Research Article

Glamour and Honor: Going Online and Reading in West African Culture

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Abstract

In the fragile reading cultures of the developing world, will people abandon print as they embrace the Internet? Whether media compete or collaborate depends on place-specific factors. West Africans insert online practices into a local context of material circumstances, social roles, and cultural values. In Nigeria and Ghana these include (1) unreliable electricity and execrable telephone service; (2) overworked women, jobless young men, scammers, and ambitious teenagers; and (3) a reading culture of limited penetration but enormous prestige. Internet access via cybercafés has intensified personal communications, reinforced gender inequality, and enabled petty crooks to go global. It has not, however, encroached on reading's all-but-sacred status. Both net-savvy youth and the adult "reading class" protect reading practices through spatial and temporal separation, time management, and functional differentiation. These preserve the honored position of reading despite West Africans' enthusiasm for the glamour of going online.

When West Africans go online, what are the cultural consequences? This article investigates how public access to the Internet is affecting Nigerian and Ghanaian urban culture in general and reading in particular.

Research assessing the Internet's impact on sub-Saharan Africa has concentrated on the two faces of the digital divide: (1) will the Internet exacerbate, or reduce, the technological gap between the developing world and advanced industrial societies? and (2) what effect will the Internet have on internal patterns of social and political stratification? We are addressing a related but specifically cultural question: how are West Africans using the Internet, and how are their practices affecting other media, in particular print?[1]

Although most research on the Internet's impact on book production and on reading practices comes from Western Europe and North America, Nigeria and Ghana offer intriguing grounds for addressing similar ques-

1. *Sonaike (2004) urges moving beyond the technology gap issue in Africa; Norris (2001), DiMaggio et al. (2001), and Wellman & Haythornthwaite (2002) overview the social uses of the Internet. See Hargittai (2004) for a summary of the access versus use issues. The study of media use, not just media access, has a history that long predates the Internet, of course. Exemplary works in this tradition include Hoggart's (1992) analysis of how working-class Britons use print differently than do their middle-class counterparts and Morley's (1992) discussion of gender's impact on the ways in which people watch television.*

tions. Both have large populations of literate people, well-developed literary institutions, and internationally eminent writers. Nevertheless, their reading cultures may be fragile, for they involve a small fraction of the population and they operate in a cultural context that rewards socializing more than individual pastimes. As new entrants into the wired world, Nigeria and Ghana are living laboratories for investigating cultural responses to technological change.

Some working definitions are in order. Whereas *literacy* refers to the ability to decode written texts, *reading* is the actual practice of doing so. We further restrict *reading* (as do virtually all studies of reading) to refer to the leisure-time engagement with print. This excludes the reading required for job performance or for school, and it excludes reading online. Our informants define it the same way. *Readers* are not people who *can* read, or who *do* read for work but those who *choose to read* in their spare time. The definition includes magazines and newspapers, although some of our respondents did associate "reading" with "books." We use the terms *using the Internet* and *going online* as equivalents, for the people we studied do not distinguish between the two. *West Africa* is shorthand for the places studied, urban Ghana and Nigeria. Despite many differences, West African countries share similar patterns of sharp North/South and rural/urban divides, ubiquitous cybercafés in cities, and ambitious youth who see education and global connections as their ticket to a brighter future; they differ from East and South Africa in lacking a (European) settler population and being less developed in terms of indicators like literacy rates.

Our methods were exploratory and opportunistic. One of the authors has studied Nigerian readers for many years (Griswold 2000). As she was completing a book on the Nigerian literary complex, Internet access became widely available in urban West Africa. The same people that constituted the Nigerian readers—the young, the educated, the well-off, the urban—were also the early adopters of such practices as sending e-mails, playing online video games, and surfing the Net for entertainment and information. So the substantive question arose: what impact would this development have on the literary culture that she had just finished mapping? Through this case one may consider more general questions about how electronic culture engages print culture:

Do they compete? Do they support each other? Do they not engage at all?

Griswold observed Internet cafés and interviewed users in Lagos during August 2002 and January 2004. McDonnell and McDonnell carried out comparable interviewing and observation during the summer of 2003 in Accra. In March 2005 Griswold conducted focus group interviews on reading and Internet use at three secondary schools in Nigeria: Queen's College–Yaba; Igbobi College; and Federal Government Girls' College, Sagamu. (See the appendix for the focus group questions.) Students at these elite schools do not represent Nigerians and Ghanaians as a whole. They do represent (1) the next generation of the reading class and (2) the first generation of youth who take Internet access for granted.

This article begins with the perspective that new technology's interaction with a pre-existing cultural context shapes its social uses. The second section looks at what is known about the relationship between going online and reading in the world at large. The third section focuses on reading in West Africa, and the fourth on Internet practices in West Africa. The fifth section considers how youth manage their reading and their Internet use. The final section concludes that the Internet and print do not compete because West Africans separate the two in both time and space, manage time carefully, and accord a cultural honor to reading and readers that is quite distinct from the glamour associated with going online.

The Cultural Impact of New Technology

The relationship between technological change and social context offers a vantage point from which to view the Internet's impact on West Africa. Until recently social scientists did not question what most people see as common sense: a rationality-based model of technological change whereby (1) a problem exists and (2) technologies are developed until something finally solves the problem. In the 1990s, however, some studies highlighted how the reverse takes place: people develop new technologies and then seek problems to which they can be applied.[2]

Technological changes can indeed revolutionize social and cultural practices. The printing press is the

2. *The standard analysis and documentation of this shift in thinking about technology is MacKenzie and Wajcman*

most familiar example; historians have seen print technology as giving rise to everything from modern science to the end of absolutism to the Protestant Reformation (Eisenstein 1979). Television has similarly had a fundamental impact on everything from how people get the news to how they eat meals. More often, however, technological change does not revolutionize social or cultural relations but facilitates what people are already doing. Whereas technology creates new behavioral possibilities, the goals of the behavior are not new themselves. A recent study of cellphone usage in the Philippines illustrates this nicely. The popularity of mobile phones derives in large part from Filipinos' strong desire to communicate in the first place (Pertierra et al. 2002). Filipinos can do what they always did—stay in touch with people and reinforce social ties—only now they can do more of it.

Thus, there are two ways to think about the impact of the Internet (or of ICTs in general): it will revolutionize cultural patterns—the "agent of change" thesis—or it will facilitate and support cultural patterns—the "agent of reproduction" thesis. By looking at the specific question of competition or collaboration between print and electronic media in Nigeria and Ghana, our research seeks to shed light on the general question of whether sudden technological change destabilizes cultural patterns. Is Internet culture (the local symbols and meanings associated with the practice of going online) eclipsing West African reading culture, is it supporting it, or is it having no impact? What are the implications of this new technology for the cultural reproduction of reading and readers? How is the reading class responding?

The Relationship Between Internet Use and Reading in the World at Large

In January 2004 UCLA's Center for Communication Policy released findings from the *UCLA World Internet Project,* which was "the first survey to produce international comparison data on the social, political end economic effects of Internet use and non-use" (UCLA, Office of Media Relations 2004, 1). The project analyzed data from thirteen coun-

tries, most from the technologically developed world.[3] Two findings give a sense of what the emerging pattern in West Africa might be. First, every country showed a gender gap, with more men than women using the Internet. The extent of this gap varied considerably, from more than 20% in Italy to less than 2% in Taiwan, with an average of 8% overall (see also Kolko et al. 2004). Second, in every country of the survey Internet users watched fewer hours of television than nonusers did. Worldwide, Internet users spend a bit more time socializing with family and friends, more time exercising, and more time reading books. Although these latter correlations are not great, what is clear is that the main loser in competition with the Internet is television.

Research on the future of reading in the wired world has been inconsistent. Some studies have suggested that the reading cultures in America and Europe are remarkably resilient, contrary to the fears in the 1990s about the death of the book (Birkerts [1994] offers the pessimistic view; McGann [2001] and Loizeaux and Fraistat [2002] express more optimistic rethinking). A new study from the National Endowment for the Arts paints a bleaker picture, especially in terms of "literary reading"—that is, novels, poetry, and drama (National Endowment for the Arts 2004). The NEA report shows that, although half of all Americans do read literature with some regularity, the percentage has declined in the past twenty years, especially among younger cohorts.

One must separate the overall trajectory of reading with the interaction between reading and going online. A recent article reviewing the survey data from highly developed countries concludes that, so far, the relationship between the two activities is one of "more/more" (heavy Internet users are heavy readers, even controlling for education) rather than "zero-sum" (Griswold & Wright 2004). Increased Internet use cuts into time spent watching television in the United States and the West generally, but not into time spent reading. On the other hand, the NEA study, though it did not measure Internet use, suspects that, because "literary participation is clearly less popular than it used to be, [this is] possibly due to competition for entertainment time and

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(1999). *Exemplary studies include Bijker (1995) and Fischer (1992). This partial shift was allied with organizational sociology's emphasis on how "the new" is embedded in and accommodates to an existing social and cultural matrix.*
3. *The UCLA World Internet project included Chile, China, Germany, Hungary, Italy, Japan, Korea, Macao, Singapore, Spain, Sweden, Taiwan, United Kingdom, and the United States.*

money from a range of other options, including videogames, movies, and the Internet" (National Endowment for the Arts 2004, 28).

Even if reading and Internet turn out to be mutually supportive rather than competitive in the West (and the jury is still out on this), what will happen in places where the reading culture is newer, smaller, frailer, and less influential to begin with?

The Reading Class in West Africa

People who routinely read in their leisure time constitute a social formation that we call the "reading class" (Griswold et al. 2005). Historically the reading class has been an elite group associated with religious hierarchies (the Church in the European Middle Ages) or regime hierarchies (the Chinese bureaucrats—literati—during the Qing dynasty). It was not until late the eighteenth-century that northwestern Europe and North America developed a reading culture, one wherein commercial, governmental, entertainment, and religious-ideological institutions presumed the widespread ability to read (Rose 2001). Other parts of the world caught up gradually. Africa lags the rest of the world in literacy, and West Africa lags the rest of Africa.[4] UNESCO reported that in 2000, 28.4% of adult Ghanaians were illiterate (19.7% of the men and 36.8% of the women); Nigeria was even worse, with adult illiteracy at 36.0% (27.8% male, 43.9% female) (UNESCO Institute for Statistics 2002).

West African readers—not those who are literate but those who read for pleasure—share some of the characteristics of readers everywhere.[5] First and foremost, they are highly educated; education is in-variably the strongest predictor of reading (Griswold et al. 2005). They are affluent and they are urban, standard characteristics associated with both literacy and reading as a practice.[6] More specific to the African context, Ghanaian and Nigerian readers are disproportionately likely to be Christian. Islam as interpreted by West African mullahs tends to discourage secular reading; moreover, the literacy rates for Muslims, especially women, have historically been much lower than for non-Muslims (Griswold 2000).[7] In contrast, much colonial literacy was a product of Christian missionary schools, and the Christian churches have continued to involve themselves in education and book publication. Reading is prestigious, even for youth, and books are fairly hard to come by, so reading a book—any book—confers status (Griswold 2000; Newell 2000). One way in which African reading may be different from Western reading involves gender. In the West women read more than men; the difference, while not large, is very stable (Griswold et al. 2005). In Africa, however, because males lead females in literacy and because Africans have large families so even educated women have little leisure time, women's usual gender advantage may not apply.[8]

Although the West African transition to print culture is not complete, people there assume that it will happen. During interviews for a book on the social complex underlying Nigerian fiction, the editors, authors, readers, and booksellers repeatedly said something along the lines of, "Nigeria does not have a large reading culture yet, but when it does . . ."—for example, we'll sell more books, I'll live off my writing, it will be easier for me to get

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4. A regional comparison shows that sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia have the lowest adult literacy, each a bit below 60%, with Arab states just a bit higher. These lagging regions also have the most extreme gender differences. Latin America and East Asia have roughly 90% literacy, and Europe and North America have near universal literacy (UNESCO Institute for Statistics 2005a).

5. Virtually all studies of reading define "reading" as noncompulsory reading for pleasure during leisure time (Griswold et al. 2005).

6. Social science research on reading has recently concentrated on reading practices rather than reading ability (literacy). For a fine example, see Barton and Hamilton (1998).

7. Girls' educational disadvantage, made notorious by the case of Afghanistan under the Taliban, is by no means characteristic of all Islamic societies. While Pakistan and Egypt have vast differences in the literacy rates of men and women, Malaysia and Iran do not (UNESCO Institute for Statistics 2005b). In West Africa the general inequality between the sexes, polygamy, and female marriage at a very young age support an interpretation of Islam that downplays the importance of girls' education.

8. There are no reliable survey data on this point, beyond the differences in literacy. Both Ghanaians and Nigerians report that young people regardless of sex read "everything," including, for example, romance novels. Adult men are likely to read for career advancement (motivational books are popular) and women for pleasure (Griswold 2000; Newell 2000).

hold of books, the quality of our literature will improve, kids will be better off, and so forth (Griswold 2000). The Nigerian and Ghanaian reading class sees itself as a vanguard for this reading culture, small, beleaguered, but on the winning side of history (for the case of Ghana, see Newell [2000]).

The onset of electronic media and the Internet raises questions about this assumption. Contrary to the expectations of their writers, publishers, and readers, Nigeria and Ghana might never attain (or need) a larger "reading culture" than they already have; indeed, the reading culture might shrink. One way this could occur is that, heretofore, African popular literature has served as an entry point (the "rich compost of prior creativity," as Lindfors put it) into reading for youth and/or the newly literate, with some readers and writers then moving on to more challenging material (Lindfors 1996; Newell 2000). If the easy entertainment of lightweight reading (Macmillan's Pacesetters, romance magazines, Onitsha market literature, *soyayya* love stories) gives way to the easy entertainment of video games and the Internet, this would derail the expected move from less demanding to more demanding reading.

Defenders of print culture have worried about competition from electronic media since the early days of television. Dana Gioia, chairman of the NEA, argues that "reading a book requires a degree of active attention and engagement. . . . By contrast, most electronic media such as television, recordings, and radio make fewer demands on their audiences, and indeed often require no more than passive participation. Even interactive electronic media, such as video games and the Internet, foster shorter attention spans and accelerated gratification." The results of reading being displaced by other media would be disastrous. "[P]rint culture affords irreplaceable forms of focused attention and contemplation that make complex communications and insights possible. To lose such intellectual capability—and the many sorts of human continuity it allows—would constitute a vast cultural impoverishment" (NEA 2004, vii). This is the view held, without exception, by the adult Ghanaians and Nigerians with whom we spoke, even those who enthusiastically embrace the advantages of going online. West African educators, editors, authors, and middle-class parents fear the Internet could have a catastrophic effect on the fragile reading culture.

The Internet in West Africa

Three kinds of billboards assault the visitor coming into Lagos from the Murtala Mohammed Airport: ones involving HIV-AIDS, ones promoting religious revivals, and ones touting Internet services. Ads for dot.coms, cybercafés, and Internet service providers are ubiquitous. Accra offers the same visual landscape: ads for Busy Internet (the city's largest cybercafé) are everywhere. Service providers and dot.coms advertise widely, whereas cybercafés usually restrict their signs to their immediate neighborhoods.

West Africans' embrace of the Internet is not simply due to technological enthusiasm. Although e-mail has many advantages everywhere, it has one extra one in Nigeria and Ghana: it helps free West Africans from their abysmal local telephone service. Government-run Nitel and Ghana Telecom are notorious. Calls don't get through, phones go dead for hours, people wait years to get connected. (Ghanaians and Nigerians similarly love mobile phones because they circumvent the national phone companies.) Most Africans don't use e-mail to contact people in the same city—an e-mail message won't be received until the recipient goes to the cybercafé—but e-mail is far more effective and less expensive than phones for keeping in touch with relatives in other towns or abroad.

The front page of Nigeria's largest newspaper, the *Guardian,* both confirms the Internet's ubiquity and suggests some local characteristics. It features an ad for technical engineering firm, Avery Nigeria Ltd., with the e-mail given as aveynig@beta.linkseve.com. Note that two Rs are missing from this e-address. Similarly on page 2 an ad for the oldest bookstore in West Africa, CSS Bookshops Ltd., trumpets the firm's prestige (Lagos address by the Cathedral; branches in Abuja, Akure, Kaduna, and Port Harcourt) and gives the e-mail address: cssbookships@skannet.com.ng—which, of course, should be book*shops.* Ubiquitous errors such as these challenge West Africans attempting to use the new media, especially when most are working out of cybercafés where their Internet time is being metered.

This is beside the point. All of the larger newspapers in Accra and Lagos have their own Web sites, and some—*This Day, Tell*—are quite sophisticated. In our observation of Internet use in both countries,

however, we *never* observed anyone looking at a local paper's Web site, nor did anyone ever mention doing so. People do go online to look up sports scores or news information, but not from local newspapers. A newspaper Web site is to impress and thereby to encourage the sale of more print copies of the paper, though a secondary but much-appreciated function is to enable expatriate Africans keep up with local news. The same is true of all business Web sites: West Africans don't shop online anyway, and few spend much time in cybercafés checking on what Avery's engineers have been up to lately. These Web sites are for prestige, not utility. All businesses want to appear up-to-date, so the point is to have a Web site and e-mail address, not to have customers actually be able to use them.

Does all this mean Nigeria and Ghana are "wired"? Does this suggest West Africans routinely use the Internet? No, for we know this is not the case.[9] What it does suggest is that there is glamour associated with the popular IT complex—URLs, e-mail addresses, Internet use—even though people face obstacles in actually taking advantage of the new technologies. Part of the glamour comes from being on the cutting edge, but in countries such as Ghana and Nigeria additional panache comes from being connected to the outside world, being seen as and seeing oneself as a global player. Whereas West African youth can try to capitalize on this, for example by obtaining visitors' e-mail addresses and then contacting them for help getting into foreign universities, merely to have the connections is satisfying. In societies where dispensing patronage—being a "big man"—is an important cultural role, both businesses and individuals benefit from a reputation of being wired into external contacts. Promotion and advertising capitalizes on this cultural fact by generating anxiety, the fear of missing out by not being online. This is one reason why entrepreneurial West Africans have been so determined to go around

their local infrastructures in order to reach cyberspace (Zachery 2002; Goldstein 2004).

Cybercafés

For the average Nigerian or Ghanaian, the road to cyberspace goes through an Internet café. Lagos seems to have a cybercafé on every block. Even if you miss the sign, the tall red-and-white towers sprouting everywhere pinpoint their locations. In Accra, although the towers are not always red and white, the cafés are everywhere.

Lagos cafés are pleasant places: air conditioned, clean, and—by West African standards—quiet. They may be crowded, with each actual user surrounded by a cloud of friends. The connection charge is modest, typically 60 naira (roughly 40 cents) for a half-hour or 100 naira per hour. This is not exorbitant, and the middle class is well able to afford it. Cybercafés range from business-like operations with training programs and an adult, work-oriented clientele, to local hangouts with posters on the wall, loud music, snacks, and young customers. Because they are neighborhood based, most cafés serve both types of clients, but the feeling in each is distinct (cf. Miller & Slater 2000).

Accra likewise has two levels of cybercafé. High-end operations, which feature newer computers and operating software, are clean, air-conditioned, and relatively quiet and orderly. Busy Internet's red walls are covered with popular Adinkra symbols; Conect [*sic*] Café has locally made batik cloth for the waiting area couches and draperies. Such cafés offer beverages and "small chops"—that is, home-baked biscuits and other snacks. They tend to have more terminals than the more humble operations, and they are more likely to offer auxiliary services such as long-distance calling, printing, computer software classes, and computer assistance. Low-end cafés are poorly lit, small-scale, and offer older computers and software. A single employee is on site and is often not able to help users much, though some such

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9. *The overall picture of Internet access in sub-Saharan Africa in general and Nigeria and Ghana in particular is dismal. In 2001 the world average was one Internet user per 15 people; in North America and Europe it was one user per 2 people; in Africa it was one user per 190 people. Of the larger African countries, South Africa has best Internet density, 1.69 dial-up subscriptions per 100 people. Nigeria has a density of 0.44, and Ghana has 0.08. (Sonaike 2004, table 1, p. 47). All such figures must be taken with a grain of salt, but there is no doubt that Africa, along with South Asia, lags most other places in ICT. Ghana and Nigeria are by no means the worst off among African countries; this distinction probably goes to the Democratic Republic of Congo, with Liberia, Ethiopia, Central African Republic, Niger, Burundi, Sierra Leone, Chad, Somalia, and Sudan also trailing the rest of the continent (Sonaike 2004, table 3, p. 48; Baumgartner 2004: 24).*

cafés charge extra for staff assistance. These low-end cafés tend to be located off the main traffic areas, and they serve a neighborhood, often working-class, clientele. High-end cafés draw a mix of middle-class Ghanaians, students, expatriates, and visitors.[10]

During the day most cybercafé customers are adults, either young men and women in their twenties or middle-aged adult men. When schools let out in mid-afternoon, youth take over the cafés and continue to dominate all evening (very young teens earlier, older ones later). Some adults show up after work, and some students show up during the day (and, of course, on weekends), but the general pattern seems to be adults earlier, youth mid-afternoon and later. Youth often go online in groups, with one paying customer accompanied by friends.[11]

One demographic group rarely appears: women beyond their early twenties. Pressed for time, mature women seldom go to cybercafés; if they need Internet information, they usually send their children to the café to get it.[12] Women as a whole are under-represented, especially in Nigeria, and most cybercafé owners and virtually all computer technicians are men. The picture in Ghana is only slightly more balanced. The owner of the largest café in Cape Coast (one of the three main cities) is a woman, and one of her assistants is female, though she is not as involved with the hardware assistance as with software usage. In Accra, however, all owners are men. Although development organizations like the World Bank work "with missionary-like zeal" at putting IT in the hands of African women, social and economic patterns on the ground have reproduced gendered inequality so far (Robins 2002).

West African Internet users may be even more youthful than elsewhere because the schools introduce youth to computer skills and because high fertility rates mean that young people constitute an enormous portion of the population.[13] Certainly the cybercafés are largely domains of the young. Older people may be going online at their workplaces, but, if they are, their activities are likely to be limited. Because our focus is on leisure time, Internet use compared to leisure reading, and because the Internet penetration into the home is minimal, the cafés constitute a good register of who is going online in their spare time.

Café managers recognize the youthfulness of their clientele but underestimate the gender gap. For example, the Conect Café in the Osu neighborhood of Accra was observed five times from May to late July 2003. Overall, there were thirty-six young male customers, one young woman, five middle-aged men, and one middle-aged woman. At Cyberlink Café in the Yaba neighborhood of Lagos, at 3:00 in the afternoon of January 2004, there were twelve males and one female at the terminals (all young). There were also three young men sitting and talking; it was not clear if they were waiting for someone or not, but they were not waiting for terminals, as several were free. The front desk personnel, two young women and one man, obscured how masculine the space actually was.

Nigerian cities have unreliable electricity, giving much occasion for the complaint that "NEPA [Nigerian Electric Power Authority] has taken the light again." When the electricity in a neighborhood goes out, many Nigerians who have been watching television head for the cybercafés, all of which have generators. In Ghana, generators are not as common, so Internet cafés sometimes suffer blackouts hand-in-hand with private residences.

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10. The portrait of the African Internet user as urban, educated, upper class, and male (e.g., Kenny 2000; Darley 2003; Robins 2002) obscures the participation of poorer people, who are online, especially if they are urban. Even small boys who beg outside of tourist sites have e-mail addresses that they press upon potential "pen pals"; they save all week to go together to one of the inexpensive cybercafés to check e-mail.

11. Going online in groups is not unknown in the West. One study of college students suggests that a quarter of them use the Internet with other people (Baym et al. 2004, table 5, p. 312).

12. Virtually all West African women work, and they bear the entire burden of managing households and caring for their typically large families.

13. Ghana has a birthrate of 31/1,000 and 42% of its population is under 15. Nigeria is even higher, with a birthrate of 42/1,000 and 44% of the population under 15. These figures are typical of sub-Saharan Africa, which has far-and-away the highest birthrate and largest ratio of children to adults of any region. By comparison, other developing areas have less skewed populations: Latin America has a birthrate of 21 per 1,000 and 31% under 15; the Middle East and North Africa are roughly the same. Europe has only 16% of its population under 15, Japan even less (14%), and the United States has 21% (World Bank Group 2005, table 2.1 "Population Dynamics").

Going Online

Cybercafé managers report that adult customers go online to e-mail, look up sports and entertainment news, and search for jobs or educational opportunities—schools, test requirements, scholarships. Customers also troll for pornography; some managers actively discourage this while others shrug. One thing West Africans do not do online is make purchases. With both Nigeria and Ghana being cash economies, the credit card transactions essential to e-commerce are impossible for most people.

Youth go online primarily for social reasons. By far the most popular activity is e-mail.[14] They chat with people from around the world. They read about their favorite sports teams. They visit entertainment sites. They are seldom required to do schoolwork online, though some students do research (not easy in cybercafés because printing is expensive and the meter is always running).

Patricia, a fourteen-year-old Nigerian girl whose online activities we observed during a session at Cyberlink, exemplifies youth practices. After she pays her 60 naira, Cyberlink staff give her a username and password. She first checks e-mail via Yahoo messenger. Her e-mails are from school friends, from her brother who is studying medicine in Atlanta, and from people she has met online. She knows girls who meet dates online, though she would not do this herself.

She then begins surfing by going to Lyrics.com to check out some Eminem lyrics; Patricia is a huge Eminem fan. (Looking up music music celebrities is popular in Ghana as well; Busy Internet has a menu devoted entirely to Tupac.) Patricia also looks at tickle.com, which has personality questionnaires and horoscopes. She participates in several chat groups, including a favorite for Christian teens. She doesn't download music or games because, if she saved them, she would have to get the same terminal next time; because of virus concerns, Cyberlink customers can't bring in diskettes or CDs.

Although Patricia's Internet access is very local, a half-block from her house, her online activities are global. For example, if she wants to check up on some Nigerian story or entertainer, she just Googles them. (A portal called onlinenigeria.com exists, but she doesn't bother with it.) She chats to a friend in India regularly, and exchanges e-mails with her brother and other relatives in the United States and United Kingdom. In many ways it is easier for her to navigate globally than locally. Information from places outside West Africa is more readily available than information from within; in Lagos and Accra, online services like locating addresses via MapQuest.com or online residential telephone directories simply don't exist.

In West Africa, like everywhere else, young people are confident Internet users whereas their elders tend to be diffident. Older users have a sense that, although everything can be found on the Internet, they do not know how to do it. One Ghanaian entrepreneur, who owned a rental housing complex and a restaurant, wanted to get into fish farming and asked the authors to search for information online; despite his successful enterprises, he assumed his own Internet incompetence. Younger people are savvier at finding things online. Friends particularly share information about free e-mail sites, and the average teenager knows a dozen or so. The time factor at cybercafés encourages extraordinary dexterity among the youth, who juggle a half dozen different online activities, fingers flying as they e-mail, participate in a couple of chat rooms, check out a singer's Web page. Multitasking is second nature to kids such as Patricia, and monitoring three Beyoncé Web sites while e-mailing your brother presents no problem.

Some Western computer skills are foreign to West African youth, however. Few have learned touch-typing; their speed comes from having mastered one- and two-finger typing, fast pecking without much need to hunt. Ghanaian students preparing to study abroad were amazed when a U.S. Embassy official told them they would need to learn how to type.

Youth conflate all computer activity with "going online" or "the Internet." Some Ghanaian boys told us about playing games online; when we asked how they play these games, it turned out that they were loading the games off the desktop, not connecting to the Internet at all. For a generation of youth who are growing up in this technological jump-forward, however, there is no sense of separation between "using the computer" and "using the Internet."

Although it is largely outside of the purview of this article, no discussion of online practices in

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14. *This is true everywhere; cf. Baym et al. (2004).*

Nigeria can ignore the problem of scams. Nigeria is notorious for its cons and corruption, and its entrepreneurial crooks have found the Internet to be a godsend. People everywhere get e-mail from some official or disgruntled member of an elite family who has selected them to participate in a foolproof scheme for spiriting funds out of Nigeria; all they need to do is send their bank account number and perhaps an advance fee. Once hooked, marks find themselves asked for more and higher fees; they sometimes wind up traveling to Nigeria, where more money will be extorted, sometimes through violence. Locals call such a scam a "419," referring to the particular section of the penal code that covers fraud. Cybercafé managers in Lagos swear that they monitor their customers to assure that none of these schemes are being run out of their shops, and they have good reason to try: the federal government will close them down if it connects a 419 to a particular café.[15] Association with these scams embarrasses Nigerians. Although Ghana has few such problems, newspaper articles in both countries emphasize the potential harm scams do to a country's economic credibility (*Accra Daily Mail* 2001, 2002, 2003; *Ghanaian Chronicle* 2003; *Daily Champion* 2004). Their mortification over Internet scams also dampens Nigerians' online nationalism.[16]

Youth Reading, Youth Online

Looking at the practices of youth is essential for understanding cultural change or stability. How young, educationally advantaged, urban West Africans read and how they use the Internet matter because (1) these youth are the future West African reading class, if there is to be one, and (2) they are the demographic and socio-economic group most likely to be experiencing the satisfactions of going online.

We held focus group discussions at three secondary schools in or near Lagos: Queen's College–Yaba (girls), Igbobi College (boys), and Federal Government Girls' College, Sagamu (girls). These elite schools admit students through competitive examinations. Queen's and Igbobi are unity schools, supported by the federal government; Igbobi is a

mission school, supported by the Anglican and Methodist churches. Queen's and Igbobi have boarding and day students; FGGC Sagamu girls are all boarders. The students at these schools are not representative of Nigerian youth as a whole. They are academic stars, and they are likely to come from educationally advantaged, middle-class backgrounds; both characteristics make them budding members of the reading class, and indeed they do read a great deal. Their considerable cultural capital makes them appropriate for a study of the cultural practices of the first West African generation to grow up with the Internet.

Our discussions, which took place in an assembly hall (Queen's), a library (Igbobi), and a classroom (FGGC Sagamu), began with the question of when and where the teenagers read for pleasure. Most read in the nighttime or anytime "I'm bored." One girl said she reads at times when she's feeling sleepy, often taking a break from studies to pick up a newspaper, but she also reads at night, especially if she's *not* sleepy. Another gave the typical response: she reads afternoons, nights, and on Saturdays, which is a "free day" for all the students. Boys and girls said they read during their leisure time—that is, on weekends, after school, and at night. A few girls, but no boys, read in the early mornings—one reported that she slept in the day and woke up around 3:00 AM to read until 6:00—because it was quiet then. Another said she liked to read "in the middle of the night" for the same reason: "I like very quiet places."

No one reported reading in any other place except "in my room" or in the school library. Day students say they read mostly at home, in their rooms, and they are usually alone when they read. Boarders find it more difficult to be alone (the dormitory rooms house fifteen or so) but they lie on their beds and manage to lose themselves in a book. At Igbobi one boarder said it is never hard to find quiet places to read around the school, and he also reads late in his room at night: "I just keep turning the pages."

When asked where they got their books, most said they bought or borrowed them—"I get them from my cousins" was a common response—

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15. *Nevertheless, café managers cannot stop this type of scamming, which some claim constitutes a major portion of the cybercafés' business (Koerner 2002).*

16. *Miller and Slater (2000) found that Trinidadian Internet users were intensely nationalistic: they use Internet for "being Trini" and "representing Trinidad." Nigerians are less inclined to "represent Nigeria" on the Internet, for they are painfully aware of Nigeria's online reputation. See Bastian (1999) for immigrant naturalism.*

though a few mentioned their school library as well. Several mentioned home libraries. Books are valued family possessions, and old paperback novels or schoolbooks do not get discarded.

Both girls and boys cited "thrillers" as their favorite leisure reading. They repeatedly brought up crime and adventure writers such as James Hadley Chase, Tom Clancy, and Sidney Sheldon as well as romance writer Danielle Steel, the Harry Potter books, and local youth-oriented fiction series such as Pacesetters and Lantern Books. (Patricia, whose online activities we looked at earlier, had similar tastes, telling us, "I like to read suspense novels, mainly bestsellers like John Grisham, Jeffrey Deaver, Sidney Sheldon, etc. I also read autobiographies, or biographies. . . . I read a wide range of books, but suspense novels are my favorite.")

Not everyone reads fiction. One boy said he likes history, both African and non-African. Another loves basketball magazines and books. Another likes to read the newspapers at night. Several girls mentioned reading magazines. One girl reads the *Watchtower,* the magazine put out by Jehovah's Witnesses. Several girls at Queen's College reported that they didn't like to read at all and did so only for their schoolwork. Because their English teachers were present, this response seemed to indicate the girls' frankness, and indeed the teachers later commented approvingly that Queen's College girls are encouraged to "speak their minds."

We had some spirited discussions of English versus Nigerian writers. Although the students respected Soyinka and Achebe, whom they read in their literature classes, most preferred English writers for their leisure reading. Whereas some fiction enthusiasts said they didn't care where the writer was from as long as the story was good, the general consensus was that the English (including American) writers were better than Africans at depicting emotions and relationships. Students concentrating in literature were the most likely to bring up Nigerian authors. One boy who hopes to be a writer himself some day was working on a copy of Isadore Okpewho's *The Last Duty;* he mentioned that he has a reading room/library at home and that his family does a lot of reading. This prompted me to ask the group if anyone came from a family that did *not* do much reading, but no one said they did. These are children of the reading class, and they take for granted that reading wins parental approval as well as social honor.

Most of these same students go online regularly. They do it from cybercafés; only a handful, usually with a parent working in the IT sector, have Internet access at home. Sagamu did not have Internet access from the school, and while Queens and Igbobi did, going online was restricted to schoolwork (although there were a few knowing smiles on this point). Some youth go to the cafés after school, but most go on Saturdays. One typical boy said he goes on weekends because that is his only leisure time; after school he does assignments. The cybercafés aren't open on Sundays, so he goes on Saturday evenings, observing "the atmosphere is cool at that time." He often goes with his friends or meets them there, since they go to the same cybercafé because "we all like it." Girls also reported going with cousins, siblings, or friends or meeting them there, though both girls and boys go alone as well. Girls did not go at night because they didn't go out at night at all. Most seemed to think cybercafés themselves were safe places, though one girl, who can go online from her home, felt uncomfortable with the mix—"all sorts of people"—there; another reason for her avoidance is "My mom believes they do 419" at the cafés.

Going online fulfills social and informational functions. As we observed at the cybercafés, chatting and e-mail are key, and some youth cheerfully admitted that chatting was "the most interesting thing to do." Many talked about staying in touch with friends and relatives abroad, and some mentioned online friends all over the world. Entertainment and sports sites were also popular. One girl who reported that she goes to the cybercafé with her cousin proceeded to give a detailed account about what "the cousin" did there: "First of all check the top ten songs, top ten movies, and that sort of thing . . . the latest cameras . . . she wants to go on with the crowd on everything, so she just goes and checks what the latest things are."

A number of students reported that they go online "for information." Few need to go online for school assignments—this would be impossible for Sagamu girls and difficult for boarders at the other two schools—but some use the Internet to supplement what they learn in school or church. Science students say that the books available are outdated, so they go online for the latest information on a

topic, secure in their belief that the online information is "always updated." When asked about reliability of online sources, no one worried, claiming that the Web sites always cited their sources.

One girl discussed in detail how she seeks answers to religious questions. She said she might hear something from her pastor and then go to a religious chat group to discuss and check what she has learned. Several other students were familiar with religious chat groups (recall Patricia's Christian teen group) and used them "to find out if it's true or not." Many of these students are actively religious and use the Internet to bypass what they regard as more dogmatic religious instruction they receive in their churches or at home.

Overwhelmingly the students claimed that going online had no impact on their reading. Three reasons came up over and over: time and space separation, time management, and the different functions reading and going online have in their lives. A theme that came up in discussing all three was the honored position that reading holds in West African culture.

When asked to describe their practices, the youth pointed out that their reading and Internet use took place at different times. They read at night or during the very early morning and went online on Saturday afternoons. Moreover, the activities took place at different places: reading was done in relatively private spaces—home, school libraries, dorm rooms— and going online took place in the public space of the cybercafé. Such time and space separation meant that the two did not directly compete. The students said that their Saturday afternoons, if not spent at the cybercafés, would be spent hanging out with friends; their nights, if they were not reading, would be spent watching television.

A number of the students stressed their effective time management: by scheduling their time well, they had plenty of time for both reading and going online. (The implication was that other young people might not handle their time so well.) One said, "Actually, it depends on the person. If you know the time you are going to use the Internet and the time you are going to read, it won't really affect you. But if you are using your reading time for Internet things, then it will affect you and you read less." Another girl said, "[Internet use] doesn't affect my reading, because I have a timetable, a time to read and a time to browse and other things, so it doesn't

affect me." I asked her about television, and she said she didn't watch it much. Another emphasized there was no problem because you can "plan your time well."

The third common response emphasized that the Internet served a different function—getting information and staying in touch—whereas reading was for pleasure and improvement. Many said, "I don't browse that much." They depicted their Internet time as communication (chat, e-mail) and getting information they wanted (schoolwork, leisure interests). Because their time online was metered, they could not indulge in long browsing sessions or online games.

Although a few students said going online might affect their reading, the reasons they gave were not that the two activities competed for their free time. Several said that, because they didn't like to read anyway, they welcomed anything that filled their leisure hours. These youth probably would not have read any more even if they didn't have the Internet; one girl who didn't like reading said she didn't patronize cybercafés much either, for she preferred to socialize with friends. Another girl said the Internet definitely reduced her reading because, if she were assigned a book for her literature class, she could just go online, learn about the book, and then write a paper on it without having actually read it. But when asked about her reading for pleasure, she said, "Oh, the Internet doesn't affect *that.*" One of her classmates quickly added: "It's much more interesting reading a book in front of you than going to the Net to find out about a book. So like me, I only go to the Net when I need something, when I want to find out about something. So I only go there to do important things, not to browse, not to download music, not to do anything else."

Several students maintained that their online activities actually supported their reading. As one girl from Sagamu College put it, "Well, I don't think it affects my reading, 'cause, if I'm reading a book today, and I want to find out more about that book, when I finish reading the book, I go online and check on the author, and I know what kinds of books he brings out and I go look for those books, so I don't think it affects my reading." A boy who likes to read and write poetry says going online helps by giving him ideas. He also chats online with other young poets, and these conversations encourage his reading and writing.

Another Igbobi boy made the complementary media argument thus: "Personally I prefer comparing the books and going online . . . because there is information about the authors." He gets a book, gets interested, and then does research on the author; he gave Tolstoi and Achebe as examples of authors he has researched online. The basketball fan said he goes online to get new information about the players and teams and to chat about basketball. For him, reading and the Internet work together to deepen his knowledge of the game and its players.

Since many of the students were boarders, I asked them to reflect on their cultural practices at home versus at school. When I asked the Sagamu girls (all boarders) about the impact of the Internet on reading, for example, I stipulated that this question referred to when they were at home and had cybercafés readily available. One girl said that reading required concentration and, when at home, many things distracted her, but the chief distractions were friends and social life, not the allure of the cybercafés. Students home from boarding school are invariably occupied with catching up with friends and relatives. At the same time, boarders are at home because they are on holiday from school, so many find that they do more leisure reading, not less, simply because they have much more free time.

The fact that most students had to go online from cybercafés may be shaping their behavior. As one girl put it, "As for me, it doesn't really affect the reading [because she doesn't often get to the cybercafé] . . . but once I get an opportunity, I always like to go. If I had the Internet in my home, it might affect it, because I like to be on the computer every time. But since it's not in my home, it's outside, it doesn't really affect me." This type of comment raises the question of what will happen when Internet connection from home becomes more available.

Here television, a longstanding competitor for people's leisure time, might offer a relevant comparison. Although there is no data specific to West Africa, one must assume that the advent of television depressed leisure reading there as it did everywhere. But will Internet access from the home impinge on reading at home or on watching TV at home? The Internet has cut into time spent watching television, not time spent reading, in the United States (UCLA Center for Communication Policy 2003; Griswold & Wright 2004). When asked about television, several students replied that the Internet was not having much impact on TV because they didn't watch much TV anyway. Because television is popular and ubiquitous in Nigeria, this suggests the reading versus watching TV split that has been found elsewhere. Both reading and Internet use are inversely related to television watching. Internet access in the home will likely reduce the time spent watching television but not have much impact on the time spent reading by committed readers.

I asked the youth to speculate on what they would be doing on weekends and holidays if they didn't have the cybercafés. One boy spoke for many when he said that there are many things he might be doing—being with friends and family, or watching TV—but he can do all of these because he doesn't go online all that much. This was the common response: they weren't spending much time online anyway, so it wasn't robbing time from any particular activity. When I asked the Igbobi boys whether anyone felt that their Internet use was competing with their reading, they all said no and seemed a bit horrified at the idea. One explained that he might go to the cybercafé when he was bored, tired of reading, just as others might visit friends or watch TV when they were tired of reading. But reading always came first in his priorities.

The Internet and Reading: Conclusions

West African Internet users of all ages seemed surprised when asked whether their online time affected their reading. They almost uniformly insisted that the Internet had no impact on reading, unless it was to support it by providing access to information about authors and books. They did think that their Internet use competed for time with a number of things—they mentioned phone calls, hanging out with friends, watching television after school, writing letters—but not with reading.

This is consistent with what seems to be the case in the West: Internet use has a negative relationship with television watching but either no impact or a slightly positive one on reading. Although the Internet/reading relationship may be the same, non-competitive one, however, the reasons are somewhat different. In the West the positive relationship between Internet use and reading is an example of the more general point that educated people do

more of just about every type of cultural activity (Erickson 1996; Peterson & Kern 1996). So it makes sense that such people would both read more and use the Internet more. The one big exception is that educated people watch less TV.

We do not know whether this is the case for West Africans as well, though we suspect it is. In any case there are other reasons at play. In the developed countries, users have the Internet continuously available, and it is woven into their other daily activities, including their reading. In West Africa, to a far greater extent than in the West, *reading and going online occupy different physical, temporal, social, and cultural spaces* from each other. In Nigeria and Ghana

- People read for pleasure in their homes, in private vehicles for those lucky enough to ride in them, or—for students—in the school library. They go online in cybercafés.

- People read after their evening meal or in the early morning. They also read at work, more or less surreptitiously, and on their way to work if the vehicle is not too crowded. Adults, especially job seekers, use the Internet in the daytime (unemployed adults), and students—the most frequent users—go online in the mid-afternoon and early evening.

- Electrical failures drive Nigerians and Ghanaians from their televisions to their local cybercafés. Loss of power has less impact on reading, which does not require electric light during the day.

- West Africans view reading as a private activity. People read individually, even when surrounded by other people in a crowded room or vehicle. They regard going online, by contrast, as a social activity. Internet use takes place in public and often in groups. Moreover, going online is inherently social, maintaining ties to distant friends, relatives, and strangers (even scams are social).

- Middle-class women are a significant portion of the reading class but a negligible portion of the Internet class.

- The Internet is somewhat tainted, especially for Nigerians, by its association with the 419 scams. West Africans hold no comparable reservations about books or reading. On the contrary: persecution of journalists and writers (especially under Nigeria's former military regimes) have established some heroic associations to writers and print.

- Going online—new, trendy, associated with youth and with globalization—had the attractions of glamour. Reading—established, institutionally encouraged, associated with elite practices and with wisdom—has the attractions of honor. The two activities occupy different cultural positions.

Reading and Internet use do not compete in West African culture. Nigerians and Ghanaians read for information, for study, for self-improvement, for entertainment, and to enact and demonstrate their social status. They go online to maintain or initiate social connections, for fun, for school and job searches, and to demonstrate their cosmopolitanism. The functions of the two activities overlap but are by no means congruent. West Africans regard reading as more serious, the mark of a refined person, someone of substance and gravity, whereas using the Internet use is fun, practical, and the mark of the young and the trendy.

One final observation specific to West Africa is that because of the slow transmission rates and the fact that Internet time is metered, some users avoid image-intensive sites. We note, for example, that our Nigerian teenager spent time on a favorite site with Eminem's *lyrics,* not images of him in performance. This being the case, the percentage of time spent reading online as opposed to looking at pictures might be higher in countries with less-developed Internet service, further undercutting any tendency for images to be displacing written words.

In conclusion, we note that one of the most firmly established principles of those studying literacy is that literacy should not be regarded as a skill or a possession but as a practice. Whereas earlier research had tended to see literacy in terms of a one-way move, an acquisition, and literacy rates in terms of tipping points, by the end of the twentieth century literacy was viewed more in terms of how it was deployed for economic, social, or personal objectives. In this approach reading became not a simple result of literacy but a practice subject to interrogation: Can people read? How well? Do they read? What do they read? When? Why? What are the social consequences of their reading?

In light of this expansion of the types of questions associated with literacy and reading we envision a parallel expansion in the way we think about the Internet. If media use—reading, going online—is seen as subject to an off/on switch, some new technology can come along and turn the switch off, perhaps by providing light from another source. On the other hand, if we understand media use as an evolving bundle of practices, all embedded in cultural patterns and understandings, then a new communications technology is more likely to interweave with current practices than to revolutionize them. With respect to books and reading practices, the Internet is operating as an agent of cultural reproduction rather than an agent of change.

This should come as no surprise. Culture is not a zero-sum game whereby the new must displace the old if it is to thrive. Cultural space is multidimensional. People located in a specific material, social, and cultural context must manage their various practices in terms of time, space, functionality, attention, and evaluation. Those practices that the culture values—that have prestige, social esteem, longstanding connections to admired figures—will be protected from the threat of the new, even as the new is embraced. Glamour and honor can coexist within a given cultural field. ∎

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Appendix

Focus Group Discussion Questions

I. Let's start by talking about your reading habits. We'd like to know when you read, where you read, and what sorts of things you read.

- When? Particular time of day? More or less on weekends? Any times when you don't read much? Times when you read a lot?

- Where? Room? Library? In public places? Are you alone or are others around?

- What do you read for your work/studies? What do you read for pleasure? Fiction or nonfiction? If you had more time, what would you read more of?

- Has your reading changed since you've started secondary school? How? Do you read as much as you'd like to? More/less than you'd like to? What would you like to change about the amount you read?

II. Now let's talk about your Internet use. Again we are wondering about when and where you use the Internet, and what for.

- When? Particular time of day? More or less on weekends? Any times when you don't use the Internet much? Times when you're online a lot?

- Where? Cybercafé? Home? Library? Other places? Are you alone or are others around?

- What do you use the Internet for in your work/studies? What do you use it for in your free time? If you had more time, would you be on the Internet more?

- Has your Internet use changed since you've started secondary school? How? Are you online as much as you'd like to? More/less than you'd like to? What would you like to change about the amount you use the Internet?

III. Tell us about your sense of whether reading and Internet compete for your time, or does one support the other?

IV. Imagine your lives about ten years from now. Let's say you're finished with your studies, working, married, or in a committed relationship. Do you think you'll be using the Internet more or less than you do now? Why? What about reading, more or less than now? Why?

V. Do you have any other ideas about the relationship between reading and Internet use that haven't come up in our discussion?