

The 2016 Internet Society Report: Areas of Impact and Concern for the Future of the Internet

an editorial by

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In 2016, the Internet Society (<https://www.internetsociety.org/>) launched a project to take stock of the key forces of change that could impact the future of the Internet and engage a broad community of its members, chapters, experts and partners; thus, they conducted two global surveys that generated more than 2,500 responses from 160 countries and economies, and in addition, they interviewed more than 130 Internet experts and hosted 10 virtual roundtables. Throughout the project, the organization reaffirmed the importance of three issue areas that will likely be significantly impacted in the future: digital divides; personal freedoms and rights; and media and society, hence, core areas for the community in its focus on putting the user at the forefront when considering the future of the Internet.

Considering that the nations of Burundi, Central African Republic, Cameroon, Chad, Congo-Brazzaville, DRC, Uganda, Ethiopia, Niger, Togo, and others have shut down Internet service to their citizens, the Internet Society project is particularly relevant in a quest for open access to information, news and new knowledge development in Africa, and around the world.

In the nine sections of the report, herein I limit my observations to “Area of Impact: Digital Divides”, “Area of Impact: Personal Freedoms and Rights,” and “Area of Impact: Media and Society” that was presented in summation, ahead of the full report.

First, the area of the digital divides (the gap between those that have Internet access and those that do not) is an ongoing concern for African people of the world (and of course others who have been marginalized as a group). Accordingly, the report states that Internet connectivity is growing around the world and many within the study have expressed hopes that it will be an empowering and equalizing force between social groups and countries.

However, the ability to meaningfully participate in and benefit from the Internet in the future will likely be determined by more than the sheer ability to connect, but via an ability to use the Internet for opportunity and advancement, relative to others. And therefore, those with access only through slow connections or smart phones living in poor remote communities and regions that lag in Internet skills and advanced infrastructure are seen as particularly at risk in falling behind compared to the wealthy countries and more developed regions of the world.

Hence, will a full information apartheid or colonization of information/knowledge develop as: (1) power requirements and higher levels of investment required for Internet infrastructure and technology deployment potentially put the developing world of the present and future at a competitive disadvantage; (2) the use of the Internet that transforms the growth in applications and uses retard a preparedness for and the ability to take advantage of information technology and consequently produce a new and fundamental divide in the future; (3) new or wider divides may emerge within countries across socio-economic status, gender, literacy level, and age; (4) concerns about connectivity through limited-access platforms, limited local language content and locally developed services, and government constraints on Internet use seemingly work to drive new digital divides; and (5) as we ultimately ask, will individuals and societies have the opportunity to create, innovate, and contribute to the Internet, rather than simply consume it?

The second area of impact focused on “Personal Freedoms and Rights” and like the first area points to the challenges posed by people in the nations of Burundi, Central African Republic, Cameroon, Chad, Congo-Brazzaville, DRC, Uganda, Ethiopia, Niger, Togo, Uganda and other locations where the Internet has been abused by government to stop or hamper protest against actual and perceived injustices. And thus, the report states that (1) challenges related to surveillance and the loss of privacy and control over one’s data will become more pressing, and (2) in the future, the notion of personal freedoms and human rights will be shaped by an ever more powerful Internet-enabled data analytics and artificial intelligence, and ergo, to what degree decision-making may be taken away from individuals emerges as a significant question. Continuing, it questions (3) to what extent could or will the Internet be used as a tool to influence/control society rather than a tool to promote freedom and human rights; (4) will people have a choice in whether and how to utilize the Internet or (5) will it be unavoidably pervasive; (6) will there be a meaningful opportunity to “unplug or disconnect” from the Internet; (7) will the risks of the Internet to freedom and rights outweigh the benefits to society and the individual, and if so, (8) what reaction will this evoke?

Next, and last in this selected review, there is a discussion on the “Area of Impact: Media and Society” which echo an almost universal concern that the Internet could be fundamentally undermined if current technical and social trends around online media and communication are amplified in the future wherein the use of algorithms will likely increase as a tool for limiting and delivering news and information believed to be of relevant to particular users or communities that may entrench selective exposure to information, especially in relationship to search engines and social media platforms,

and other online media providers that may become capable of returning tailored results that the “echo chamber” effect (where users receive information that increasingly reflects their current views and social behaviors) could become a dominant characteristic of the future for the Internet. Here again, a form of information apartheid or the colonization of information/knowledge implemented in secret in an effort to manipulate an unsuspecting population.

And within this mix, other critical questions were raised, such as: will the future Internet create more bridges between societies and cultures or lead to greater divides; will the Internet make neutral media institutions and unbiased journalism a thing of the past; what impact would the Internet have on society; and to what extent will diverse cultures be able to embrace the Internet without fear of losing their own values?

The above three sections of the nine point directly to the question of agency in the African world community in regards to self-determination and human dignity in a growing sphere of communication and understanding. The 2016 Internet Society study should be a wake-up-call for us all, especially when there is a “... quest for profits and corporate disfavor of controversial viewpoints could change both what you can see on the Internet and the quality of your connection”, as outlined by the American Civil Liberties Union. Thus, we must make sure Internet service providers and governments regulating the Internet treat all data on the Internet the same, therefore not involving itself in discriminating or charging differentially by user, content, website, platform, application, type of attached equipment, or mode of communication. Hence, net neutrality must be a universal reality. The good people in Burundi, Central African Republic, Cameroon, Chad, Congo-Brazzaville, DRC, Uganda, Ethiopia, Niger, Togo, and elsewhere are righteously and justifiably battling for this unrestricted access to the Internet, an effort we should all support and encourage.