The importance of an empowered African tech media

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On 30-31 August 2015, ICANN participated in the 19th edition of the Highway Africa conference (www.highwayafrica.com), where the theme was "Journalism and the city." Organized in partnership with the Department of Communications of South Africa, development agencies and media associations, the conference was located within the marvelous campus of the Rhodes University School of Journalism. Close to 400 delegates, made up of academics, media professionals, students and activists, turned up to this year's conference, demonstrating the continued popularity and pertinence of such a gathering. Indeed, Highway Africa has now evolved into a full-fledged forum for critical reflection on journalism, media, technology and development in Africa.

The potential for capacity building at the Highway Africa conference is immeasurable, and can be seen in the commitment and engagement of the high quality of speakers, sponsors and participants.

ICANN at HIGHWAY AFRICA 2015: Why Participate?

Seeing the potential of partnering with this important event, ICANN organized a workshop and a panel during Highway Africa, which highlighted ICANN and Internet governance, and the need to strengthen the Domain Name System (DNS) industry in Africa. It is evident that a lot of work still needs to be done to spread awareness of ICANN, Internet governance and the DNS. However, it also affirmed the importance of our Africa Engagement Strategy, which was launched nearly two years ago with the goal of engaging local and regional communities to involve them in the Internet ecosystem.

Highway Africa allowed for us to talk about ICANN and our globalization efforts over the past few years. ICANN's mission is to ensure a stable, secure and unified global Internet. This is vital for the Internet's continued operation. More than 3 billion people are online today, and as the Internet continues to expand, its governance ecosystem is in the middle of an important evolution. It is key for the African community to catch up with the main topics and get involved in the dialogues and policy-making. The NETMundial conference of Sao Paulo established core

principles and a roadmap for how to improve and evolve the system. ICANN itself is in the middle of major evolution, both in its globalization efforts and with the IANA Stewardship Transition. Everyone should find a way to contribute to this important process.

The other subject covered during Highway Africa was about how to make Africa a net contributor to the Domain name industry. We are lagging behind in this market, and the potential is truly vast. The Domain Name System (DNS) is the 'phonebook' of the Internet, whereby names are translated into numbers that machines (servers) use to find each other. ICANN coordinates these unique identifiers across the world. Without that coordination, we wouldn't have one global, interoperable Internet.

Recent statistics show that Africa has yet to truly understand and rollout a plan for how to bolster the regional domain name industry. In fact, when ICANN launched its new gTLD (generic Top level Domain) program three years ago, only 17 African organizations submitted applications for new gTLDs, compared to the 1930 received globally. And most of those 17 applications came from South Africa. That said, the already existent market for country code Top Level Domains (ccTLDs), also suffers from a lack of effort from the African ccTLD managers. Of the one million and three hundred thousand domain names registered all over Africa, South Africa accounts for one million, with the rest of the other 53 African countries sharing portions of the remaining three thousand.

Highway Africa allowed us to start a dialogue with the budding African media, and start building bridges. These new relationships will help the African media investigate and write more about the African domain name industry.

African journalists must tell the African story as it relates to the digital economy and Internet governance

In a powerful speech delivered during the close of Highway Africa, Eric Chinje, CEO of the African Media Initiative, urged the African media to be bold enough and opt for investigative journalism, which seeks to provide the communities with appropriate information that can help transform Africa's socio-economic landscape. Indeed, it is critical that the African media write about the true African story and what matters to the continent's various communities. As the saying goes, "As long as the story of the hunt is only told by the hunter; we will only hear part of the story!"

So how should the Africa media tell the African story as it relates to harnessing ICT for improving the continent? I believe one of the prerequisites is that media must be made aware of the stakes at hand. To achieve this, it may be necessary to invest in specializing the Africa media to bridge the technology knowledge gap. Highway Africa is platform for doing this, and by increasing its partnership with Internet-related organizations and research centres, we can launch specialized curricula on digital economy and Internet governance. We, as ICANN, would definitely continue to contribute to the story and involve our expertise in the process.

A specialized African media – one that is well versed in the online world and the digital economy – would help spread the word, thus increasing awareness and interest. For instance, one good story to tell, is the 'Demo Africa' initiative (http://www.demo-africa.com/), launched in 2012 through a public-private partnership, which is now making tremendous breakthrough by selecting and coaching African startups and facilitating their access to financing. A growing number of startup founders are now building world-class products, introducing important innovations and tapping into new market opportunities. But very little is being said about initiatives such as these.

ICANN Africa launched an African media outreach campaign recently, and is implementing it within the framework of its African strategy. This effort aims to support the DNS industry in Africa and increase Africa's participation and contribution to global Internet policy development.

In a nutshell, more media awareness initiatives should be taking place on the African continent. Journalism is a key tool in the effort to develop the African landscape. It is responsible for spreading current, relevant news, and presenting information to its audience that creates the right environment for keeping systems and organizations accountable. Events like Highway Africa could signal the beginning of an era of strategic partnership with African media and schools of journalism to do just that: create a stronger media community that is inspired, motivated and re-energized.

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