Reasons for slow internet growth in Africa

DAR ES SALAAM, Tanzania - Internet access and availability are not enough to get people online, says a new Internet Society study released yesterday at the African Peering and Interconnection Forum (AfPIF) taking place 30 August - 1 September 2016, in Tanzania.

Image by 123RF

The 'Promoting Content in Africa' report reveals that while significant improvements have been made in internet infrastructure, most notably in mobile networks, internet adoption rates are slowing in many countries because users lack compelling reasons to connect.

According to the study, content and services are the main factors in making the internet desirable, especially when the subject matter is relevant and in a language that users can easily understand. In Sub-Saharan Africa in particular, local language content is key to bringing new users online, as many are not comfortable reading in English or French.

'Promoting Content in Africa' outlines the barriers to the development of local content and offers recommendations to improve local content availability and distribution.

Local content

In the Sub-Saharan countries studied by the Internet Society, the majority of international and locally developed content is hosted outside the country, typically overseas. This results in slow internet speeds and higher access costs.

In Rwanda for example, of all websites using the .RW domain name, only a small fraction are hosted in Rwanda. The majority of sites are hosted in Europe and the US. Hosting content locally is key to making the internet faster and more affordable for users.

As mobile financial services are becoming increasingly available in the African continent, monetising mobile content is still a major challenge. "Faster and better Internet access can help entrepreneurs create new local content including services and apps, but developers face barriers when it comes to payment mechanisms in order to monetise content," said Bastiaan Quast, Internet Society Fellow and co-author of the report.

The region faces a combination of barriers, including the inability to pay and receive payments for mobile apps, which serve as a major channel for content distribution in most African countries.

Detailed results of the report will be presented at the seventh annual AfPIF which began 30 August, in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania.

Hosted by the Internet Society in partnership with the Tanzania Internet Service Providers Association (TISPA), the event serves as a platform to expand internet infrastructure and services across Africa by bringing together key players to address the opportunities in interconnection, peering, and traffic exchange on the continent.

Content availability

Internet peering is a business relationship whereby two internet service providers agree to provide access to each other's customers at no cost. Internet users throughout Africa benefit from peering, which enables faster and more affordable access.

"Removing barriers to content availability and distribution will have significant impacts on the internet ecosystem in Africa. It will help to make existing international content more accessible," explained Dawit Bekele, Internet Society regional bureau director for Africa. "AfPIF is the only event in Africa focused on building the internet by building relationships. It plays a key role in bringing together different parties to increase local traffic exchange across the continent," he added.

AfPIF aims to build cross-border interconnection opportunities by facilitating discussions on internet infrastructure challenges including capacity building, development of Internet Exchange Points (IXP) and local content.

Previous editions of AfPIF have been held in Kenya, Ghana, South Africa, Morocco, Senegal and Mozambique. Last year's event featured 232 participants from 57 countries and an online participation of 978 people in 77 different countries.

The 'Promoting Content in Africa' report can be accessed in English and in French.