **Locating Businesses, Products and Services**

Internet Yellow Page directory services are updated regularly to assist in locating anything anywhere. In circumstances where businessmen want diversification, the yellow pages could be of immense assistance to provide new opportunities. This in turn could help to reduce unemployment problems in our society.

2. **Education and Research**

Research is greatly enhanced when there is enough relevant information. With Internet, researchers and scientists are able to download up-to-date research results from around the world. Such information is obtained very quickly and at minimal cost.

Schoolteachers are able to co-ordinate projects with classrooms all over the globe. Students are able to do research from their home computers. The latest encyclopedias are on-line. The Net offers the best library services.

3. **Marketing and Sales**

Companies are selling their products over the Net. On-line bookstores and music stores allow people to browse on-line, choose titles and pay for them over the Net.

4. **Investing**

It is possible to buy stock and invest money online. Investors are finding new ventures and new ventures are also finding capital. Business is therefore greatly enhanced.

5. **Healing**

Patients and Doctors keep up-to-date with the latest medical findings, share treatment experiences and give one another support around medical problems. In fact there was a recent situation where some Nigerian doctors rushed their colleague to a Teaching Hospital and found that even there, they could not obtain any additional help for the condition. One of them who were connected, resorted to the Net and immediately obtained information that saved the colleague.

6. **Finding People**

Directory services are available to search the phone books of many countries, by which method people may be found. There is an online service that looks people up by names and addresses. These services are of immense importance in emergencies.

7. **Love**

Singles advertisements and match making sites are available for users. People really find romance on the Net.

8. **Organizing Events**

Conference and trade-show organizers use the Net to disseminate information, call for papers and handle registration on the web. Paper and shipping costs are drastically reduced in this way.

4. **For whom is Internet?**

From the foregoing it may be seen that the Internet is for everybody. It is estimated that about 7 million kids shall be on line by the turn of the century. The Net has dramatic implications in education, entertainment and socialization of children. The more we know and use the Net, the more avenues it opens for us.

Many people are learning more on the Net than they ever did in school. It is open to every one of any colour, height, belief and description. Those who were previously handicapped in one way or the other, physically, economically, geographically or otherwise find the Net an empowering, life-altering experience.

In addition to the informal education that is already available, organizations are actively working to establish formal on-line colleges. Athena Visual On-line University (VOU) was founded in 1995. Thousands of students in Malaysia avail themselves of instruction via the web. One can today, use the Net to research classes and professors to get a better idea of what appeals to one.

5.1 How to Get Connected

There are many Internet Service Providers in Nigeria who are able to link customers to the Net. Some of them operate on dial-up store and forward access that supports e-mail service while others have up-dated to satellite based service.

With the deregulation of the telecomms industry private sector participation is growing. It is hoped that the quality of the telecomms infrastructure shall also improve correspondence to enhance full Internet Connectivity. Many of the current Internet Service Providers are based in the Lagos Area though NITEL and also some of the private ones hope to spread to other areas.

The cost of subscription (about N82,000) presently makes Internet Services exclusive. This of course, is due to the fact that the Internet Service Providers have to use backbones based in the United States or in Europe. A local backbone in Nigeria shall drastically reduce the high cost of subscription to bring about rapid spread of Internet activity that more benefits are derived from the Net. The situation in Nigeria is putting some people outside the global village, which will further make them lag a century behind the rest of the world.

Apart from the subscription are needs to have one's computer, modem, and software to run the computer and an account with an Internet Service Provider. The cost of these various items are reducing fast in countries that have fully adopted Internet. Unfortunately, they are still beyond the reach of the purpose of helping the common man that calls are being made to government and the private bodies to set up public Internet centres like NITEL has done for pay phones.

Also one requires a digital phone for the Net. Most of our current phones are analog and suffer from long downtime due to one reason or the other. Eventually, Nigeria may need to join the rest of the advanced countries in the use of wireless communication, as this shall greatly enhance service to our rural population as well.

5. Conclusion

Information Technology, solidly hinged on Internet is a new money-spinner in the world. Internet has the prospect of breaking Nigeria's dependence on only oil for income. It has the capability of transforming Nigeria from a third world to a 'second' world country. Nigeria and indeed Nigerians should grab the opportunities derivable from the Internet.

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