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Internet Filtration in Sub-Saharan Africa

October 20th, 2009 — Scott Hartley

Internet penetration in Africa remains undeniably low. According to the 2008 International Telecommunications Union, only five Sub-Saharan African countries had Internet penetration above 10 percent, and four of those were island nations. While Internet at five-star hotels in the Seychelles might be widely available, at the other end of the spectrum, Sierra Leone can hardly boast over its 0.2 percent. In fact, Zimbabwe is the only continental nation with greater than 10 percent penetration. Perhaps not surprising on a continent where only 17 percent of Sub-Saharan Africans have access to electricity, there is evidence of forthcoming change.

On October 1, the [OpenNet Initiative released a report on Internet Filtering in Sub-Saharan Africa](#), highlighting the potential for broadband in Africa, and still-inchoate governmental policy on monitoring new media. This recent release builds on and expands an ONI report focused on trends over 2006-2007.

While West and Southern Africa have been connected to international cable networks via the South Africa Telcom-3 (SAT-3) sub-marine fiber optic cable to India, much of Eastern Africa was disconnected until July 2009. Until the arrival of the Seacon cable, East African Internet penetration had been limited by the repeated delays of the East African Submarine Cable System (EASSy). EASSy will be complete in July 2010, and coupled with the United Nations' 2007 announcement to leverage [WiMAX](#) (wireless Internet available up to 300 feet), the potential for broadband penetration reaches beyond East Africa, and deeper into the rural core of the continent.

Because the Internet is not yet ubiquitous in Africa, cyber-law, censorship, and policy response remains largely undetermined. Though Zambia instituted cyber-crime law after a hacker turned the President's photo –on the official website– into a cartoon, in many countries Internet law remains an extension of media precedent.

All of this, outlined comprehensively in the ONI report by Rebekah Heacock, provides the context from which they observed Internet surveillance and filtration in Sub-Saharan Africa. Past observation in Africa indicated that IP, rather than URL blocking, is most common, and sporadic government raids on Internet cafes in Eritrea and Zimbabwe intimated Big Brother prowess. But while Zimbabwe maintains a strict surveillance regime, and a highly regimented national press, monitoring e-mail and allegedly even firing eight journalists who failed to adequately support Mugabe, ONI research confirmed that Zimbabwe is not filtering domestic Internet. Across four countries observed, namely Ethiopia, Nigeria, Uganda, and Zimbabwe, only Ethiopia was guilty of Internet filtration. Ethiopia successfully blocked blogs as well as political reform and human rights sites, and arbitrarily allowed far more acrimonious sites.

While broadband is slowly encircling the continent, how Africa will respond to the URL is still largely TBD.



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