

CAN YOU BUY AN AFRICAN DREAM?

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DIGITAL DIVIDE OR DIGITAL DYNAMICS?

We all know statements like these:

- »There are more Internet accounts in London than in the whole of Africa. «
- »Industrialized Nations with less than 15 percent of the world's population account for more than 88 percent of all Internet users«
- »94 percent of the links to secure server are written in English«¹

Nobody will want to argue against the fact that ICTs aren't spread equally around the globe. Digging deeper into the phenomenon there are two questions to be answered:

1. Is this divide a particular digital one?
2. Anyhow, how can it be overcome?

Ad 1.) Many serious research convincingly argue that there is a clear association between GDP per capita and rating on the Networked ICT Readiness Index e.g. see Figure 1.

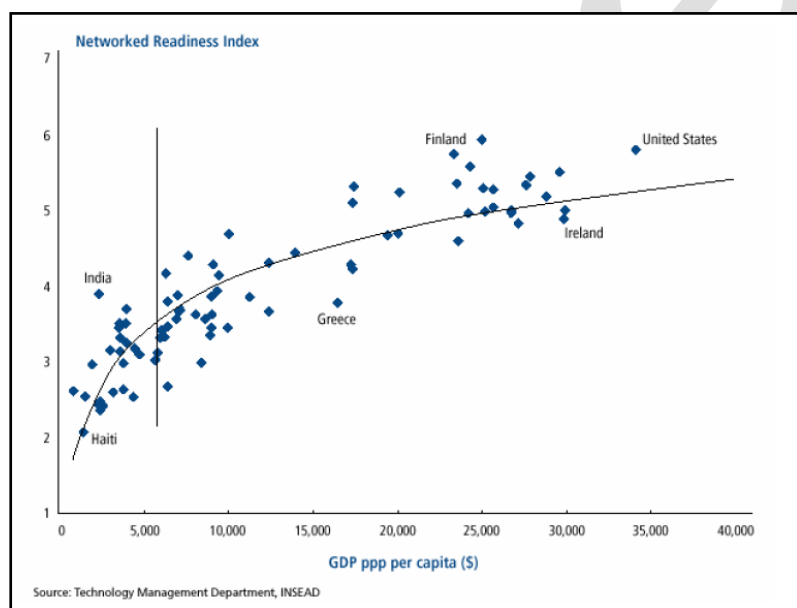


Figure 1

So the digital divide doesn't seem to be a genuine digital one but to follow the rather traditional divide of the rich and the poor wherever you draw the line. What really makes it different to the traditional divide of the haves and have-nots of tapped drinking water e.g. is the digital dynamics that is at work in the digital sphere and targets at bridging the digital gap. The second question posed above now deals with this subject.

¹ World Economic Forum (2002): Annual Report of the Global Digital Divide Initiatives. Geneva

Ad 2.) One has to take into account that at the very heart of the digital sphere two exponential dynamics are at work: The first exponential is Moore's law stating that every 12 to 18 months the amount of transistors per inch doubles thus cutting the costs of computing power into half every 1 – 1.5 years; i.e. within 10 to 15 years some smart and creative engineers or entrepreneurs in emerging markets can buy the computing power of google's current data center for the price of a PC. That alone accounts for an unprecedented rapid growth in ICT distribution all over the world. While it took the radio 38 years to reach 50 M people the Internet made it in only 5.

More important though is the second exponential: Reed's law arguing that the value of a network grows exponentially with every new member. It is therefore in the very interest of the (digital) haves – for their own sake – to turn as many (digital) have-nots as possible into haves who furthermore (because of Moore's law) are every year more and more in a position to do so themselves. Because of these two dynamics the distribution of ICT's is – in the nomenclature of Amartya Senn – a growth related process not a development related one.

Let me summarize this argument with a bet: Before every household in Africa will have tapped drinking water (just one example for an existing analogue divide) every household in Africa will have internet access.

And then? That is the question we really have to deal with here! Being growth related the process may not need any subsidizing in the long run but it well needs guidance not to get out of hand. Even or rather especially in a digital world we will still face a certain divide - a genuine digital divide then. To understand this one must think of what media does (equal if the media is digital or analogue) at its very heart: in its ultimate abstraction media enables the difference of presence and non presence. The white paper of a book, a blue screen, a wave length etc. - they all provide the possibility for something to become present. Now let us take a look into today's media (business). We simply have to state: Africa is not (very) present. To be provocative again: Please compare the presence of the 2.000 deaths of the 9-11 attacks with the 2.000.000 Million deaths of the Ruanda civil war. The digital divide we have to deal with in a (because of its digital dynamics sooner or later globally and completely) digital world is who and what will be present there and who and what will not.

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Now instead of a long list of Do's and Don'ts or some heavy moral Code I would like to present an initiative that on the one hand follows the digital dynamics stated above – even more it makes creative use of it for its own sake to on the other hand bridge what I would call the real digital divide in the future digital world: to make Africa present - www.buyanafricanream.com. It may never take off as a real implementation though I am willing to pursue it seriously. In any case it pays well of as a case study, a suggestion for your own work or at least as a basis to discuss what is morally demanded: to bridge gap.

As we don't want to achieve this by subsidizing rather than by guiding the dynamics we therefore have to look for something that perfectly fits into the virtual world created by these dynamics. So the object of the project has to be virtual itself. Secondly its structure has to reflect the structure of the Internet: a network connecting individuals across distance, time, culture, gender, creed and so forth. And thirdly its intrinsic subject has to be to make something truly African present. So the project we have to look for to bridge this gap is as simple as that: a network that enables Africans to produce something virtual that meets the demand of others (Africans as well as non Africans) and well represents Africa. Now my suggestion is: dreams – dreams of African teenagers e.g. – they are virtual, they are African and they are perfectly suitable to be transported within a network.²

² As I have to admit that I am no expert in African culture (or cultures) at all dreams are still sort of an X in my equation. Dreams and their interpretation do have a certain tradition in nearly every culture especially if it is not yet imposed by western rationalism. But there might be well something other more genuine African yet unknown to me that would also go along well with the above stated prerequisites (being virtual, allowing for a network structure etc.) Like Haikus if we would talk about Japan or Calligraphy in case of Arabia – so I am open for suggestions in this direction.

So imagine a platform, where African teenagers can type in their dreams and present them in the net and others can 'buy' these dreams paying an agreed prize to the originator. What we would achieve by this is that e.g. a school buying a computer for educational reasons and motivating its pupils to present their dreams on the platform could even quickly refinance the investment by the cash flow back (given the platform can fulfill its purpose and succeeds to generate the traffic and demand necessary). This set up allows us to achieve several desiderata:

- Firstly to enable Africans to achieve the basic prerequisites to get connected by offering a simple possibility of refinance
- Secondly to develop the relevant competencies to present a subject in the net thus improving the e-literacy of the participants
- And thirdly get something genuine African present in the net as nothing could be more authentic than the dreams of its youth – unfiltered and uncensored.

FROM ,WWW.BUYANAFRICANDREAM.COM' TO ,WWW.ENADREAM.COM'

Two counter-arguments that have to be taken seriously into account helped me to refine and improve the proposal: from www.buyanafricandream.com into www.enadream.com (which finally stands for 'engage in an African dream').

Counter-argument 1: Buying a dream is too materialistic

The concept of urging even a well meaning person to 'buy' a specific dream isn't quite what I intended. I wouldn't know myself what to look for in specific and on which criteria to choose one dream over another or even fix a price. So I suggest the refinement of providing (virtual) space for the dreams instead of buying them, i.e. with a payment of let's say 10 US\$ you 'buy' the space on which a (possible) dream can be presented - not a specific dream itself. There are three big advantages of such a business concept:

- a. You can easily raise funds also from large companies e.g. attaining the IBMs, Microsofts or googles to render X dreams possible (on stock so to say) by a bulk payment (not a donation!) of e.g. 10.000 US\$ (being granted a banner ad 'stating this dream was made possible by ...' in return)
- b. The originator of a dream can be rewarded immediately as with the payment of the sponsor (in advance) the organization is ready to 'pay' him out immediately on his publication
- c. You easily can see where you have to intensify your efforts: either on the demand side (generating demand/traffic by interested 'consumers') if there are more dreams in the pipeline to be published then there is space for them on the platform or on the supply side if there is a backlog of (prepaid) space and no dreams to fill it out.

Counter-argument 2: The concept is static - still web 1.0

"And then?" somebody might ask. What comes after a dream has been published and finally bought? Another nominal site in the web? No! The story has to continue – so the dream must be published not as a static html or pdf but as an interactive blog. And the system must inform the sponsor of the space about 'his' dream and it must allow for further interaction – exchange of ideas, comments, refinements etc. thus building a community beginning with the very first and impersonal act of granting space and filling it out not ending there. With a blog (and in the long run (not at the very beginning) with even more sophisticated techniques of web 2.0) the platform can allow other interested users to further support this or that dream be it moneywise be it in another way. Myspace.com e.g. has built a community of now over 100 Million members with finally nothing else than granting space for blogs, videos, forums etc. Youtube.com (granting space for videos) has been bought by google for 1.6 Bn US\$. The platform suggested here could be a truly African equivalent.

For these reasons I finally would like to call my contribution to this conference 'Engage in an African Dream' or www.enadream.com and invite everybody to discuss it, criticize it, help to improve it or finally make it happen.