

Internet Use at the Balme Library, University of Ghana

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Introduction

Ghana's experience with electronic telecommunications (like the rest of Africa) has been very recent and much of it has been in areas other than the academic sector. Computers were usually for the purposes of generating payrolls and the other related areas of accounting. Generally, electronic communication has been a novelty for most African countries and a greater part of its history is as a result of donations rather than through purchase or acquisition. Badu (1993) reports that the Balme Library of the University of Ghana acquired its first microcomputer as a gift from the Ministry of Education in 1988 as part a World Bank Project.

All over the world, e-mail is the most patronized facility of the internet and Africa is no different. Until recently, however, most countries on the continent had a form of e-mail contact either through Fidonet or UUCP technology both of which however were not directly connected to the internet. E-mail was made initially available in Ghana through the Fidonet store-and-forward means at the Council for Scientific and Industrial Research and with the Ghana Scientific and Technological Information Network (GHASTINET) as the Network administrator (Diaba, 2000).

When e-mail was originally introduced into the country, it was the Fidonet, store-and forward type which accessed the internet indirectly via the GreenNet gateway in London. It was hosted by the GHASTINET with a few clients including Balme Library and some NGOs. The Fidonet e-mail facility in Ghana was under the sponsorship of the PADIS/IDRC as a capacity building technology for the GHASTINET network project. In June 1995, Balme Library became the site

and National Host of the Fidonet e-mail for Ghana under the PADIS/IDRC fund for CABECA (Capacity Building in Electronic Communication for Africa). As a National Host, the University of Ghana became responsible for maintaining and sustaining connectivity with modal points (that is, the user community) in Ghana (Kisiedu, 1997).

In August 1995, Ghana became one of the few African countries to be connected to the internet. South Africa and Egypt were among the other countries in Africa to have had full internet connectivity at the time. (Quaynor, 1997)

Network Computer System (NCS) Limited is credited with being the pioneer in internet connectivity and service provision not only in Ghana but also in West Africa. The company started research into commercial e-mail use in 1993. During this time, however, NCS was involved in a form of data transmission as a form of Wide Area Network for Ghana National Petroleum Corporation (GNPC) from its offices.

In 1994, NCS started an internal e-mail system which was commercialized in 1995 using another store-and-forward means via a dial-up module to PIPEX in the UK. This was then replaced by a 9.6 Kilobits per second (KBPS) system by virtue of a license from the then Ghana Posts and Telecommunications (now Ghana Telecom).

Internet at the University of Ghana

Since it was made the National Host of the Fidonet E-mail System in 1995, the Balme Library of the University of Ghana has been the "Electronic Post Office" for a number of individuals and departments both on and off the University of Ghana campus, who were not yet connected to the host by means

of modems. All the other universities namely, the University of Cape Coast, Kwame Nkrumah University for Science and Technology, the University for Development Studies as well as the University College of Education of Winneba and GHASTINET, were clients. Of the five, these three – the University of Cape Coast, Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology and GHASTINET – acted as local hosts which also provided services for local clients. Thus, all the e-mail messages, which were sent from the other clients, were batched at the Balme Library and forwarded (Diaba, 2000).

The changeover of the University of Ghana to full internet connectivity in the early part of 1998 further enhanced the opportunities available to the academic community. It is very obvious that this medium stands to attract increased patronage from both students and faculty alike. For most members of faculty, especially, this opportunity afforded the chance to obtain the kind of information that they considered very relevant and necessary for enhancing academic activity.

At present, apart from the facility at the Balme Library where members of the university community can get internet connectivity, there are other centres on the university campus where the facility is available. Two of these places both on top of the university bookshop, offer members the opportunity to open e-mail accounts on the internet and as such enable them the privacy of accessing their mails all by themselves. Several departments are connected and a number of individuals also have personal accounts. Additionally, there are other communication centres owned by private concerns which also offer the internet facility to members of the

university community. The Students Representative Council (SRC) has also established a cyber café of several computers for the student body to have access to e-mail and other internet facilities.

The study

The study was carried out in October, 2003. Users of the internet at the Computer Laboratory of the Balme Library, University of Ghana were made to complete a questionnaire on reasons for using the internet.

In all, a total of 3136 people used the facility during the period. The findings are indicated in Table I.

The widespread use of the internet on college and university campuses worldwide has contributed to an increased curiosity about what types of online activities the users engage in. It can be seen from the findings of this study that users of the internet at the University of Ghana Library mainly concentrate on e-mail, research and browsing. These findings are consistent with the results from similar studies by Miller (1996), Snider (1997) and Perry *et al.* (1998).

Although it is encouraging to note these developments in internet usage, it is also disheartening to note that none of the users of the internet had something to do with academic activities such as submitting assignments or even discussing academic problems with professors. This is an area that needs to be encouraged as students may find electronic communication less threatening than speaking in class (Kussmaul *et al.*, 1996). Additionally,

Table I

Service	No. of users
E-mail only	1,412
Research only	166
E-mail/research	35
Chatting	2
Browsing	44
E-mail/browsing	1
Typing	8
No response	1,468
Total number of users	3,136

faculty members at some universities have used the internet to post course syllabuses and class announcements for use in their classes (Young, 1995).

Problems with internet use

The rapid growth of the internet has not been without its problems. It is gradually becoming a librarian's nightmare – or paradise, depending on how we look at it. The major problem of internet use at the University of Ghana Library is the frequent power cuts. This can mainly be solved in the long term by providing a stand-by generator for the library.

From the findings of the study, it can be seen that the viability of the internet as a strong support for academic work is not being taken seriously at the University of Ghana. This should be considered with the aim of strengthening the option of distance education as an alternative form of education by the University of Ghana.

There is also the problem of slowness of the system. It is recommended that the university authorities consider the option of establishing the university's own internet service. Though such a consideration may have a very high initial capital input, collaboration among all the five state-owned universities could reduce total cost that would otherwise be borne by a single university. Hence the need for consortia-building among university libraries in Ghana.

Conclusion

This study had a number of limitations including the short period of data sampling and the high number of non-response. All the same, it is obvious that the internet has made a significant breakthrough at the University of Ghana. It has provided academics in Ghana the opportunity to obtain current information as well as communicate with others at an affordable price. However, this facility

would be of greater use if steps are taken to make it more accessible to all members of the academic community.

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