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**Mainstory: Making friends with Facebook: Rwandans turn to the internet to get connected**



**INSTANT CONNECTION: Social Networking is common among peers. (Photo / G. Barya)**

**BY STEFANIE CARMICHAEL**

In 2004, American dot-com millionaire, Greg Wyler, set out to wire Rwanda from east to west. Since the launch of his company, Terracom, Wyler has been trying to bring high-speed internet to a country that is still discovering the benefits of the mobile phone.

Today, Wyler's dream has reached new heights. Not only do Rwandans have increasing accessibility to the internet, but a growing number of them are beginning to make use of it in new and exciting ways.

Social networking is one of those ways. Websites such as MySpace and Facebook have already taken North America and Europe by storm. Now, they are beginning to make headway in Rwanda.

Facebook, a social networking site launched in 2004 by a former Harvard student, currently has over 62 million active users.

The Rwanda network has almost 1,500 members, as well as hundreds of groups that are devoted to all things Rwandan, including Rwanda En Fete! and R.W.A. (Rwandese Witta Attitude).

Louise Ingabire, is one of those young Rwandans turning to online social networking sites to stay connected.

"I use Facebook because I have lots of friends outside Rwanda," she says.

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**Where do you think Rwanda will contribute best to the EAC?**

- Good governance
- Environmental protection
- Fight of corruption
- Regional ICT hub

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"I never went to school here so most of my friends are abroad. Plus, it's a whole lot cheaper than text messages or phone calls".

She also suggests that Facebook provides strong security measures that allow her to feel comfortable about posting personal information online.

In addition to being more secure than other similar sites, Ingabire notes that Facebook has two key benefits:

"Keeping in touch with friends regardless of space or time and reconnecting with long-time lost friends". Still, Ingabire remains doubtful about its potential in Rwanda.

"I don't think it will become as popular as it is in North America because access to the internet here is still very limited," she says.

But that is precisely the challenge that Wyler and others are taking upon themselves to address. Before Terracom came along, a high-speed internet connection from the national RwandaTel cost close to \$1,000 (Frw540,000) per month; only 22 customers could afford the service.

Today, after buying RwandaTel and laying down 350 kilometres of fibre optic cables throughout the country, Terracom offers a range of cheaper alternatives, including a wireless laptop connection for anywhere in the country for just \$70 (Frw37,800) a month.

And Wyler wants that figure to keep dropping. He believes that if they can only remove the barriers of cost and infrastructure to the internet, the possibilities for Rwanda will be endless.

Bertrand Muhire, is another young Rwandan who is currently in the U.S. but still takes time to stay up to date with his online network of friends.

"I like using Facebook because I stay in touch with my friends all around the world," he says.

"And, I can meet new friends from different cultures. I like to explore new things".

When asked what benefits Facebook brings him, Muhire did not hesitate to say, "I can use one word: friendship".

As for how likely it is that such online social networking sites will really take off

in Rwanda, Muhire remains optimistic.

"I think the development of ICT and of course the growing number of people having access to the Internet will make Facebook popular in Rwanda," he says, adding, "but I don't think as much as in North America".

"Many people in Rwanda, especially the youth (I mean the 15-30 years range) prefer Hi5 to Facebook or any other online social networking," he adds.

But whether it is Facebook or another site of choice, Muhire recognizes the growing popularity of the Internet as a tool for social networking. Non-profit organizations in Rwanda have also begun to make use of sites such as Facebook.

From the Kinamba Nursery School, Pennies for Rwanda to the Aegis Trust, NGOs are beginning to realize the benefits of Facebook in spreading their message and raising awareness to a growing global audience.

Still, challenges remain with regards to the extent to which such online social networking sites will be accepted in the mainstream social networking in Rwanda, and so too with the rest of Africa.

Kate Raynes-Goldie is a social technology consultant who has witnessed those challenges first-hand.

Most recently, she was involved in creating an online engagement strategy for a partnership between Taking IT Global (the world's largest online community for youth and social change) and telecentre.org (an initiative to support people involved in the grassroots technology movement).

"Facebook and other social networking tools make sense and are relevant to people who use the internet seamlessly as part of their everyday lives," she says.

"Ubiquitous access creates a totally different understanding and literacy of the internet than situations where access is very limited, such as most of Africa".

According to Raynes-Goldie, there are barriers facing mainstream adoption and use of such sites that go beyond questions of access and infrastructure.

"I think there is an entry barrier created by the culture of the whole bunch of people in the developed world doing all

sorts of high level blogging, tagging and taxonomies who have understandings of the internet based on years of experience and were actually present when the development happened online," she says.

"So this culture of people has norms and values and expectations and it is really hard to break into that."

While sites such as Facebook might still be in their infancy in Rwanda, Raynes-Goldie suggests that the blogosphere has been penetrated in recent years by many strong African bloggers, all striving to give their continent an online presence, and doing a good job of it at that.

For now, people who use Facebook and other social networking services in Rwanda remain the minority. But as Terracom and other internet service providers continue to break down barriers of access to the internet, the obstacles will be addressed and even, perhaps, overcome.

**Ends**

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