



Gone With The World Wide Web

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'Globalization insights' is a series of feature stories told by journalists from Africa, Asia and Latin America – stories that give an insight into the perceptions and experiences of people as globalization unfolds in their environs. This project is jointly organized by the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung and IPS EUROPA.

Once upon a time the Nigerian capital Lagos was a scenic, coastal town nestling by the sea and inhabited by a few thousands. The skyline was beautified by tall, rangy trees.

Now Lagos is a city cast in concrete with a smoke-laden skyline and a dirty coast. The landscape is sullied by huge metal masts reaching for the stars.

The earliest of these telecommunications masts first sprouted about a decade ago when shops offering Internet services made an innocuous entrance into the city's business landscape.

Since then more Internet Cafes and their ubiquitous masts have mushroomed as local businesses strive to meet the city's growing communication needs. Nigerians throng these cafés in a bid to visit all corners of the small village globalisation has turned the world into.

"There was a day I logged into Yahoo messenger and an Indian asked me if there was a problem in Nigeria," slightly built Napoleon Omere, a computer engineer says.

"She said she has had about 87 Nigerians chatting with her on that day alone."

Before the Internet revolution, squabbles over International Monetary Fund, (IMF), loans and social and economic upheavals induced by fluctuations in global oil prices were the aspects of globalisation that Nigerians were conversant with.

Nigeria is the world's fifth largest oil producer. But the country owes is 32 billion U.S. dollars abroad.

Now, the Internet is the facet of globalisation that influences the lives of the average Nigerian more than any other. Unfortunately, only a fraction of the growth of Internet can be surmised from figures. Until recently, Nigeria hardly kept figures.

According to a 2002 International Telecommunications Union (ITU) report, however, in 1999 there were 30,000 Internet users in Nigeria. By 2002 the figure had jumped to 420,000. Local experts believe that in the last two years the figures have leapt further, in hundreds of thousands.

Generally, Nigerians are a genial lot. A BBC report says a 2003 survey placed Nigerians at the top of the happiest people on earth. The average Nigerian loves meeting people and doing some bit of travelling. Yet, a weekend holiday in Benin, Nigeria's immediate neighbour to the West will set an average wage earner back by the

equivalent of three month's wages.

The Internet is seen as a cheap alternative for the global level interaction desired by many. But not all surfers go on an excursion on the web for reasons so harmless.

Despoiled innocence

Until late last year, Seun Ramson's little notebook was his most prized possession. The loss devastated Ramson, a 20-year old final class secondary school student. "I am sure it was stolen," Ramson says, his voice threatening to break. "It contained all the web addresses that I used to visit. Now, I have to start compiling web sites all over again."

Ramson lives in Ikotun, once a sleepy, rural and sparsely populated town on the outskirts of Lagos. Before globalisation, in the form of Internet Cafes, crept into Ikotun, Ramson's life and those of his friends was simple and not much of a concern to their guardians.

But with the coming of the cafes the children of Ikotun (and the rest of Lagos) lost their innocence. Their daily trip to the Cafes exposed them to a world that turned them into objects of concern to their parents and teachers.

"I know I cannot watch pornography at home but I can go to the cybercafe to watch it," Ramson says. To keep up with this habit Ramson skips classes daily.

As a result, Lagos school authorities have had a hard time keeping students like Ramson in school. It is a war that may be difficult to win. Recently, the state government began the construction of single monolithic building-schools to replace old school types that had classrooms scattered over a wide expanse of land.

Each three-storey, square building contains school classrooms and is accessed only by four door exits manned by school guards. Governor Ahmed Tinubu of Lagos says the manned exits would curb truancy among students.

Experts have however expressed concern that the doors may not prove impervious to the strong allurements of Internet surfing constitutes for students.

What the Internet has joined together...

One of such lures is the success stories some dedicated cyber buffs have to share. The story of John and Maria Bello is for many a Nigerian cyber buff, a fairy tale come true. Many Nigerian singles scour the web with the hope of getting a partner.

John and Maria 'met' on a singles website in 2001. Their subsequent affair which culminated in marriage could never have been without the Internet. It was the Internet that helped both lovers breach the 5201km distance

between Lagos, where 34-year old John lives and Jamaica where 30-year old Maria then lived.

"Communication was what made the relationship to be very strong," John, a broker at Diverse Assets Management Limited, Ikoyi, Lagos, recalls. "We exchanged emails, chatted, and spoke on the phone. I watched her eat, dance and work, through the Webcam. Sometimes while watching her I would ask her to dance for me and she would."

A year into the affair when both agreed that it was time Maria's mom learn of the affair, the introduction was done online. Maria Annetee, a single Mom saw Maria, a Computer and Management graduate of the University of West Indies, Jamaica and her brothers through school.

"I told her Mummy there is a friend in Africa I want you to meet," Maria remembers, at the little flat she shares with John in Lagos.

Maria Annette took a good look at John and blurted out to her daughter, "Is he my future son-in-law?" Her daughter nodded. After a lengthy conversation with John, Maria Annetee left the room impressed with her daughter's choice.

The scammers...

But she changed her mind a few days later when she told some of her friends about her daughter's friend. "They told my Mom, 'Nigerians! They are fraudulent. Email scams, frauds, name it, they are in the thick of it'".

Such scepticism and, sometimes, hostilities, are hurdles well meaning Nigerians (the majority who wants new friends and tries to connect with old ones) routinely scale to win the trust of the rest of the world. But crossing these barriers is made Herculean by the activities of the third group of Internet users.

"Through the Internet one can become rich, one can become a millionaire," a puny, small time scammer says, his eyes gleaming at the thought of easy wealth. "I 'met' a girl in the U.S. She sent me her pictures and she asked for mine. But I told her that I am from a poor background and I 'brained' her. I keep getting a lot of things from her." With the return of civilian rule the Nigerian government launched a war on scamming. Presently, a trial of suspects who swindled a Brazilian bank of 214 million U.S. dollars is ongoing, but Britain, Nigeria's ex-colonial master, says it loses 150 million pound sterling annually to Nigerian scammers.

"Yes, these secondary school students do lots of scams and watch porn but I don't stop them," says Olumide Olukanni, a cyber café operator with a head for figures. Behind him on the wall hang the posters cyber café operators use to stake a part in the government anti-scamming war.

"THE USE OF BULK SCAM MAILS ARE NOT ALLOWED," one read. "419 OR SCAM MAILS ARE HIGHLY PROHIBITED AT LENGTH. YOU'LL BE ARRESTED BY THE POLICE," says another.

Olukanni says government may be fighting a lost battle. "30 percent of dedicated Internet users are scammers. They resume at cyber cafes and close there. Everyone

knows them and any cyber café operator that tells you he does not sell them time is lying," he says.

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