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27 April 2006

Internet Connections Growing Fastest in Africa

Survey predicts bandwidth to Africa will grow dramatically

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Washington -- Africa is gaining Internet connectivity faster than any other region and as such, service is spreading to smaller cities and rural areas via innovative technologies -- and that only can help the expansion of free press, democracy and development all across the continent, says the co-founder and chief executive officer of allAfrica.com, Reed Kramer.

In an interview with the *Washington File* to mark May 3 World Press Freedom Day, Kramer cited a recent survey by the London-based newsletter *Balancing Act*, which projects that international bandwidth to Africa will grow by 81 percent between 2005 and 2008, making the Internet accessible to more users across the continent.

Kramer said Internet users in Africa now exceed 22 million, according to an estimate produced by Internet World Stats, a marketing and research Web site. Although only 2.5 percent of Africa's 900 million people are online, compared with nearly 16 percent worldwide, the number has grown by 400 percent since 2000, the World Stats figures show.

Continentwide, Kramer said, the largest populations of Internet users are in South Africa, Egypt, Morocco and Kenya.

With an estimated 3.6 million users, Kramer said, South Africa remains the country with the largest number of users but no longer makes up the majority of users as in years past. Additionally, Kramer cited World Stats figures that show actual usage throughout Africa might be six times to eight times larger than the number of Internet accounts, due to the growth of cybercafes and other multiperson access points.

Kramer said the Internet and its growing evolution across Africa have revolutionized news-gathering in Africa and the operations of allAfrica.com as well.

Kramer's comments came in an interview marking World Press Freedom Day -- which this year celebrates the theme "Media as Good Governance."

A free press, Kramer said, is a "key building block" of any democratic society -- and especially in those societies that have less democratic tradition and judicial independence than in the United States. The press can play a "multitude of roles" in any society, he said, from watchdog, to advocate -- providing a platform for competing and conflicting viewpoints. All of that is key to democracy."

Media, Kramer stressed, also have a big role to play in development. "It is very important that as countries debate and determine direction and make choices about

resources that the media is there is to help peoples' viewpoints be heard and sponsor debates on these very vital topics ... and serve as a forum" for all opinions.

Kramer believes that the Internet has created openings and opportunities for the free press in Africa and that the trend for increased free press is moving in the right direction. He was joined by two of his colleagues to discuss that point: Gaddiel Baah, an English news editor from Ghana and Aminata Sall, a French language editor from Senegal. Most of allAfrica.com's employees are African.

Kramer and his two colleagues agreed that trends are moving in the right direction on expanding press freedoms, but warned that results have been mixed and serious problems persist.

"I am hopeful," that the free press can expand in Africa, Baah said. "Naturally, with the expansion of democratic space ... all of the institutions and organizations that thrive on democracy will inevitably grow -- so respect for the rights of journalists, respect for laws that regulate the media and having the right laws -- these things tend to improve as the general democratic atmosphere improves in the country, the region and the continent."

TENSIONS BETWEEN MEDIA AND GOVERNMENT

All agreed there is a natural tension between the government and a free press in any country.

Sall recalled that recently, there was heated debate in Cote d'Ivoire about what issues journalists should cover and what is in their reporting purview. Kramer added, "We see the same issues confronting the press in Africa that we see here."

"AllAfrica.com provides a gateway and a platform where readers from around the world can get a variety of viewpoints and perspectives on what is going on in most parts of Africa and most of that comes from the African media that are represented on our site and through our distribution channels that we reach," Kramer added.

AllAfrica.com works directly with 125 news organizations in Africa, Kramer said. "We receive content from them. We have contracts with them to receive their content. We share revenue with them and provide visibility. We not only distribute their stories through allAfrica.com the Web site, we also have a news wire -- the allAfrica.com news wire." That wire, he said, goes out to many of the best-known media outlets like Bloomberg, *Financial Times*, Lexus-Nexus.

Kramer said, allAfrica.com also has an environmental news wire, provides specialized feeds to corporate clients and a small news operation of its own, which provides coverage of U.S.-Africa relations and often does interviews with African heads of state.

The allAfrica.com Web site, Kramer said, has 12 million page views every month and about 1 million unique users spread across the globe, with more than half of those users being in North America.

Although a large digital divide still exists between Africa and the rest of the world, Kramer concluded, technology is changing the way Africans live and improving their lives daily.

For more information, see [Freedom of the Press](#).

(The Washington File is a product of the Bureau of International Information Programs, U.S. Department of State. Web site: <http://usinfo.state.gov>)

