

Chapter 2

Media Entertainment as a Development Strategy

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Rarely need one justify a topic as much as online entertainment for Africa. There is a lot of headshaking and muttering that it is not really important for Africans to watch TV shows on the Internet and that in any event their basic networks are too far behind to make this a realistic issue.

One can respond to such critique by being defensive: online TV entertainment is happening anyway in Africa, even though this might be unknown to Northern observers, and for better or worse we need to be prepared for it. But the alternative is to rejoice. Instead of wringing our hands about a frivolous distraction we should in fact positively embrace this evolution as a great opportunity for development.

So first, yes, it is happening. TV media are progressing rapidly in richer as well as poorer countries. Media firms and ICT such as BBC, NHK, Netflix, Apple, Google, and YouTube have been pushing the envelope. There are clouds, tablets, and apps. There are virtual reality, virtual worlds, and multiplayer video games. TV is changing before our eyes. It is moving into its next stage, the online stage, after the first stages, those of broadcasting, of multichannel (satellite and cable), and of digital broadcasting.

Online TV is not simply more TV on a different platform. High-speed broadband enables interactive and participatory forms of TV media, with great sharpness of resolution, wall-sized screens, and large program libraries. This is about to happen.

And one should not expect that the urban elites in poor countries will sit by and watch one or two public and commercial channels while their peers in other countries watch TV as a 2-way, 3-D, 4 K, 5.1 surround sound, 6-foot-screen medium.

Is this TV important for Africa? An Internet with video speed seems an unaffordable luxury, a cruel dream. But some of the same people said something similar, 10 years ago, about the notion of a mobile phone being in the pockets of a

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majority of Africans. And yet that's what happened. Indeed, this is not only a logical but compelling conclusion when one appreciates that before the explosion of mobile phones in Africa, televisions significantly out-penetrated fixed telephony by huge margins demonstrating the continental demand for TV. Couple the ubiquitous mobile phone with the cultural demand for TV and the relevance of online entertainment in Africa is inescapable.

I read a newspaper story report of a riot by Zambian school girls over restrictions on their cell phone use during class time. The girls were identified as "mostly from poor families." What does this tell us? First that Zambian girls are a spirited bunch, which bodes well for democracy and for equality. But it also tells us something about the essentiality of mobile communications now. Ten years ago nobody had it. But today, take it away for a few hours and you start a riot.

Mobile communications were not planned by governments as a priority. It was not declared by the World Bank as a development goal with a lot of money to back it up. But it grew and grew anyway, and due to its usefulness it created its own demand, which was supplied by multiple carriers.

Mobility was the killer app for narrowband telecom connectivity. And now, it is used for much more than voice calls to one's mother or customer. It quickly became the SMS platform even before carriers could figure out how to bill for texting. Then it becomes the mail platform, though still lagging behind texting due to pricing regulation and handset technology. In more recent years it created a more convenient and user-friendly financial facility for the growing middle and established upper classes and a whole new banking system where none existed before for the millions of previously unbanked Africans. And that's just the beginning.

In the same way, the next generation of broadband will progress. People need a killer app to get broadband and pay for it. One can talk about e-government, e-education, and e-health all day long, but that's like saying that spinach is good for you, so kids will want to eat a lot of it. People need something that excites them enough so that they will pay.

That killer app is entertainment: video, TV, films, sports, and music. For that, people will pay, save, and invest. People consume entertainment voraciously. They watch typically 4 h a day of TV, high bit rate information. 3.5 Mb per second. 4 h a day. They are often willing to pay for it. Directly or through advertising that they pay for in their product prices. And that demand will generate the business incentives to upgrade the infrastructure, first in mobile wireless and then in wireline core network as it migrates closer to the users in order to handle the loads.

Take Zambia. If of its 13 million people 10 % will find the content compelling enough to pay 8 cents per hour of entertainment, that's 10 dollars a month, and it generates about 200 million dollars per year. This creates a funding mechanism.

Thus, entertainment is enabling the economic foundation for networks. And the other applications can then piggyback on it.

Everyone around the world is promoting broadband as the base for the information society: applications such as energy, environment, health, and government.

The merits of these programs are identified, the impacts are measured, and then a pitch is made for supportive government and international funding and policy.

But let me suggest that we need to change these dynamics that are centered around government and international investments, around a supply-driven focus. Instead, the future of broadband will be demand driven: just as these school girls and other users have been driving the demand for narrowband network services. Governments may have helped, but the global prevalence of these trends shows that particular government policies do not make much of a difference. A demand explosion was happening anyway, and all that governments could do was deal with problems of equality and gaps, and otherwise just take the credit.

People will then be able to use the networks in many ways, representing the needs and desires of a broad cross section of the society—students, doctors, teachers, creators, retailers, banks, etc. And therefore, by unleashing this demand, a video policy is a development policy.

Of course, no gain comes without pain. In particular, the media system of countries becomes challenged, and this is typically a politically highly sensitive area. Public broadcasters lose some of their audiences, though they might gain others. National media producers have to contend with a greater foreign competition, though they may also have opportunities to export themselves.

Will the content be local, or is it necessarily global? The answer is both. There will be international, high-value entertainment of the Hollywood type. But there will also be content from nearby countries, providing for regions that share a similar culture. And thirdly, there will be local content in local languages from national public broadcasters, private media firms, and many small independents.

Media regulators will have greater difficulties to control such an emerging complex media system. Their policy goals deserve respect and do not necessarily change just because we use digital packets and IP instead of analog. But it would be a very expensive mistake to let the slow-moving media regulatory system keep network evolution hostage to a slowly reforming media policy.

Importantly, encouraging entertainment applications does not mean frivolous use. It does not mean giving priority to investments so that people can watch reruns of “Who Wants to be a Millionaire.”

It means transforming network development from a supply-driven, network-driven, government-driven emphasis to an orientation that is user driven, applications driven, and demand driven. And which, to boot, will cost the governments very little, outside of the high-cost, low-density areas, to create a national infrastructure.

So media policy will become development policy, and entertainment policy will be infrastructure policy.