

How Africa's digital divide is being diminished, one innovation at a time

By Leigh Andrews

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The final two sessions of the 2020 track of AfricaCom - focused on how the 'smart feature phone' will revolutionise the digital landscape in Africa and what will happen when 1bn Africans are connected to the internet - were called 'two of the most underrated of AfricaCom 2018,' by African telecommunications specialist Ashley Holling. Here's why.

Why Africa will be home of the next feature phone revolution

In the first session, we heard from the fittingly named Sebastien Codeville, China-based CEO of the KaiOS web-based operating system, which is expressly run on low-cost devices.



The harsh reality.

The young company, founded in June 2016, works on diminishing the digital divide because while instant connectivity is second nature to everyone who will read this article, more than 50% of the global population still doesn't have access to internet.

Codeville says this in turn impacts on global inclusion factors like gender equality, democracy, and access to education.

That's why they're doing what they can to make digital services a reality for all, largely based on **bringing down the cost of internet access through cost of both phones and data plans.**

Accessible user experience is another important aspect to consider, as voice search is more popular where literacy is low.

Bringing 3G, 4G and 5G internet to 2G devices

Designed for traditional touch handsets, KaiOS is effectively bringing popular apps like Facebook, Google, Youtube and Twitter to feature phones.

KaiOS Partners with Unigroup Spreadtrum&RDA to Integrate with Newest Chipsets and Offer Advanced Functionality on Lite Phones

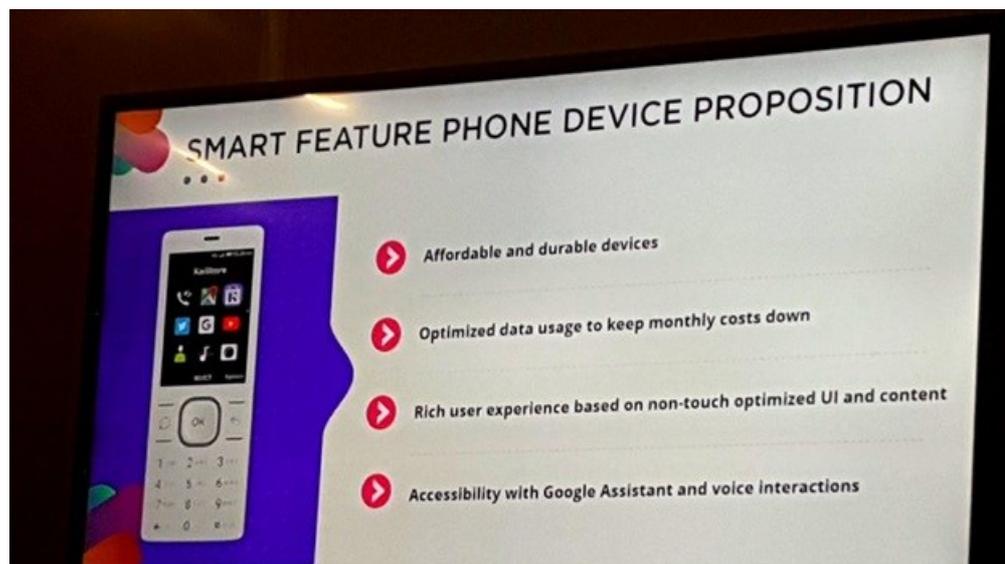
UNISOC 26 Feb 2018



But therein lies another problem – once access is ticked off the list, there's another hurdle to face, as Codeville stated that less than 1% of apps accessed outside of the Western world feature local content.

So there's a cultural mismatch as much of what's advertising in Europe and the US just doesn't make sense in Africa and Asia.

The smart feature phone device



KaiOS' smart feature phone device proposition.

If you'd like to get involved in bringing more local content where it's needed, there's an app store option in the Kaistore. Locally, Codeville said to watch for the KaiOS MTN and Orange smart feature phones, launching across the continent next year.

“ Excited to announce our expansion in Africa - with the KaiOS powered devices, along with the KaiStore! Learn more here. <https://t.co/m5XeM3JupJ>— Sebastien Codeville (@SCodeville) November 14, 2018 ”

In the final session of the AfricaCom 2020 track, Nivi Sharma and Christian Doyen of connectivity startup BRCK in Kenya explained their mission to connect Africa to the internet.

Sharma began by asking attendees to imagine how the way we do business on the continent would change if we didn't have to factor in excessive airfare prices and visa admin.

Connectivity = ease of African business collaboration

Then take that idea of connectivity and collaboration with other markets, opportunities and people and you see the wealth of knowledge offered by a connectivity landscape.



Think the world's connected? Think again. A slide from BRCK's AfricaCom2020 session.

Unfortunately, Sharma said there's still lots of work to be done to bring the bulk of the African population online.

So the six-year-old Nigerian looking to compete in the business world in 2030 with a Norwegian who has grown up with technology is already at a disadvantage.

“ *'Inequality starts before birth' - Dr. David Harrison from @DGMurrayTrust shared important information with us for the #YouthReport2018 #InstantGrass@JamesLappeman @instantgrass @Dali_Tembo @ramneekHEAIDS @ladylilac @AlphabetSoupSA @bonchiachanza @Leigh_Andrews @HDIYouth pic.twitter.com/utZyptPc1L— UCT Unilever (@UCTunilever) October 12, 2018* ”

Doyen added that it's often taken for granted that connectivity is “ubiquitous and cheap”, but that price elasticity is so rigid for the rural African – for the users who don't want to spend 250Mb updating an app.

Or for those who switch off their mobile data settings to avoid high costs.

Where's our Wi-Fi?

The main barriers to **connecting the unconnected** are access and affordability.

“ *It takes someone in Africa 4 days of work to earn 1Gb of internet. In the US and Europe, it takes just 2 hours to do the same. https://t.co/xcUVRNTB9B pic.twitter.com/AECvBCGmCt— Erik Hersman (@whiteafrican) October 29, 2018* ”

And unfortunately, the poorest communities pay the highest relative cost for data. If you earn \$2 a day and spend 20 min on Facebook, that's connection, is effectively 20% of your daily income.



#Africacom2018: What's *really* chewing up your data

Leigh Andrews 13 Nov 2018



That's where the BRCK hardware, complete with rugged microserver storage, comes in. Designed in Africa for Africa, it's ideal for low-infrastructure environments with low internet connectivity.

Even better? It offers free content and connectivity, as they would rather have the users spend the currency they *do* have – time. They earn points for premium content as well as connectivity that can be redeemed immediately or saved for later by performing micro-tasks on the platform, like filling out surveys or watching sponsored content.



#DesignIndaba2018: Connecting the unconnected in Africa

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Sharma concluded with the question, what would happen if the unconnected were connected?

Including Africa in the World Wide Web

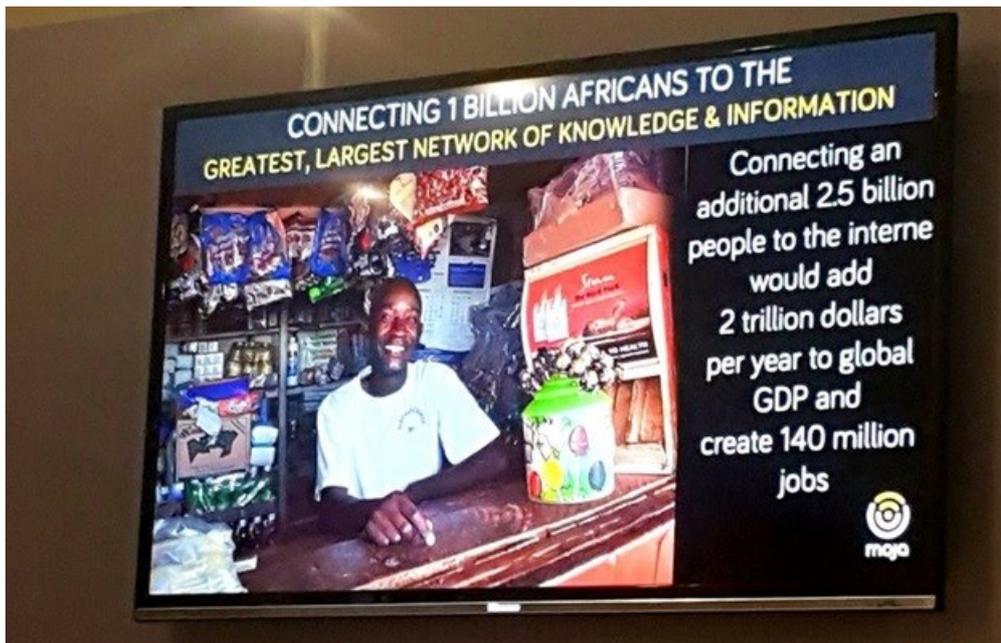
There are potential positives in almost every sphere of life, from improvement in government services to cutting time queuing thanks to access to mobile banking, as well as economic development due to technological advancement and improved literacy, leading to a more educated continent.

“ How free WiFi is changing Africa ~ <https://t.co/Y036gPAD1n> pic.twitter.com/utP9IC3xWe — Brainstorm Magazine (@Brainstormmagza) [September 14, 2018](#) ”

But Sharma pointed out that the most popular websites in Kenya at the moment are Google, Facebook and YouTube, as one would expect, next on the list is sports betting and pornography.

“ In rural areas, sometimes the only time they see 'www' is on a billboard for a betting website. ”

So it's not necessarily a pretty picture, but there's a wealth of impact if internet access comes with the right education on potential outcomes.



BRCK predicts this potential economic outcome.

It's easy to see why BRCK is one of *Time* magazine's first ever 50 Genius Companies of the Year.



6 African startups among TIME's Genius Companies for 2018

Tom Jackson 15 Oct 2018



ABOUT LEIGH ANDREWS

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