

Online access for three quarters of the world population.

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On Wednesday evening Mr Ng presented a piece of art called the world of 100, in which he presents various statistics, nicely illustrated. One of those statistics was: only twenty percent of the world's population has access to the Internet.

I work for an organization that takes the position that this is not accurate, and that instead seventy-five percent of the world's population does have Internet access. How? Using their mobile phone. Not smart phones with apps, or wap access, but mostly voice and messaging.

That point of view may seem a bit far-fetched. Indeed I sometimes hear "well you can't go on Facebook by calling a number, can you?". True. But that's not because it's technically impossible. Indeed, if Facebook were interested, they would do it. you'd be able to call a number, say who you want to hear about, listen to your wall updates, etc. That way, you would be using the Internet, just like 3/4 of the human population could. The same idea could apply to SMS services.

The real issue is thus not technical but lies in the fact that in regions where people only have access to the Internet by calling, not many are interested in Facebook. For instance, a farmer in the remotest regions of Mali may have an interest about whether Justin Bieber is in a relationship that's "complicated", but it's more likely he'll want to know how to stop the wind blowing his seeds away, or whether Soundou beat Kambila in the local football league.

So we find that half the world's population has access to the Internet, but is not using it. And that's because there is little content of interest to them, or in a form and language that are usable. It's a kind of deadlock situation: no content, then no users, then no content providers.

How are we going to break the cycle and build the universal Internet? Who will provide that content? Who will develop services relevant to communities, accessible to people with low-reading skills, who only speak Bambara and care mostly about which market to go to in order to sell their rice? It's community members themselves, being the people who understand best their own needs.

That's the principle that drives the work of the Web Foundation: to help people benefit from the Internet, you don't need to wire every house across a country and give a computer to everybody. You need to help people develop content and services online, accessible using terminals they already own.

More information on <http://www.webfoundation.org/projects/mobile-entrepreneurs/>,
<http://www.webfoundation.org/projects/mlab-east-africa/> and
<http://www.webfoundation.org/projects/voices/>