What's what and who's who in the new digital economy

By Russell Southwood   3 Dec 2014

With faster, cheaper bandwidth either ready or not far off, Africa is experiencing the digital content and services moment. Like all things at the beginning, it's full of fits and starts but the direction is clear. Something is happening here but maybe you don't know it is...

About two years ago, we started (rather quietly) a web TV channel (called smartmonkeytv.com) to replace the now defunct Balancing Act YouTube channel. It's taken us a bit of time to get clear what it was about and who might be interested, but we got there.

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It tracks and analyses the arrival of Africa's digital content and services economy, looking at how far things have come and the barriers holding back further development. It describes itself as for "Creators and Innovators in Africa at the crossroads of culture and technology."

With the arrival of cheaper mobile internet and much larger numbers of users, it's now a question of what the internet's going to be used for and how. Africa's internet is like a great big biro and people are finding out what they want to write. There's an enormous ferment of activity and the summary that follows is provided to give some feel for the scale of it:

VoD platforms

We have counted over 100 video on demand platforms in Africa for a recent report and the number continues to grow. MTN says it is only weeks away from launching its own subscription service with South African company, Discover Digital.

Two of this new breed of VoD platforms have been launched by filmmakers who we met again at the continent's TV market, DISCOP 2014. Juliet Asante's Mobilefliks has had 100,000 subscribers' downloads in Ghana and is also taking ground in Nigeria.

Pascal Schmitz' iBiskop is a 'download to own' online content shop which is available in 26 countries in Africa. In South Africa it will also be rolling out Wi-Fi hot-spots where customers can download for free.

Older, more established platforms include iROKO and Buni TV, both of which are believers in generating content for their own platform. In this video clip interview, Jason Njoku from iROKO talks about launching its production arm ROK Studios to test film and TV series.

In a clip from DISCOP 2013, Marie Lora Mungai from Buni TV reflects on how to make a success of African online content.

Music on demand platforms

Again from a recent report of ours, we have counted 100+ music on demand platforms and the number continues to grow. South African hip-hop artist Slikour has launched an SMS-based service. Two of the older platforms are Spinlet and iROKING. Nkiru Balonwu, CEO of music platform Spinlet, told us how mobile operators take most of their revenues.

Njoku from iROKO talked about why its online music platform iROKING will grow in Nigeria.

New forms of media

Improvements in bandwidth are creating new forms of media to fill gaps that previously could not easily have been filled. Larry Izamoje from Sports Radio Brila FM elaborates on launching an online sports TV channel in Nigeria aimed at smartphone users - particularly those stuck in traffic.

Geoff Cohen of South Africa's 24.com is using mobile to extend the reach of this Naspers-owned news platform.

The late lamented Carey Eaton from One Africa Media talked to us about how it has built a business by providing the online equivalent of classified sites.

E-commerce

For years the hurdles to getting successful commerce in sub-Saharan Africa were too great. But there are now something like 2 million people in Nigeria ordering online. I spoke to Jumia Nigeria's Jeremy Doutte about becoming the largest retailer - physical or online - Nigeria.

The impact on small startups of having this kind of channel is perhaps best exemplified by my interview with fashion startup CEO Rukky Ladoja, Grey who talks about selling through Jumia.

Andy Higgins from uAfrica is creating an e-commerce platform for SMEs in South Africa and Nigeria and is already attracting a significant number of merchants.

Gamers

GamersNights is a Ugandan organisation for multiplayer computer gamers. Having got an agreement with Liquid Telecom to host one of its servers, it is expanding its user base further.

Alrick September from Techladon is launching an African gamers news website and organising the forthcoming FIFA 15 gaming tournament in Cape Town.

Olakunle Ogungbamila (Kuluya Games) has struck distribution deals for its games in China and India.

ICT4D

ICT for Development (ICT4D) is finally making some real inroads into areas like education and health. Alice Liu, Director of ICT4D, Jhpiego, talks about how mobile provision could change healthcare.

Bas Hoefman, Text To Change has carried out Tanzania's largest m-health programme using SMS.

Susan Oguya, MFarm is helping Kenyan small-scale farmers sell their crops using mobile.

Mark Bennett, iSchool is using low-cost tablets to change learning methods in Zambia.

Digital advertising

One of the two business models for African online content is advertising so it's important to understand the dynamics of digital advertising spend. Seanice Kacungira runs a Ugandan digital agency and talks about the tipping point for online advertising.

Shahzad Khan works for one of the continent's large advertising agencies and sees the rapid growth of the internet in Africa as one of the reasons for the rise in digital ad spend.

Social media

This has been the runaway success of internet use in Africa and is already affecting behaviour in many ways. Paul Bomani talks about the growth of social media in Tanzania and how his clients use it for social engagement.

Christian Katsuva talks about a Twitter campaign #GomaNeedsWater which was used to focus the city's government and water provider on the current shortfall.

Brett St Clair fromGoogle talked to me about what You Tube is doing in Africa and which content is successful.

Nicola D'Elia of Facebook sees its social media platform as an "on-ramp" for Africa's first-time internet users.

Source: www.balancingact-africa.com via AllAfrica.