

Assessing Amharic Information Streams

by Daniel Yacob

The number of documents on the world wide web is now estimated to be over 75 million. The number of Amharic documents on the Internet, as of Megabit 7, has reached 533 documents. The total number of Ge'ez, Tigre, and Tigrigna documents stands at 22. The percentage this represents is trivial to say the least; it is a drop within a drop of water in the ocean of information. This fact and the lack of standards for Ethiopic information interchange would be the primary reasons we do not find Ethiopian language support in the leading web browsers.

Is the outlook so bleak for Ethiopic on the Internet? Lets look at the same figures another way. Since the formation of ECoSA the standards issues are at long last assured now to be addressed. Since the same point in time 7 months ago the number of Amharic documents on the Internet has grown from 23 to 533. The percentage here is no longer trivial, in this small amount of time we find a growth of 2,317%. It is probably safe to say then that Amharic and Ethiopic are now the fastest growing language and writing system on the Internet.

It is still quite far off before we see 1 million Ethiopic documents on the Internet, but we can look forward to seeing 1 million words before long. The total number of words of Ethiopic text, from all of the documents I've just mentioned, comes to 347,534. But what is needed to keep Ethiopic flowing into this ocean of information until finally it is noticed by the big software companies?

To answer this let's look first at where Ethiopic information comes from and what makes it propagate forward. Information that is recorded and delivered to the Internet is primarily in the form of the written word, as you have no doubt seen by now -what's new is a lot like what's old.

So, let's start there, lets return to what's old. Back to the traditional information-based organizations and societies within Ethiopia. Information streams flow through the city, continuously, endlessly, around us always, we need only trace back to their sources.

Sources of electronic text can be found in Addis Ababa from the government and its ministries which produce mountains of information. Some of it is for internal use and some for public consumption.

Small businesses, NGOs, and professional associations in Ethiopia produce both public and private information in much the same way but at a smaller scale.

The Church, arguably the oldest and most successful information society in Ethiopia, and various ministry organizations in town produce large quantities of literature that now originates electronically.

The IES houses the greatest number of Ethiopian documents and manuscripts in any one place. It is a receptor that all streams must flow into. The IES does produce original material electronically though we see very little flow out of what is potentially the greatest information stream of them all.

Rising above these under-currents we arrive on the surface at Addis Ababa's turbulent information wave front: the newspapers. These waves of information from the private and government press come crashing into the street corners daily. This is information that originates electronically but dissipates there in the streets, never to leave Addis. This was the case at least until early Nehasse of last year when a

communication experiment, the Ethiopian News Headlines (<http://ENH.EthiopiaOnline.Net>) was launched that helps direct the info streams from 45 Ethiopian language papers into the information ocean that is the Internet weekly.

Let's consider now how the information market works and how this relates to the flow of information onto the Internet. We are not to assume that every scrap of electronic text must be put on the Internet, nor that if it were on the Internet that people would want to read it. Enough people that is to justify the effort and expense of making it available through the Internet.

So, what information should go outward first? For the sake of the success of the script on the Internet and to reach a 1-million-word count, Ethiopic information should be offered first that will be received in such a way that the audience, the consumer, responds such that the providing agency, the feeder, will want to offer more and more.

In the reality of the agencies making the information available they will need to justify the expense and resource of doing so. For this the information needs to be received as expected (by the agency) from the audience that it is made available to.

The value of information is in the eye of the beholder. There is a potential between the feeders and the consumers that is stronger as greater numbers of people wish to receive the information and as the wish to send the information is stronger by the feeders.

Let's look back at our information providers and consider the relative value of the information they offer to see who would be in the best position to succeed in online information distribution.

Each information producing entity will have information that it wishes to keep private as well as information that it wishes to make known. In the case of the government, it has the responsibility to inform people of matters of health and public safety and changing laws and regulations. The government will provide this information freely to the public or at very low cost. This is indeed a part of their purpose, and they are paid for the service through tax funds.

Business spread information to inform the public of the products and services they offer -to then increase their business revenues. By way of advertising businesses will not only give this information away freely but will pay to maximize its propagation to the largest number of consumers.

Societies and political organizations in town may create pamphlets and newsletters to inform the members and the public of their activities. This information is usually subscription based and of value to those people with an interest in the society.

Academic and cultural institutes produce information to share within their fields of study and to help advance those fields of study. This class of information may come at any cost range and is generally of interest to a small group of people.

Religious institutes will provide literature at minimal cost to help spread the beliefs of their doctrines and increase their congregations.

The government we expect is providing general information for the good of the citizenry. The others are providing specific information of themselves to advance their own causes.

Finally, we have again the newspapers which are more truly info-centric, their purpose is simply to sell information. Not information of themselves but of the immediate events of the day and additionally summary information from all of the above categories. Since their purpose is also to make money from the sale of information it is natural then that a newspaper owner, before others, will look towards new mediums to resell their product to new and larger audiences.

The potential would be strongest here then. The largest part of the population will perceive this consumer-oriented info as having the greatest value. The value is derived from the timeliness of the information, its detail and accuracy. So, we can then expect that a newspaper would be the information provider most likely to succeed on this information delivery medium we call “the Internet”.

Is this the case? Looking quickly at examples of Amharic information providers that are online already, the data that we have is pretty clear. The only Amharic information to be found coming from the government online is through press releases made available by the Ethiopian Embassy in Sweden. Their readership statistics are not publicly available, judging by the low number of links to this source of information, however, we can expect the readership is likely not higher than the others. The Ethiopian Economic Association and ECoSA both provide Amharic materials. The EEA receives over 300 readers a week. ECoSA, which is newer receives around 200 readers a week. The Geja Kale Heywet Church Literature Ministry receives 4-500 readers a week for their bi-monthly magazine. Tobia Online was receiving 2,000 readers a week for its weekly newspaper articles and magazine offerings. This is comparable to the Ethiopian News Headlines which receives the same figures for offering at least 10 Amharic articles from a variety newspaper sources.

What we see here is that information that is updated the most frequently draws the largest readership. This is great for the information providers but how can they make money from this? How do you make money by giving information away freely?

We must also consider now that that the market for Ethiopian information consumption on the Internet is not within Ethiopia. Consider if you will the expense of reading an Ethiopian newspaper over the Internet, at \$3.75 an hour, which is recently down from \$5.00 an hour, vs paying one Birr on the street for the printed edition. Considering this expense, we have to conclude that the audience and consumer market for Ethiopian information will by and large be outside of Ethiopia -where the information, the product, is also less accessible.

These consumers being outside, so is their income which presents the complexity of how to receive monetary funds from this audience. This is an issue for the paper when it wants to sell subscriptions for the printed edition to this audience as well as for the papers' potential advertisers. The same issue is there were the electronic edition to be made subscription based -an English language paper in town will be trying this shortly and the results may indicate the trends for Amharic in the future.

Let us conclude and summarize here. For the script to grow and succeed on the Internet its best chances are under a commercial venture. We have found already an audience for Amharic information of around 2,000 individuals, comparable to the in-town circulation of many papers. This number of individuals continues to grow. The last barrier is not the technology for reading the materials but for electronic commerce between Ethiopia and the outside. When these facilities are in place, yet another business area in itself, we can look beyond the million-word mark and raise our sites to the target of a million documents.