

Straylight, Mala Mala, Pink Frikkie, Blekgelexy and Rumba Kali @Africa. The Net: New Apprentices and Old Masters

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As it happens, the exercise has proved interesting, if sobering. Three years ago, the key issues could be expressed as a paradox: how could access to digital technology be used to mark exclusive status and, at the same time, be seen as a democratizing form of mass communication that could bypass years of conventional economic development? Three years later, there seems little prospect of bypassing conventional economic development, and different associations suggest themselves. For example, there are at present almost ten times the number of Africans infected with the HIV virus than there are Internet users on the continent, and this year roughly the same number of people will die of AIDS as will use the Web. Africa is beset by regional conflicts, and the still-emerging new economic order has devalued many African currencies several times over. Realities such as these indicate social and economic priorities that must temper initial enthusiasms for a digital Africa.

But while the euphoric advocates of new digital frontiers now appear as jaded boosters, more careful analyses have proved robust. Models of the new relationships between local identities and global diasporas, articulated by cultural theorists such as Stuart Hall (1990), Arjun Appadurai (1996) and Manuel Castells (1996, 1997, 1998), have proved durable and help to explain the ways in which the relationships between "center" and "periphery" are still being shaped.

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Straylight, Mala Mala, Pink Frikkie, Blekgelexy and Rumba Kali @ Africa

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This paper returns to the questions asked in "Africa connected" (Hall 1998) in an attempt to re-interpret past impressions as trends that may point to the future. But, as **The Nation** warned recently, "pundits who predict the future are always wrong" (Perlstein 2001). So beware.

In 1995, Shahid Akhtar and Luc Laviolette briefed the United Nations Economic Commission for Africa with the following assessment: "Africa's information infrastructure is by far the least developed in the world. Technical statistics consistently show that Africans have the smallest number of telephone lines per capita, the most restricted access to computer equipment, the most primitive information networks, and the most inaccessible media systems" (Akhtar and Laviolette 1996). Has this situation changed over the subsequent five years?

By November 2000, all African countries had been connected to the Internet (Jensen 2000). But

the regional variation in the density of this connectivity was still marked. In the mid-1990s, South Africa had been ranked 17th in the world in terms of absolute numbers of hosts recognized by national domains, and had an information technology infrastructure in the finance and retail sectors that was comparable to Europe's, advanced cellular communications and a substantial community of Internet subscribers (Hodge and Miller 1996). This had placed it in a category with Spain, Denmark, Austria and New Zealand, and clearly distinct from countries which would be described as "developing". The contrast with the rest of Africa was stark. In 1998 South Africa had 95% of the continent's hosts and Egypt a further 2%. Namibia, Botswana and Zimbabwe (one of the fastest growing sectors on the continent) shared a further 1% of hosts, while the remaining 2% was shared between nineteen countries, all with less than 500 hosts each. The rest of Africa had no recorded connectivity ([Internet Domain Survey](#), Network Wizards).

There is no evidence that these disparities in connectivity are diminishing. Indeed, as the quality of information on individual access to digital communications improves, there is every indication that Akhtar and Laviolette's 1995 assessment holds good. Nua's Internet survey estimated that just over 407 million people were using the Internet in November 2000; of these, only 3.1 million were in Africa (Foley 2000). This is less than 1% of the global "digital community", and about 0.4% of Africa's total population. This estimate correlates with the recent survey by the United Nations Economic Commission for Africa (Jensen 1999), where it is estimated that, of these 3m African Internet users, two-thirds are South African. Jensen (2000) adds a third perspective, noting that of the approximately one million dial-up subscriber accounts to Internet Service Providers (ISP) in Africa, 65% are South African, 20% of the customers are in North Africa and the rest of the continent shares the remainder. When South Africa and the Mediterranean littoral are excluded, only 150 000 Africans have dial-up ISP accounts.

Within South Africa, there are additional variations in connectivity. The majority of those with access to the Internet are from privileged minority sectors of the population, and the extent of this privilege can be illustrated by looking at the more traditional aspects of the telecommunications infrastructure. South Africa has always had a teledensity significantly higher than the rest of sub-Saharan Africa (Hodge and Miller 1996; International Telecommunications Union, African Telecommunication Indicators, 1996). But, as with all aspects of South Africa's economy and public services, there are wide disparities within this infrastructure, rendering the majority of its population as marginalized as communities elsewhere in sub-Saharan Africa. In the mid-1990s, almost 90% of whites had telephones in their homes but only about 12% of blacks, reflecting a parallel distinction between urban and rural communities, while close to 50% of blacks in all areas had no access to any phone, compared to less than 10% of whites. Well over half of people living in rural areas had to travel more than a kilometer to use the telephone, and few main lines were payphones, further restricting access by marginal communities (Hodge and Miller 1996).

In order to address these disparities, the South African government adopted the controversial policy of extending its telecommunications monopoly until May 2002, running counter to the world trend towards deregulation. The intention was to roll out new lines to under-served, mostly-rural areas that would, it was believed, be unattractive for investment in a market-driven policy (Station Africa 2001). In addition, cellular licences were conditional on provisions being made for marginalized communities. It is clear that these policies have had an impact. More than 250 tele-centers have been established in under-served areas. Vodacom (one of two currently-licensed cellular providers) has set up just over 2000 phone shops, and Telkom (the partially government-owned monopoly) is reported to have provided subsidized Internet connections to more than one thousand schools (Bidoli 2001). Nevertheless, it is clear that South Africa's digital divide is still huge. Internet cafes in South Africa's townships are either non-existent or very difficult to find, telephone rates (in particular, the local calls necessary to connect to an ISP) are among the highest in the world, and cellular phone rates are prohibitive.

There are, then, still major disparities in Africa's connectivity. At the larger scale there are major

disparities between South Africa and the rest of the continent, with the vast majority of Internet connectivity at the extreme south or north. Within South Africa, there are contrasts between urban users of information and communications technology, and rural communities that have only partial access to basic telecommunications.

What are the implications of this digital divide for the politics of development in Africa? Despite the waning fortunes of dot.com start-ups, digital technology is still seen as a key element in economic growth in the developed world, with a continuing shift towards service economies driven by new market possibilities and, increasingly, by business-to-business Internet use.

Five years ago, there was a widely shared belief that the Internet was the golden fleece of Africa's future prosperity. In this argument, new information and communication technologies would reform the geography of underdevelopment and dependence - an advance comparable with the invention of the first stone tools, agriculture and industrial production. Dr K Y Amoako, Executive Secretary of the Economic Commission for Africa (ECA), told his audience at an information technology congress in May 1996 that "eons from now, archaeologists will look back at meetings like this one as they search for the foundations of their fully live information societies". By taking advantage of the lag in infrastructure development to learn from the mistakes of others, Africa could "leapfrog over several generations of intermediate technologies still in use in the industrial world", providing cost-effective and appropriate technologies (Amoako 1996).

This view was firmly rooted in aspects of economic policy. The United Nations' Economic Commission for Africa collaborated with the International Telecommunications Union, the International Development Research Center and UNESCO to formulate the African Information Society Initiative, launched at the Information Society and Development Conference in South Africa in 1996. This policy framework placed the development of the continent's "Information Society" at the centre of the United Nations' economic strategy for the region, and presented cabinet-level proposals for national policies. Goals included the creation of effective information and decision support systems, open access to information, private sector leadership, the empowerment of all sectors of society and, by the year 2010, a situation where "every man and woman, school child, village, government office, and business can access information through computers and telecommunications." The ECA saw its role as working with national governments to develop information and communication infrastructure plans, and promoting partnerships between governments, and between governments and the private sector (Cogburn 1996).

This vision of "Africa Connected" reached a high point with the African Connection Rally of March 1999, in which South Africa's Posts and Telecommunications Minister, Jay Naidoo, drove from the northernmost tip of Africa - Bizerte in Tunisia - to the southern extremity of Cape Agulhas in South Africa. Crossing Tunisia, Libya, Egypt, Sudan, Ethiopia, Kenya, Tanzania, Malawi, Zambia, Zimbabwe and South Africa, the rally was intended to raise awareness of the possibilities of telecommunications, building a "highway in the sky". Launching the exercise, Naidoo said: "Cecil Rhodes wanted to build a railroad from Cape Town to Cairo in order to subjugate the continent. Now we want to build an information super-highway Cape to Cairo which will liberate the continent" ([African Connection Rally](#)).

But, since then, telecommunications advocacy has been more muted. There has been little public follow-up to Naidoo's rally, and the Third African Telecom Summit, held in Accra, Ghana, in March 2001, was low-key in comparison with the media profile afforded earlier events (see [African Telecommunications Union](#)). In part, this can be attributed to the apocalyptic politics of Africa at the turn of the century: disruptive wars across vast areas, successive economic crises linked to the vicissitudes of world markets, and the devastation of HIV/AIDS. In South Africa, post-Mandela politics have been characterized by a shift from the utopian renaissance policies of

Thabo Mbeki's Deputy Presidency and early months in office (in which the theme of "Africa Connected" played a prominent role) to an increasingly vituperative political climate characterized by conflicting views on public health policies, allegations of pervasive corruption and racial polarization. There seems to be a new pragmatism that places early claims - such as the Economic Commission for Africa's 1996 euphoria - in a more realistic perspective.

This slide from utopianism to pragmatism is evident in the more general culture of connectivity. Perhaps the most influential manifesto for a new Digital Culture was Howard Rheingold's advocacy of a transformative "virtual habitat" (Rheingold 1991, 1993). Rheingold imagined "a kind of new contract between humans and computers, an arrangement that could grant us great power, and perhaps change us irrevocably in the process" (Rheingold 1991: 386-387). This utopian vision implied that such forms of computer-mediated communication would make the old distinction between individual and community redundant because of their capacity for meeting individual and community needs simultaneously. All would have access to nirvana, which would be the "spirit of community" - "the subjective criterion of togetherness, a feeling of connectedness that confers a sense of belonging" (Foster 1997:29). This would be a postmodern culture that realized the transcendental fantasy of freedom from the constraints of body (Porter 1997).

But such visions of digital prosperity ignored a rather obvious problem in their logic. For if a "second media age" was to become the future of the human species, how would the mass of impoverished, undereducated people gain access to, and learn how to use, the advanced and complex communication technologies upon which the Connected would depend (Lyon 1997)? Contrary to Rheingold's utopian expectations, access to the digital superhighway has steadily become more difficult for many people, rather than easier. A study based on December 1998 US census bureau data found that households with incomes of \$75 000 or over were more than 20 times as likely to have access to the Internet than those at the lowest income levels; that whites were more likely to have access to the Internet from home than Blacks or Hispanics from home and work combined; and that black and Hispanic households were two fifths as likely to have home access to the Internet as white households. This divide had increased by more than 6% since 1994 (National Center for Educational Statistics, 1999; National Telecommunications and Information Administration, 1999). The US government has now identified the "digital divide" as a leading economic and civil rights issue.

These emerging scenarios make digital utopia's opposites seem more probable visions of the future. This is the shadow world of cyberpunk writing; a stygian space in which the Connected are in continual conflict with the Unconnected, defending privilege against the pressing weight of those outside the Net. This, very different, view of the digital future was well represented in Neal Stephenson's "Street" (**Snow Crash**, 1992). In this metaphor, which perceptively anticipated the full development of the Internet, the inhabitants of virtual reality put up their digital shopfronts, billboards or personal profiles along an infinite strip through which digital travelers cruise. There is none of Rheingold's Internet socialism in Stephenson's world. The "Black Sun", for instance, is a very exclusive virtual space:

... when Hiro cuts through the crowd, headed for the entrance, he really is cutting through the crowd He steps over the property line, and he's in the doorway. And in that instant he becomes solid and visible to all the avatars milling outside. As one they all begin screaming. Not that they have any idea who the hell he is - Hiro is just a starving CIC stringer who lives in a U-Stor-It by the airport. But in the entire world there are only a couple of thousand people who can step over the line into The Black Sun (Stephenson 1992: 40)

Today, aspects of **Snow Crash**'s future are our present. Cyberpunk writing describes new cultural syncretisms born in the radical rezoning of cities and new juxtapositions between the rich

and poor. Current demographic trends are resulting in a large-scale movement of poor people to the cities, which are developing into huge, sprawling megalopolises beyond rational governance (Kennedy 1993). In this archetypal city, best represented in Mike Davis's (1990) Los Angeles, deprived communities are fenced off by electronic control and surveillance, and consigned to ghettos dominated by drug warlords and their economy. In contrast, the elite live in privatized, gated communities: "data-rich zones, gated off from the real world but emphatically engaged with the virtual world of cyberspace" (Burrows 1997).

Seen from this perspective, cyberspace seems to provide not so much the promise of a world free from constraints, but quite the opposite. Studies of the use of the Internet, and of "virtual communities", show how they tend to be characterized by monolingualism and homogeneity, reversing trends towards multiculturalism and desegregation: "virtual anonymity does not necessarily lead to relational diversity ... two virtual places may be 'separated' by only a keystroke, but their inhabitants will never meet" (Healy 1997: 62). Michele Tepper's close study of one Usenet newsgroup - alt.folklore.urban - has shown how this homogeneity develops. Complex textual jokes serve to distinguish insiders from outsiders, important in open sites that can be joined by anyone with Internet access (Tepper 1997). More recently, Cass Sunstein (2001) has argued persuasively that the personalization of information through the combination of cable television and profiled Web sites is a dangerous affront to democracy, creating a world in which people do no more than reinforce their prejudices about the world through on-line sources.

Such tendencies towards closure have been long-apparent in groups which are extreme by definition. The diffuse, decentred character of the Internet is an ideal environment for far-right "frontier foundations" and the advocacy of racial and ethnic superiority (Whine 1997) - a manifestation of the rediscovery, or invention, of numerous ethnic identities which is one of the consequences of globalization (Appadurai 1996). Rather than transcending barriers, then, elite Digital Culture seems to reinforce them. Rather than an open world of unconstrained access, the Internet facilitates "lifestyle enclaves" (Healy 1997); cyberpunk's gated communities, shopping in the virtual mall and engaging only with one's own kind, while fighting back the teeming masses beyond the barricades; Sunstein's (2001) "Daily Me", an Orwellian view of the Internet.

In this world, Cartesian spaces have been superseded by digital flows of information, in which the global collapses into a local "point of presence", and in which locally-generated signals are replicated and distributed endlessly and simultaneously. This has been described by Manuel Castells as the "Network Society", a "space of flows" in which capital is managed in real time by globally integrated financial markets, and production and distribution are managed in a "global web" (Castells 1996, 1997, 1998).

Today's global economy comprises the three major regions of North America, the European Union and the Asian Pacific region:

around this triangle of wealth, power and technology, the rest of the world becomes organized in a hierarchical and asymmetrically interdependent web, as different countries and regions compete to attract capital, human skills, and technology to their shores (Castells 1996:101)

Castells' argument is that the "digital divide" is a structural feature of the Network Society, rather than an unfortunate side-effect that can be ameliorated by enlightened social policies. He sees networks as gatekeepers to "network enterprise":

inside the networks, new possibilities are relentlessly created. Outside the networks, survival is increasingly difficult. Under the conditions of fast technological change networks, not firms, have become the actual operating unit (Castells 1996:171)

Why does this happen? Castells argues that competitiveness in the global economy depends on

technological capacity (understood as the articulation of science, technology and industry), access to large, integrated and affluent markets, an appreciable differential between production costs at the production site and prices at the market, and a political capacity to steer growth strategies. Because these are all features of developed economies, the Network Society is reinforcing historical patterns of domination.

These new networks - the "space of flows" that has refigured the geography of consumption, offering almost instant gratification for a digital elite - have created a "mode of information" in which commodities can be bought, sold and distributed. Some of these commodities are new forms - information, financial transactions and images, for example. But in other respects, this Network Society seems to be reasserting the meta-texts of colonialism that have shaped the relationship between Africa and the world for five centuries (Hall 1999).

An influential tradition of writing about Africa has as its hallmark an emphasis on difference, inferiority and primordality, thus reinforcing the image of Western culture as superior and homogenous (Hall 2000a). Such writing started with pre-colonial images of monsters and semi-humans, deserts and wonders, and continued through the high colonial fantasies of Rider Haggard and his contemporaries. Hollywood has always been fascinated by the idea of the primordial continent. In one of very many instances, Bertolucci's **The Sheltering Sky** (1990) has its world-weary American couple seeking release from repression in Africa but finding instead death and unrepressed sexuality in a landscape which seemed empty to them. William Gibson's **Neuromancer** is also part of this tradition. The plot moves between Tokyo, the Sprawl (a megalopolis covering North America's East Coast) and a virtual paradise somewhere in space, dominated by the Villa Straylight. There is no imaging of Africa as a space - the geography of the continent has become irrelevant. But representations of Africans remain true to age-old racial stereotypes. A small cast of characters drifts in and out of the story, never playing a role. There is "a tall African whose cheekbones were ridged with precise rows of tribal scars" and "a thin black child with wooden beads and antique resistors woven tightly into her hair" (Gibson 1984: 9, 90). Later, the protagonist, Case, encounters

two slender Africans ... the men had shaven heads and wore orange coveralls. One was singing softly to himself in a language Case had never heard, the tones and melody alien and haunting ... they'd taken on a sort of imaginary life; he pictured them gliding gently through the halls of Straylight, their smooth dark skulls gleaming, nodding, while the one still sang his tired little song (Gibson 1984: 241, 247-48)

Such images and descriptions of the "outer rim" of Europe's eurocentric world have always had trade value. From the earliest years of colonial explorations of Africa, there has been a brisk and lucrative sale of original and recycled traveler's tales. This trade value continues to grow with the global entertainment and leisure industry that thrives on the ease with which images can be distributed, and with world-wide travel for the affluent. This sort of marketing is hardly surprising. In the global flows of Internet commerce, any African sector must emphasize its particularly local characteristics if it is to gain any competitive edge. In the mid-1990s, South Africa's nascent on-line commodity marketing showed this trend. Web sites emphasized the ethnic and the exotic. "SA Arts and Crafts", for example, was promoted as "a place for you to make all your ethnic and hand-created purchases via the Internet"; ethnic silkscreening by Brian and Gretchen of Cape Town, romantic Zimbabwe landscapes by Wendy (then living in Durban), Brendon's paintings, "a unique style that blends the surreal with African scenery", and African montages by Martin, a "3D art form using artifacts and wooden animals carved by various tribes from as far as Tanzania, Malawi, Mozambique and Zimbabwe" (formerly at <http://www.sacrafts.co.za>). "The Great African Emporium" took a similar line, inviting the digital shopper to "step inside our oasis, and discover the wonders of Africa. Here you can sample and buy some of the exotic goods on offer. Hang up your pith helmet and step up to the counter...". Merchants included "African Legacies",

offering fabrics, wooden key racks and wooden puzzles "to bring a touch of Africa to your mantelpiece [sic] and coffee table", and "South African Bears", featuring a golliwog and a range of teddy bears (formerly at <http://www.emporium.co.za>; Hall, 2000b).

Five years later, the Great African Emporium is still online, although "SA Arts and Crafts" has ceased trading. Digital exoticism, though, is still thriving. A contemporary example is [Authentic Africa](#). Based in New York and Philadelphia, this site offers "unique regional and tribal handcrafted objets d'art" with "a genuine ceremonial or daily use background" and a "flexible return policy" to ensure customer satisfaction. Authentic Africa's online showroom includes masks, spears, clubs, shields, fetishes, exotic animal skins, tribal music CDs and dolls, together representing "the culture and craftsmanship of Angola to Zaire, from Ashanti to Zulu". Customers are warned to expect "markings or scrapes" on a purchase and should "rest assured that this is because it is in its original condition and was actually used in its related function".

An enduring landmark in South Africa's virtual world - and offering a similar exoticism - is the Internet safari offered by [Mala Mala](#), an exclusive private game reserve deep in the eastern lowveld. The design of this now-veteran Web site captures the circle of representation that links the oldest images of the continent with their repetition via the latest media. A series of sepia-tinted maps recalls the discovery of untamed wilderness. Firstly, a click with the mouse brings up a map of Africa in the style of the seventeenth century - "Discover the untamed soul of Africa". A further keystroke takes the explorer closer in, with a map of southern Africa that places Mala Mala close to the fifteenth century empire of the Monomatapa while (in the style of the Internet's collapse of time and space) also showing the present-day cities of Pretoria and Johannesburg. The next screen - Mala Mala itself - is accompanied by a quote from Sir Thomas Browne: "we carry within us the wonders we seek without us: there is all Africa and her prodigies in us". Finally, the Web site provides details of how to make a reservation and offers the download of a free screen saver: "why settle for any old screen saver when you can go wild with the sights and sounds of the African bush?"

Early modern explorers of Africa provided images that were exotic because they were fantastic, playing to the imagination of consumers in Europe who could not see for themselves. The Internet provides the Connected with images that are exotic because they are hyper-real, playing to a sense of wonder that time and space can be conquered. Neuromancer offers racialized representations of Africans free from spatial ties to Africa, while Mala Mala offers the Internet tourist Africa's wilderness free from sequential time. Wild Africa, free from history, is a long established trope; elite Digital Culture extends it into unbounded space and time (Hall, 2000b). Representations of Africa such as these, and the commodities that they present, are stalls in the virtual mall. In the relocation of elite consumption that is enabled by the Internet, the credit-worthy shopper can reside in New York, Nairobi or New Delhi. This global, electronic economy carries with it the social relations of computer-mediated communication, building the "lifestyle enclaves" of unilingual, homogenous interests, whether through the cultural jokes of newsgroups, distance education, online games, or virtual sex.

But...

Despite the eclipse of Rheingold's new frontiers by Stephenson's Black Sun, the Internet is famously elusive. The Web was, after all, embraced enthusiastically by the military as a way of avoiding a wipe-out from a direct hit, and the Web continually shows the ability to reform through and around the direct hits of corporate campaigns and financial armory. To repeat Manuel Castells' perceptive observation, with emphasis added, "inside the networks, *new possibilities are relentlessly created*" (Castells 1996:171). When the "operating unit" is the network itself, there are continual possibilities that range from permutations through confrontation to hacking.

Some of these alternative digital worlds stress a new, participatory democracy, often conceptualized as a modification of Habermas's "public sphere" - "a realm of our social life in which something approaching public opinion can be formed", and where "access is guaranteed to all citizens ...a portion of the public sphere comes into being in every conversation in which private individuals assemble to form a public body" (Habermas 1989: 136). This has been conceptualized as a limitless public space made up of heterogeneous and contested subject positions (Foster 1997; Knapp 1997). New possibilities for governance are claimed, with fundamental changes in relations of power due to the opening up of computer-mediated communication as a medium of emancipation, particularly for those marginalised by existing structures (Loader 1997; Gurstein 2000).

Further forms of agency enable the politics of local identity. As Arjun Appadurai (1996:7) has pointed out:

there is growing evidence that the consumption of the mass media throughout the world often provokes resistance, irony, selectivity, and, in general, agency. Terrorists modeling themselves on Rambo-like figures (who have themselves generated a host of non-Western counterparts); housewives reading romances and soap operas as part of their efforts to construct their own lives; Muslim family gatherings listening to speeches by Islamic leaders on cassette tapes; domestic servants in South India taking packaged tours to Kashmir: these are all examples of the active way in which media are appropriated by people throughout the world.

The Internet is a site for anarchical opposition that is not subject to the restraints of physical resources, the need for mass support or the requirements of bureaucratic facilitation - the Seattle phenomenon that has forced the World Bank, the IMF and other multinational organizations behind police cordons and razor wire.

This is an ideal environment for extreme political positions, and the advocacy of racial and ethnic superiority, as already noted. South Africa's earlier contribution to claims for white supremacy was - predictably - the Afrikaner Weerstandsbeweging (AWB), whose site was dedicated to "the furtherance of realization amongst Afrikaner-Boers of their ethnic white descent and inheritance, the blood relationship and nationalist importance of being a pure bred supreme race...". To the tune of the old South African anthem, the site offered the insight that the former South African president, "Pink Frikkie" de Klerk, was seduced by the wife of a communist Greek shipping magnate: "is her influence possibly the reason why de Klerk, who was always regarded as a right wing conservative, suddenly became an extreme radical left winger? A frank and honest answer to this question could make very interesting reading". In similar vein, the Boerestaat Party Web page offered support for white supremacists at the "embassies of the Boernation in the world", opposing enslavement by communists through "braaivleis and Boerespot".

Part of the effect of such sites lies in the difficulty of measuring their true support - a particular characteristic of the culture of digital anarchy. Far-right racism will long be a political concern in South Africa. But the Boerestaat Party, as prominent on the Web as many other political movements, only mustered a few supporters for a rally on leader Robert van Tonder's farm to mark the anniversary of the defeat of the British at Majuba: two bottles of mampoer wrapped in the vierkleur were auctioned to raise money for AWB leader Eugene Terre'Blanche to defend himself on a charge of beating a farm laborer around the head with an iron pipe (Hall, 1998, 2000b). Interestingly, neither the AWB or the Boerestaaat Web sites exist any longer, presumably reflecting the diminishing fortunes of far-right political organizations in South Africa.

Other fringe sites are politically progressive, idiosyncratic or eccentric: [Earthlife Africa](#) (pollution, the protection of ecologically sensitive areas and connections with international Green issues); the [Alternative Information and Development Centre](#) ("campaigning and lobbying on the macro issues affecting the development process in South Africa"); or the [National Society of Microsoft](#)

[Haters](#) ("a response to the current bid for World Takeover being waged by Microsoft Corp"). Sites such as these demonstrate the particular power of Internet alternatives - anyone, anywhere, with a standard computer and an account with an Internet Service Provider can put up a Web site that can be accessed from anywhere in the world, and which can have as much prominence as an official government site or that of a large corporate organization.

Along with electronic mail, this allows political action that can defy almost any attempt at information control. For instance, virtual conferencing has provided varied and up-to-the-minute perspectives on political events; NuAfrica's conversations about the civil war and collapse of Zaire, going much deeper than the superficialities of commercial news coverage, or the use of lists to report pillaging of museums by military forces. There has been opposition to the Nigerian government by the Association of Nigerians Abroad. Ibe Ibeike-Jonah (Cornell University) and Ali Mazrui (State University of New York) distributed a petition on the African Higher Education Network and other lists that called on the Organization of African Unity to establish a Pan-African Senate consisting of former heads of state who relinquished power in democratic circumstances to "address the sore emanating from the problem of political succession in Africa", and counter "the mirage of staying in power indefinitely". More recently, Zimbabwean [Chaz Maviyane-Davies](#) has used the Internet to campaign against the re-election of Robert Mugabe, publishing two protest posters a day on his Web site: "design is my weapon and Zimbabwe is my country ... My motivating force was listening to the radio and watching the news ... It was anger, every day, and the anger drove me more and more" (MacKinnon 2000).

In the wider cultural sphere, digital media offer new avenues for experimental art and writing - alternatives to the digital economy of the media moguls. The prohibitive cost of printing is making even the best poetry impossible to publish, and several Web sites circumvent this restraint; these include the [UCT Poetry Web](#), concentrating on the work of poets in the Western Cape and Cape Town, and [Barefoot Press](#), "home of free poetry", featuring Madame Pedmont, "resident automatic poet", interactive poetry writing, the work of "South Africa's finest new and used poets" and links to other poetry sites. Fringe literature can thrive in a medium where distribution costs are negligible. Such sites can be ephemeral. For example, in 1998, "Sidelines" was an on-line quarterly publishing on topics such as pornography, Joe Slovo, politics, bicycle theft, South African English, and urban life; while Blêksem described itself as "a South African electric pamphlet", "the electronic version of the real thing". Three years later, there is no trace of either, while other sites have been born (see, for example, [Blekgelexy](#)).

There can be no doubt that the Web will continue to expand as a source of new cultural forms that are specific to Africa. Hiphop is a good example of medium's potential. Of the many sites dedicated to the different aspects of Hiphop culture, [The Hip-Hop Headrush](#) and [Pan African Hiphop](#) are examples. The Hip-Hop Headrush originated in South African campus radio in the mid-90s, moving to the Web in the late 1990s - now its primary home. The site lists events (the Johannesburg Graffiti Gallery, African Dope Tour), mailings, a discussion forum and news of new releases. In particular, The Hip-Hop Headrush seeks to counter the negative publicity of commercial media: "Hip-hop is not violence, misogyny and narcotic substances - if you believe that, then the media and commercial mainstream music buyers have you sadly confused". Instead, "Hip-hop is a positive, true-to-life art form ... a global culture, transcending geographical, gender and racial boundaries". Pan African Hiphop matches this advocacy on a continental scale. Supported by Madunia, a Dutch NGO that promotes African music, this site was originally called "Rumba Kali", Swahili slang for "totally broke". The Pan African Hiphop site covers music across the continent, with news and events from Senegal, Botswana, Tanzania, Mali, Ghana and other countries. Forums include "battle rhymes" ("show off your rhyming skills, in any language"), discussion of Hiphop lyrics in Swahili, a French language forum - and a discussion forum for academics wanting to make direct contact with artists.

One of the Internet's most evident qualities - whether at the heart of Castells' Network Society, or at the periphery that is Africa - is its apparent conquest of time and space. A keystroke takes the surfer to Australia and forward ten hours in time. Another keystroke, and you're in California, visiting a bookstore while everyone is still sleeping. Previously, such time travel was the domain of physicists, communicating in the language of mathematics. Now, the algorithms are common property. This collapse of space and time can be seen most clearly in the new conjunctions of the local and the global, and the individual and the community, in the new politics of identity. Who, in this "space of flows", are the Old Masters and New Apprentices?

In one sense, it is striking how the roll-out of the new "mode of communication" mirrors the ligaments of nineteenth century colonialism (Hall 1999). From beachheads of privilege in the south and north, Internet Service Providers have pushed into the heart of the continent, extracting the raw value of exoticism and selling it to the West. The commodities sought by the Old Masters - Africa's minerals and timber, ivory and oil - have become the luxury goods and services of the New Apprentices, playing to the tourist's insatiable need for exotic stimulation, and to the West's market for masks and fetishes, scuffed and scratched into authenticity.

But the Internet's conquest of space and time also creates almost-instant veterans of its own culture - the venerable Webmasters of three years ago, and their new acolytes. The Hip-Hop Headrush's MassDosage looks back to 1998 with nostalgia, offering old showsheets - "a collection of classic Hip-Hop". Pan African Hiphop's Rumba Kali site looks forward to a new wave of music and performance, such as the X Plastaz from Arusha, Tanzania, who are gaining wide popularity for a style that incorporates traditional music and story-telling, with Maasai singer Yamat Ole Meipuko. The X Plastaz are supported by an international NGO, with their music distributed worldwide through the Web and a program of music workshops for schools in Kenya and Tanzania.

Who knows what direction these new cultural forms will take - whether they will be commercialized into a standard exoticism, or whether they will use Africa's new connectivity to transgress the boundaries of conventionalized media? Never trust a pundit.

Note

[1] I am grateful to the editors of **Mots Pluriels** for inviting me to revisit my article "Africa Connected", published in **First Monday** 3 (11), 1998, at: http://www.firstmonday.dk/issues/issue3_11/hall/index.html. I would also like to thank Pia Bomardella for her diligent testing of old links and investigation of new sources.

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Back to [\[the top of the page\]](#) [\[the contents of this issue of MOTS PLURIELS\]](#)