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Editorial: Information Systems Research for Africa: A Renewed Focus

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Information Systems Research for Africa: A Renewed Focus

Editorial

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Going to primary and secondary schools in Sub-Saharan Africa, we were taught common songs such as "London Bridge is Falling Down." As kids we thoroughly enjoyed the songs but never knew or even cared to understand why we were singing those songs about a bridge thousands of miles away from us and in a country we (at the time) never knew anything about. Neither did we ever think about going to visit the famous London Bridge. Of course, our primary and secondary schools teachers had little choice but to teach these songs as they were part of the books used for our classes, most of which were published in England or some other Western nation. These great teachers at the time (and even today) had little or no incentive to write books (and songs) about the great rivers and local bridges in our countries, which we could relate to. Unfortunately, even today, these long time experiences have translated to most African universities depending almost entirely on research published in Western journals and because of the same reasons - viz lack of resources and incentives to publish work specifically focused on the realities of countries within the African region.

The purpose of this editorial is not to point fingers at any particular entity or play the blame game that is reminiscent of news media outlets. However, we want to address the issue of Africa creating its own identity in terms of developing a knowledge base pertaining to Information and Communication Technologies in general and select information systems in particular. Yes, we do understand there is no common African identity but there are some socio-economic and political characteristics common to most African countries. These characteristics have affected the way Africa acquires and adopts ICTs.

Without a doubt there has been a plethora of publications that have shown that the growth of ICTs in Africa has been exponential. In fact, wireless phone growth rates in Africa are the highest of all regions of the world. Similarly, growth of other ICTs such as computers and related accessories has been exponential. However, growth in related applications of these ICTs has been slow. For example, the diffusion of ICT applications such as those used for distance learning (Tele-Education) or such as those used for delivery of healthcare at a distance (Tele-Medicine) has been marginal. Notwithstanding, almost all economic sectors in Africa have

adopted some level of ICT services and some of the (financially) richest people in the continent have built their wealth through ICTs.

ICT research with focus on Africa has been traditionally almost nonexistent in mainstream ICT publications. About three years ago, in the *Journal of the Association of Information Systems* (JAIS), Mbarika et al. (2005) reveal an acute dearth of ICT articles with a focus on Sub-Saharan Africa. Despite the many reasons that can be given for this dilemma, the fact remains that theory-driven ICT articles on Africa are rare. Hence, many business owners and policy makers in Africa have fallen to the grave error of acquiring new "high-tech" technologies for the sake of keeping up with the "West" without addressing the questions: "Which specific technologies do we need?" and "What do we need these technologies for?" For instance, maintenance of these technologies in Africa is a huge problem. Hence, many acquire computers and mobile phones that become unusable after the first or second breakdown. Research is needed in order to avoid such trends and to inform technology stakeholders in Africa on best practices for transfer, adoption and use of ICTs.

African scholars, and scholars interested in research focused on Africa, need to step up and help define the direction of ICT research within the context of Africa while placing it within the broader context of global ICT research. In launching *AJIS*, it is our earnest hope this will be an avenue for researchers of Africa-related ICT to publish their work and have such work gain visibility throughout the IS research community. We are also open to publishing articles based on case studies of ICTs in Africa, as well as thought provoking research notes or issues and opinions.

This is the inaugural volume of the AJIS. It comprises of two issues, with this being the first. We have selected five relevant and interesting articles for this issue. Three of these articles are full length empirical research articles, one is a case and one is a teaching note. The three research articles reflect diversity in topic, research-method and country-studied concerning ICTs in Africa. They serve as a good beginning in our long journey to document empirical, critical and conceptual contributions on ICT issues and the advancement of ICTs within the context of Africa.

First among the research articles is authored by Gertrudes Macueve and undertakes an analysis of three e-government projects in Mozambique with a view to identifying their contributions to, and impacts on, that country's development. The author effectively employs Amartya Sen's concept of "development as freedom" as an effective lens for evaluating the extent to which these three projects contribute to the leveraging of the "freedoms" of Mozambique's citizenry. The conclusion reached in the paper is that much still needs to be done, despite tractable evidence that some freedoms have been attained owing to the implementation and use of the requisite e-government initiatives studied in this paper. Additionally, the paper provides tangible contributions and recommendations concerning ICT management for purposes of leveraging country development. This article is an excellent example of qualitative research on ICT emanating from Africa. The article presents a fresh perspective on the definition of development, the role of ICTs towards advancing this development, and a well articulated empirical approach for analyzing the ICT phenomenon, especially in the context of Africa.

In this issue's second research article, Nixon Ochara, employs the case study research method to examine the emergent meanings of e-government within the context of Kenya. The authors suggest that most e-government initiatives seem to be primarily a foreign artifact, imported into Africa largely through initiatives of international development agencies, and intended to achieve governance goals that for the most part are what these development agencies construe to be reflections of "good governance." The authors assert that the notion of e-government is still in its infancy in most African countries and thus explores the meaning and implications of E-Government in Africa, by examining the emergence of the e-government artifact in the case of Kenya. The article comes to the conclusion that conclusion that e-Government success within the context of Africa "requires socially inclusive national information infrastructure". Further, the current take on e-government as exemplified in the case of Kenya seems to reflect a heavy bend towards "managerialist" intentions which in turn "help in solidifying and possibly exacerbating" the problem of social exclusion. Therefore, implementation of e-government systems may end up mitigating the very purpose for which they were intended.

Udo Averweg's article is the third research article appearing in this issue. The author employs a quantitative research approach to examine the applicability of the technology acceptance model in explaining the adoption of executive information systems (EIS) in the KwaZulu/Natal region of South Africa. The results of the study indicate that, in comparison to Perceived Usefulness (PU), Perceived Ease of Use (PEOU) seems to be a stronger determinant of EIS use by business organizations in KwaZulu/Natal region. Additionally, the results indicate that there appears to be no consistency in the frequency of use of these systems by business executives in the studied firms. Thus these results depart slightly from the conventional notion that in resource-poor contexts, PU is the stronger predictor of ICT use. Albeit the relatively low sample size used in this study, and which was well justified, the findings remain relevant and interesting. The scope of the study and useful responses received however, place limitations on the theoretical generalization of TAM as it applies to ICT adoption across the entire South Africa and beyond. Nevertheless, we garner some useful information on the nature of the adoption of a specific type of ICT within a significant economic region in one of the countries in Africa.

We have also included one commentary and one teaching note in this issue. The commentary authored by Solomon Negash, Richard Watson and Detmar Straub, reports on the conceptualization, development and implementation of the PhD program in information systems at Addis Ababa University. Reflections of these senior scholars about the process and outcomes of this initiative contribute to the knowledge on the executive management of ICT education within Africa. The Teaching note included in this issue likewise contributes to the advancement of ICT education administration. That article, written by Michael Eccles, June Pym and Kevin Johnson reflects on the lessons learned from the initiative to introduce a new information systems curriculum at the University of Cape Town.

It is our hope that these articles serve as a reflection of the richness of knowledge on ICT in Africa that remains to be articulated. We encourage submissions of ICT research that is well founded, adequately conceptualized and effectively articulated for publication in this journal. And we hope that the journal finds its place as a source of rich knowledge on ICT, especially pertaining to Africa.

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