

Stretching the mobile web across Africa

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Fixed line infrastructure is largely absent throughout Africa's rural heartlands, many say this is why cellular stands the greatest chance of delivering internet services to the masses.

But 3G network rollouts are rare, sophisticated handsets expensive and ARPU margins so low that the mobile internet will remain the preserve of the wealthy minority.

Speaking on Day 1 of this year's AfricaCom event, held in Cape Town, South Africa, Stephane Boyera of the W3C Mobile Web Initiative, outlined his organisation's vision for bringing the benefits of a connectedness to some of the most economically undeveloped regions on the planet.

"I think that there were the exact same question five years ago about mobile telephony, and some people were questioning the profitability emerging markets could offer. They thought that developing countries were too poor to afford mobile telephony, just considering the cost and not the return on investment that could happen," Boyera said.

Boyer concedes that ARPU is very low, however, he feels strongly that the overall model is incredibly beneficial and profitable for all. "People have an incredible tool for development, operators, handset manufacturers, service providers, mobile telephony equipment manufacturers: they are all making money, and are even considering that emerging markets are the most promising source of revenue for the future. So clearly, I'm convinced that the profit will be here, if appropriate economic models are found, and is the prices are well set," he said.

Speaking as part of the panel discussing wireless broadband Boyera suggests the developed world's aspirations of a 3G-enabled broadband mobile internet are not necessarily right for Africa. "My vision for the mobile web in Africa (and other developing countries) is a bit different: it should work on the lowest phones, and on a GSM network."

According to Boyera, the point is not to bring the web content as it is today with "sound, video, pictures and so on, to people who would not pay for that now," but to both use the power of the web and the ubiquity of mobile phones, "to bring them valuable information, dedicated to their daily lives and activities, and that would really improve their conditions."

From W3C's perspective, the mobile web will lead to the development of the next generation of mobile applications, that would widespread the use of already available content, and of dedicated applications, that are really useful for underprivileged populations living in rural communities.

W3C is currently exploring this work within its Mobile Web Initiative. The goal is to look at how beneficial the convergence of mobile phones and Web

technologies could be for developing countries, in order to sustain development in emerging markets and to enable bridging the digital divide.

"I personally don't think that people in rural areas would pay to access the web like the one we are 'consuming' for entertainment, for pleasure, for networking, because of the cost that would be considered as wasted. However, if the point is to access content and services that help them, then this is no more a cost, this is an investment," said Boyera.

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