

Ethiopia's Information Providers

by Daniel Yacob

When we discuss the practical benefits of the World Wide Web people generally cite the access to news and information resources as well as to free software that can be downloaded in a few mouse clicks. Often these applications we download are web browser companions to then allow us to read web pages with even greater multimedia “bells and whistles”. But what are people really reading in their web browsers?

After search engines that guide you to very subject specific information it is to the current events information sites that people are surfing for. Sites like CNN, BBC, MSNBC, ABCNews, MTV and News.com where news content is updated as it becomes available. Unlike information that has a long-term value that people generally want from a search engine, topical news is consumable, disposable, of no value after we've read it. Yet we crave it as the immediacy which is its value just might change the course of day or our lives or impact the lives of those we love. Like the flow of blood through our hearts or of air through our lungs we need to keep the information flowing through our minds to at least know that we are conscious. Even with radio, newspapers, magazines and television we can never get enough, and besides what else would you use a new information medium for anyway?

It should come as no surprise then that when the doors to the Internet opened to Ethiopians there were some in the info sector here that had an eye towards writing while the other was busy reading. The Ethiopian info businesses have ventured online, some not waiting for Internet to come to Ethiopia.

Most prominent among those who have trodden online is the pioneering English weekly The Addis Tribune ([Http://AddisTribune.EthiopiaOnline.Net](http://AddisTribune.EthiopiaOnline.Net)) which has been online since late '96. The Addis Tribune has been the best received by the outside public who has responded with a readership of approximately 50,000 a month and who sends in a continuous flow of letters to the editor that get reprinted regularly in the printed edition. The televised CNN African report has found the Tribune's articles a value source of weekly news from Ethiopia as well.

While the Addis Tribune has gone the free route on Internet the anthological Press Digest ([Http://PressDigest.PhoenixUniversal.Com](http://PressDigest.PhoenixUniversal.Com)) is testing the waters of subscription-based WWW news service.

Materials from both the Addis Tribune and the 7 Days Update are featured at the African News Service ([Http://WWW.AfricaNews.Com](http://WWW.AfricaNews.Com)). Africa Online has recently become host to articles from The Monitor ([Http://WWW.AfricaOnline.Com/](http://WWW.AfricaOnline.Com/)) while the Ethiopian News Agency has been posting materials on Telecom's web server ([Http://WWW.Telecom.Net.Et/ena.htm](http://WWW.Telecom.Net.Et/ena.htm)).

While Addis Ababa is represented online by but a few English newspapers the Amharic weeklies can also be found neighboring their English rivals. The Ethiopian News Headlines ([Http://ENH.EthiopiaOnline.Net](http://ENH.EthiopiaOnline.Net)) was the first site to host Ethiopian News in Amharic. Still less than a year old the site has archives of 56 newspapers from Addis Ababa. In the month of Genbot the worldwide readership at the Ethiopian News Headlines swelled with the interest in current events above 15,000/month.

The Ethiopian News Headlines (ENH) was launched as a technology test bed by the Ge'ez Frontiers Foundation. Articles can be read with any of 54 different Ethiopic fonts. The unexpected popularity of the site helped launched formal web sites for the Tobia and Fiameta newspapers

([Http://Tobia.EthiopiaOnline.Net](http://Tobia.EthiopiaOnline.Net), [Http://ENH.EthiopiaOnline.Net/Fiameta/](http://ENH.EthiopiaOnline.Net/Fiameta/)) who receive similar figures for readership.

The sites collectively have helped contribute to nearly a half million words of Amharic onto the Internet. The ENH which started as an experiment will likely continue into the future as a business. The results of Amharic and English Ethiopian news experience does indicate that there is a steadily growing online market for Ethiopian news and information. For these news services to survive past the novelty phase and to remain free services (like radio or television) we will need to see a response by advertisers to this growing market of avid information consumers. Advertisers may come from either local or worldwide firms to buy space on these electronic pages. So far however advertisers have been slow to harvest the potential of this new market. It is important to realize here that while the cost of Internet access remains high, relative to the cost of a typical newspaper, that the online market for Ethiopian information is among Internet users outside of Ethiopia.