Young people, computers and the Internet in Niger

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ABSTRACT
This article explores how computers and the Internet are represented among young, educated people in Niger and the social expectations that are attached to their use. It argues that pre-existing social and economic conditions play an important role in shaping the meanings associated with these devices. Thus, in a context of poverty and unemployment, the Internet and computers are perceived as technologies that may help young people and their country integrate into a modern world of economic opportunities and well-being via the transnational and transcultural interactions that take place in cyberspace. The Internet is associated with the ideas of modernity and ‘leapfrogging’ development. However, because of the lack of computer equipment and adequate infrastructure, these expectations are largely exaggerated, and they divert attention from the actual possibilities for change that reside in people and not in technological devices. The research is based on fieldwork conducted among young, educated computer and Internet users during the summers of 2003 and 2004 in Niamey, the capital city of Niger and further complemented by data collected in 2008. Semistructured interviews were used to explore the reception of the Internet and the representations associated with them. Although the term ‘educated’ may sometimes refer to traditional or Arabic/Islamic education in Niger, we restricted the use of the word to refer to modern western-style education (without prejudice or pejorative label to those who are not in that category).

KEYWORDS
African Internet
Niger ICTs
Internet users
Niger media
development media
young people
INTRODUCTION

This article seeks to examine the representations associated with computers and the Internet among young, educated people in Niger. It shows that these representations are characterized by a kind of technological messianism that is largely oniric. The Internet is seen as the ultimate tool for progress and access to a state of well-being and is invested with the capacity to change society, a capacity that goes beyond its functional utility as a tool for storing, generating and exchanging information. These views are in line with those of many authors and international organizations (Mansell and Crede 1998; Thioune 2003; Etta and Parvyn-Wamahiu 2003; Waverman et al. 2005; ITU 2008, 2009; GSMA 2008) who contend that the advent of information and communication technologies (ICTs) particularly the Internet, may help to alleviate poverty and foster economic development in Africa. In contrast, this article argues that the possibilities attached to these technologies are largely exaggerated and that the introduction of the Internet cannot in itself amount to structural social and economic transformation. In fact, the technocentrist discourse associated with the Internet diverts attention from the actual situation that is largely characterized by poor equipment, poverty, social inequality and economic dependency.

ICTs AND DEVELOPMENT IN AFRICA: DO WE NEED A REALITY CHECK?

An abundant literature – mostly evaluation studies, conference reports and newspaper articles – addresses the current issues related to ICTs and development in Africa. However, in the last ten years, researchers have shown increasing interest in questions about ICT’s reception and adoption in African settings and about ICTs and development in Africa. Most of those authors have emphasized the ‘transformational’ character of computers and the Internet. Etta and Parvyn-Wmahiu (2003), for example, suggest that community tele-centres implemented by the International Development Research Center in Uganda and Kenya are empowering rural users because they ‘opened them and their communities to wider audiences, facilitated external communication, and promoted knowledge of computer technology among local community members’ (2003: 18). According to Mtimde and Stephen:

In order for Africa to sustain its democracies, empower its communities, ensure community driven reconstruction and development, and to compete globally, investment in technological advances and telecommunications infrastructure is essential to close the digital divide gap and allow Africa its rightful place among the economies of the world.

(2001: 18)

According to the African Information Society Initiative (AISI), a major area of focus for Africa’s development agenda is to promote ‘sectoral applications of ICT for eradicating poverty and improving quality of life’ (AISI website). In the same way, several studies (Waverman et al. 2005; ITU 2004, 2008; GSMA 2008) and countless newspaper articles have popularized the idea that the use of ICTs (and mobile phones in particular) has substantially improved or even ‘transformed’ the economic performance of African countries.

However, not all authors agree with these enthusiastic accounts. Kehbuma Langmia contends that ‘Notwithstanding the urgency and enthusiasm with using this new medium for social and economic change, the Internet has
brought about negative as well as positive contributions to development in Africa’ (2005: 144). Mercer analyses the differential use and representation of ICTs among different social groups and concludes that:

development interventions, which turn the symptoms of poverty into technical problems to be solved with technological responses, are inherently flawed, since the failure to deal with the causes of poverty means that the majority of Tanzanians continue to be excluded from the ‘information society.

(2005: 243)

Similarly Ebo et al. (2001) examine the way the consumption of foreign intellectual production and cultural values through the Internet may negatively affect African cultures, African identity and societies. According to them (Ebo et al.), local values and endogenous development could be undermined by foreign interests and models of consumption imposed from the outside by ICTs and their promoters. In the same vein, Ya’u (2004) contends that globalization as promoted by the World Trade Organization is resulting in ‘a new imperialism’ characterized by a ‘knowledge dependence’.

The question that is posed by this situation (such as described by Ya’u) is whether Africans will be only passive ‘receivers’ in the chain of information and not creators or contributors, particularly when it comes to the Internet’s content and appropriation, because the expansion of capitalism and imperialism has always been ‘linked to the American mass culture, mass media products, and communications technologies’ (Rusciano 2001: 12). Along with material goods, foreign ideas and foreign cultures are also exported.

Therefore, it is possible to divide the epistemological positions adopted by those authors who analysed the social consequences of ICTs in Africa and those who emphasized the economic dimension of ICTs into two categories based on their opinion or posture. On one hand, a kind of technological determinism emphasizes the transformational character of ICTs at the social or economic level, and on the other hand, there is a kind of dystopian posture that perceives technology as a tool for the domination or destructuration of African societies and cultures. In both cases, technology is endowed with a kind of agency, an independent existence that has the power, in itself, to determine our destinies. In this perspective, computers are not mere instruments in our hands but agents of social and economic transformation.

In this paper, I adopt a more cautious approach. Although I recognize that the introduction of the Internet resulted in new practices, I do not believe that those changes amount to structural transformations, that is, they do not amount to changes in the relationships between groups (men and women or young and elderly people for example) or social classes. In other words, I do not think ICTs have the capacity to ‘transform’ the social structures. In my view, the changes introduced by ICTs relate to daily practices and have been integrated into the regular social processes already in place or, at best, simply expanded them. For example, in everyday exchanges, face-to-face relationships remain as important as they were before the introduction of mobile phones and the Internet. Although these devices help to overcome obstacles, such as distance and the cost of transportation, in such exchanges or to maintain and strengthen daily ties between members of society, such as communal ties, these tools, in and of themselves, cannot transform the relations, particularly class relations, between groups. This position is akin to the one Dartnell
adopts when he says, paraphrasing McLuhan, that ‘the web is a messenger that shapes perceptions, not events’ (2006: 5). In other words, I believe that ICTs can only heighten social, ideological or cultural dimensions of our daily lives; they are not decisive in shaping or governing our relationships or our behaviours. However, ICTs are not ‘just tools’. Because they are associated with meanings, they are also ‘enchanted and enchanting devices’ to which all kinds of expectations are attached.

In this perspective, the paper will show how the introduction of ICTs, especially the Internet, has sparked new representations among young, educated users in Niger, particularly expectations that relate to modernity and integration into a global world of advanced technology and economic opportunities. However, those social representations have to do only with ideas, values and beliefs and do not amount to actual social changes. For example, they do not change the positions women occupy in society or spark significant change in social mobility because these new representations take place within existing conditions (which are constantly being readjusted and reproduced) in society. These conditions include poverty, unemployment, and unequal economic and political relationships between the least developed countries and most developed countries – those that are seen as lands for migration and for opportunities related to well-being. The introduction of new ICTs did not change those conditions but merely amplified the expectations attached to technology as a way to escape them. Therefore, participants’ notions of ICTs take place in a kind of oniric or utopian representation of reality that is related to a sort of technological messianism that sees ICTs as the ultimate tool for progress and access to a state of well-being. In the pages that follow, I examine these representations and how they appear in the discourse of the interviewees.

INTERNET USERS IN NIAMEY

This article is based on semi-structured interviews carried out during the summers of 2003 and 2004 in Niamey, the capital city of Niger. These were further complemented by data collected in 2008. The participants to the initial interviews were twenty Internet users selected from the fronts of cybercafes. The selection criteria required that the Internet users be 35 years old or younger. There was no need to sample users based on education level because all Internet users in Niger are highly likely to be able to read in French and/or English. The length of the interviews took between 40 minutes and two hours to complete (in two cases because of non-related events). Most of the Internet cafes in which I did the interviews were privately owned cybercafes located on three of the main avenues of Niamey. However, interviews were also conducted on the premises of the Niger-French Cultural Center of Niamey (Centre Culturel Franco-nigerien), in the technical high school of College Issa Beri and on the premises of Alternatives Espace Citoyens, a Nigerien human rights advocacy group whose main activities are focused on the promotion of good governance and democracy through the empowerment of free press and media. The study was based on a qualitative approach and took into account the perceptions, subjectivities, experiences and realities as understood by the study participants and interpreted by the researcher. Other data were collected from newspaper articles, conference proceedings, various reports and statistical surveys. Part of the data was also gathered through direct observation, personal experience and notes taken about the participants. Since this is a qualitative study, it was not a precise and systematic representativeness of the
sample that was sought, but in-depth information about the feelings, sentiments, expectations, hopes and fears of the participants. The overall structure of the interpretation of the data and the additional information gathered derived from the precise structure of these interviews.

COMPUTERS AND THE INTERNET IN NIGER: POVERTY, ACCESS AND POLICY ISSUES

The United Nations Development Program (UNDP) in its annual report on the Human Development Indicator (2008) lists Niger, with its population of 15 million, among the four least developed countries in the world. The country’s development indicators are very low: 88% of women and 72% of men are illiterate (INS and Macro International Inc. 2007); access to health infrastructures is very poor, life expectancy stood at 55.5 years in 2005 (INS and UNDP 2009) and infant mortality was 81% in 2005 (INS and UNDP 2009). The situation in the communication sector is no better. According to the ITU, in 2007, Niger had the lowest ICT development indicator in the world (ITU 2009) with only 0.07 computers per 100 inhabitants in 2005, 0.17 land line phones per 100 inhabitants in 2005 and 0.28% Internet users in 2006 (ITU 2007, 2008). This is updated information obtained after the initial interviews.

However, as elsewhere in Africa, the inaccessibility to computers and the Internet is in some way compensated by the proliferation of cybercafes in urban settings, which are frequented primarily by young people. Because of the cost, very few people can buy a computer in Niger, so access to the Internet is essentially public. Workplace access is more prevalent than domestic access, which is almost nonexistent, but it is not yet possible to say that the Internet is part of people’s daily lives. Although it is not a marginal phenomenon among some sectors of society and some social groups, such as young, urban, educated people, computers are not yet familiar objects for everybody, as televisions and radios are. At the same time, these devices are losing their status of esoteric objects that only a few initiated “technology wizards” could possibly understand and use. Cybercafes are becoming part of the urban environment, computers are in current use in workplaces and several technical schools offer training in information technology and computer science.

On its part the Government is trying to implement a national ICT strategy in order to build a ‘knowledge society’ and foster development. This goes with the integration of ICTs in the national rhetoric of development in Niger that sees ICTs as tools that may help eliminate poverty and ensure the integration of the country into the global modern world. This is expressly stated in the Government’s Plan NICI, the programme for the development of ICT infrastructures in Niger: ‘The ownership and mainstreaming of ICTs in Niger will, by 2010, reduce poverty significantly. All social strata will be able to access information and knowledge, to participate to the democratic process, and enhance their economic and cultural heritage’ (République du Niger 2004: 29). In the same way, ICTs are thought to have the power to enable Africans to participate in the global ‘electronic republic’ (Grossman 1995) in a smooth and nonantagonistic way. In this perspective, the Government is trying to implement ‘electronic governance’. ‘Electronic governance’, as it is understood by the conceivers of the Plan NICI, has the following goals:

E-government (or government intranet) will facilitate the procedures and the flow of information within the central and decentralized
administration; and e-governance will facilitate relations between the administration and users by providing access to a range of public services without the distance-related hurdles.

(République du Niger 2004: 32)

However, we should not forget that this plan relates to a country in which most people are illiterate, with part of the population composed of nomads scattered over vast distances in the Sahara desert. Also, Niger is a country inhabited by nine different ethnic groups; a country where most people (98%) are Muslims with deeply entrenched cultural and religious values. In this context, specific problems, all related to culture, arise from the use of computers and the Internet.

**THE INTERNET AND CULTURE IN NIGER: FOREIGN LANGUAGES AND INTERNET USE**

It is well known that users from the developing world are likely to visit websites located in the United States and other developed countries, mainly European countries, even though African content exists and is expanding on the Internet. English language dominates the web, and those who do not speak English or some other European language (such as French in the case of Niger) find very few opportunities to visit sites in their own languages. The level of familiarity with English and other European languages, as well as the general educational level required to surf the web effectively are also important barriers to some users of the Internet. These barriers have important effects on the patterns of Internet use since its primary users are most likely to be people influenced by, if not educated in, western cultures.

In countries like Niger, Internet users come primarily from the small, elite portion of the population educated in French-style schools. French is the language they use most often to navigate the Internet. There are numerous websites in Hausa (including a Hausa version of Google), the main spoken language of Niger, but since Hausa is not the language students learn in school and since a large majority of the population is illiterate, only a small portion of the population knows how to read it. This has important consequences on the kind of technologies people use, do not use or cannot use. Thus, while radio (and television in urban settings) and now cell phones can be found in the hands of the poorest people in the remotest areas of Niger, this is not the case for technologies such as computers, which require literacy and knowledge of European languages. However, these are not major concerns for users, who tend to speak French or English and to be literate. In spite of those languages being foreign languages (a fact users are aware of), the Internet as a ‘free space’, a place for everyone, is still the prevalent view of the participants in this study. As will be seen below, these young people manifest a sense of ownership of the Internet that is not found among other groups of the population, such as illiterate people.

**ICTs, culture and identity**

Some authors (Rusciano 2001; Ya’u 2004) have emphasized the ‘alienating’ or ‘imperialistic’ character of western technology and particularly the Internet. However, most of our interviewees believe that the Internet can be incorporated into the cultural context of Africa. This attitude is reinforced by the idea that this device favours the free choice of information because it is
a flexible technology that imposes no constraints; a technology that makes control possible in order to counter its possible bad effects on youth. Boukary, a 35-year-old English teacher, says:

The impact on youth is certain, but young people need to be given direction so as to avoid viewing bad sites that present images contrary to our cultural beliefs. For this matter, those sites regarded as bad from the viewpoint of our culture should have their access coded; any person who would like to have access to them must be mature and have good morals. Cybercafé owners should forbid very young persons from accessing those sites.

Therefore, as users, the participants of this study are aware that not everything on the Internet is in accordance with their cultural values. It is not that they are totally unanimous on everything, but they tend to downplay cultural concerns by reaffirming the possibility of using the Internet for their own interests and the possibility to control the use of the Internet. Most of them say they feel in charge when using the Internet and do not think their identity is being undermined by daily surfing. They consider the Internet a place where multiple identities can be represented without threat to any of them individually. This view is held principally because they consider the Internet to be, above all, a tool of communication. As Safia, a 25-year-old geologist says:

My opinion about the Internet is positive because with it we can easily communicate, even with people far away from us, and at low cost. After all, the Internet is a means of communication; it helps bring people together. I do not think that the Internet can change our cultural behaviour; if it can, it is just in a positive way.

The idea that the Internet ‘helps bring people together’ is based on the conviction that we are living in a shrinking world and that we should consider everything from a global perspective. The interviewees seem to infer from this sensibility that, thanks to the Internet, alternatives to their present identities can be imagined and even explored. This expectation plays an important role in the way they envisage self-representation and their relationships with others, particularly those in the western world. It is not exactly that they think they are participating in a more homogenous world – they are largely conscious of their own difference – but they do not accept the idea that the Internet mediates the exclusivity of specific cultures and is attached to spatial boundaries (or lack thereof) that could constitute a threat to their own cultures. In regard to a similar study devoted to the Internet in Trinidad, Miller and Slater point out, ‘There was little anxiety about either the content or its impact’ (2000: 12) because the Internet is largely associated with choice and interaction, that is, the idea that one is free to choose what one wants to access from among the information displayed.

Therefore, it is the interactive character of the Internet that is underscored. It is a question of choice between sites that could be either ‘bad’ or ‘good’, depending on their content, although these sites are never to be rejected simply because they are ‘European’ or have some ‘foreign content’. If study participants do not insist on labelling the ‘foreign’ or ‘western’ character of available sites on the Internet, it is because they view the Internet as a place for everyone, where all cultures are expressed. It brings them a sense of
‘communautarism’. For the first time in history, they think, all people around the world are sharing the same cultural space, and that space is cyberspace. In the same vein, they attach many expectations and particular symbolic representations such as prestige, signs of modernity and futurity, fear of lagging behind (Lally 2002), lifelong expectations, and hopes to ICTs.

**EXPECTATIONS ATTACHED TO COMPUTERS AND THE INTERNET**

**Reaching up to the global world**

These expectations have first to do with establishing relationships with friends abroad, with foreign companies or with anonymous chatters in cyberspace. In this last case, the motive often is to find someone who is able to help one secure a visa or in some other way to help the Nigerien interlocutor leave the country. Therefore, the expectations attached to computers and the Internet, as they appear in discourse, are mostly related to integrating into the global world in some way. For these young people, computers are, above all, what gives them access to the outside world. They are important in building networks and maintaining them, and they play important roles in strategies related to skills acquisition, searches for employment, business opportunities and education, which are often envisaged as essential parts of connecting with the outside world.

However, these expectations also reflect the country’s economic situation and its impact on youth. Being young and educated, these Nigeriens face unemployment, and therefore they want to leave the country at almost any cost. In conversations with them, it appeared to me that they describe their lives as empty: Here, they say, they have nothing to do but gather in front of a friend’s home and sit all day, sipping endless small cups of tea to fight stress and boredom. They think the Internet can help them fulfil their dream of migrating abroad to a better life. This view is summarized by Chaibou, a 25-year-old student:

> I have already said that we young people, we face a lot of problems: unemployment, lack of education, poor access to information. All these reasons push young people in Africa and in Niger to visit the Internet in order to have the information they need about work prospects, studying opportunities abroad, etc.

Indeed, since the early 1980s, Niger has experienced a severe economic crisis while its population has continued to increase (Liman-Tinguiri 1990, 1991). Opportunities for employment were severely reduced by the implementation of the Structural Adjustment Program, which was promoted as a remedy for budgetary constraints by the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank. According to Gervais:

> The means prescribed for addressing the ends pursued by the SAP (Structural Adjustment Program) within the framework of redressing public balances were a wage freeze and a limit on recruitment in the civil service, taxing the informal sector and reversing the trends between operating expenditures and productive investment.

(1995: 32)

As a consequence, thousands of young people each year enter a job market that offers only a few opportunities in poorly paid positions, mostly as civil
servants or teachers, and the vast majority of them end up unemployed for many years (Saidou 2004). In this context, many see migration as their only recourse, so it has become a major goal for young people, and the Internet is seen as its primary facilitator (Saidou 2005).

**Computer ownership and personal development**

The fact that migration, employment and education expectations are associated with computers makes the computer an object of affective investment. Ownership of a computer is seen as an important way to gain status or escape from the conditions of poverty and ignorance. As Ousmane, a 24-year-old student says, ‘At home I do not have a computer; however, if I could have one, it would be of a tremendous help because I would spend a lot of time searching for education or job opportunities’.

Like Ousmane, many interviewees express a desire to own a computer, and they identify its use as a way to change their lives. They also think that the country’s lack of accessibility to computers prevents them from taking full advantage of life’s opportunities and realizing their potential. The projected image they have of themselves as modern actors in a contemporary world corresponds to what Miller and Slater call an expansive potential: ‘In expansive realization, the excitement relates to “finding oneself”, “taking up one’s rightful place”. It is about the Internet as a mode of imagining the future’ (2000: 13). This projection of oneself includes a sense of being or desiring to be cosmopolitan. The interviewees often emphasize the possibility of acting in diasporic contexts or global contexts by attending universities abroad, interacting with trade partners abroad and pursuing an international career. In other words, they see in the Internet and computers the possibility to reposition themselves (and in so doing, their country and society) in a global world. They see themselves as potential participants in a new world made possible by the advent of computers.

Computers are also associated with personal feelings. Users’ intimate preoccupations, their inner states of being, and their hopes and fears are transferred to their use of computers. Their future and the projects associated with that future are imagined in relation to computers and to how these devices can change their destinies. That is why many interviewees find in the ownership of a computer a kind of security – a certitude that, with a computer, they can secure a place of their own in the future. According to Boubacar, a 27-year-old student, ‘Another advantage one gets from the Internet is to have an opening on the world, to have and see new things; it helps acquire knowledge that I cannot otherwise have access to’. He adds:

> Having a computer at home would tremendously change my life. You see, I cannot spend a week without going to a cybercafé. So, if I had a computer of my own and had the possibility of being connected at will, I would use most of my time doing research. A computer would be of great help for me because I would be independent.

Therefore, it appears that computers are the object of all kinds of aspiration and expectation transfers. These expectations in turn show that a technical ideology is under way similar to the one that, according to Hakken (1993), gives technology the power to create a new model of society. For example, there is a clear similarity between symbolic associations made by these respondents
about computers and the ‘information revolution’ discussed by theoretical proponents, such as Howard Rheingold, who writes in Virtual Reality, ‘The “virtual habitat” is transformative. […] (It is) 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’ (1991: 386–87).

This change is both collective and individual. The respondents say that ‘having a computer will change’ their lives and add that the whole situation of their country would change if the country were sufficiently equipped with computers. In other words, computers are thought to meet simultaneously both individual and collective needs. Even the apparent contradiction in the knowledge that, for the moment, there are two separate worlds in Niger – the world of the connected, elite, educated, urban, young persons, and the world of the large mass of the ‘unconnected’ – seems not to deter the optimism about the digital culture’s ability to leapfrog over illiteracy, poverty and illness. We find the same rhetoric among decision makers, international-development agents and common users of the Internet (Alzouma 2005, 2009), all of whom praise the integration of Africa and Niger into the modern world through the increased use of advanced technologies.

**National development and global modernity**

Participants, as stated above, see computers not only as devices that can change individual destinies, but also as machines that can change collective destinies. As Chaibou, a 28-year-old English teacher, says, ‘I think that if the presence of the Internet were effective in Niger, we would see a lot of positive changes’. It seems as if the fate of the whole country will be decided by the quality of its ICT policy:

> Our traders would correspond and exchange with their counterparts abroad; they would engage and develop strong economic links. On the educational level, our students would have the possibility to study online, broaden their knowledge, and have access to recent material and documents. In a word, everyone would benefit. So it is high time for the public powers to help these technologies become available for the whole population.

Therefore, the country’s fortunes seem to rest on having computers, and the possibilities for change brought about by computers seem to be only positive ones. Although some interviewees (sometimes the same) stress the possibility that the Internet be ‘imperialistic’ or the fact that the Internet alone ‘is not going to do miracles’, the prevailing view is that it is a tool for accelerated development. Development, then, is identified by these young people as a matter of connectivity. Once connected, and because they are connected, Africans become fully modern, advanced and developed. ‘ICTs are a factor of development; they should be given prime importance if Africa is to develop’, says Chaibou, a postgraduate student I interviewed. Most of my interviewees offered similar observations. Anani, a 24-year-old student, sees ICTs as an opportunity to gain access to the global market, to be up to date about technological evolution and to meet his basic social needs. He thinks that access to information, especially for a country like Niger, is crucial. He believes that the country can also sell its raw materials over the Internet or become informed about new technologies in the healthcare sector, and therefore government
policy should make these technologies more available, and at low cost, ‘particularly in schools; there should be a computer in almost every classroom’.

For her part, Amina, a 24-year-old female student, emphasizes the link between the Internet and economic development. She identifies access to the Internet as a source of economic opportunity, stressing its informative aspect: ‘Being informed in real time is a major economic opportunity. Africa should not lag behind in world affairs. The people who think that the Internet is a factor of imperialism are wrong. I do not see it in that way’.

Omar, a 17-year-old student, also stresses economic opportunities and access to the global market. He strongly believes that the Internet can constitute a major factor of development for Africa because it can help people communicate with others all over the world: ‘On the ‘net, investors can find what to invest, where to invest, and how to invest; therefore, the Internet can help Africa develop easily’.

Aliassan, a 24-year-old student, says he is aware of the fact that the Internet could be an ‘imperialistic’ tool, but he insists on its interactive character – the ‘possibility to make choices’ instead of having decisions imposed upon him. For him, the Internet is a ‘friendly’ technology, a ‘humane’ tool that Africans can control. He states, ‘Africa should embrace these technologies. Yes, it can be a way of imperialism; now it is up to you to know about the thing that can deviate you from your culture: You have a choice to make’.

For some other participants, the Internet is even a ‘progressive’ technology that is the icon of globalization. The simple fact that the Internet has been largely ignored by African leaders is, for Adamou, proof that these leaders belong to the past. For him, technological progress is inevitable, as is globalization, because Africa needs to have exchanges with the rest of the world. ‘ICTs offer an opportunity for Africa to make up for its lagging behind’, he says. He also thinks that African leaders should be committed to the promotion of the tool, although they are not. ‘This is the biggest problem because, since they are ignorant, they do not give it top priority’, he explains.

Therefore, popular conceptions of the Internet among those young people centre on a link between technology and development and a need for African countries to acquire the Internet in order to integrate into the global world. This view proceeds from the idea that the continent is out of historicity, out of the global process of modernization within which most present-day people and nations already operate. Africa is not only outpaced; it is no longer (if it has ever been) in the race for modernity, and it is being marginalized even further. The Internet provides an opportunity to counter this marginalization. Perhaps more important, most people consider technological change to be inevitable, so it becomes an obligation for African governments to provide the technological resources for effective global integration.

**Communicating and networking**

Asked about their primary use of computers and the Internet, study participants invariably refer to the ability to send and receive e-mails. Matthew, a 32-year-old barber says, ‘Usually, when I come here, I stay for one hour, and the only activities I engage in are about receiving and sending messages because I know little about computers, let alone the Internet, so I can’t go beyond what I know’.

It appears also that the recipients of these e-mail exchanges are usually outside the country, either relatives living in America or western countries,
or correspondents from those countries. Exchanges by e-mail with Nigeriens inside Niger are important as well, but they seem to be limited to certain categories of the population, namely, young, urban, educated people.

The websites that interviewees listed most often are foreign websites and chat groups at foreign universities and companies. The students in the group view the outside world as a world of opportunity for young people seeking to be admitted to western universities, as well as for business people seeking links with western enterprises. Madougou, a 35-year-old trader, states that he goes to a cybercafe to use the Internet primarily to get in contact with people with whom he corresponds in the United States. He also uses the Internet to look for places in the United States where trade fairs are scheduled in order to attend these fairs and showcase his products. He works with business people abroad and often writes to organizers of fairs in the United States for information concerning the events and documentation that will help him get a visa to go to the United States, where he can trade with his American counterparts. For this reason, the websites he visits concern business exclusively, and therefore most of his activities are related to sending and receiving e-mails. Similar responses were given by Ms Abdou, a 27-year-old computer scientist, who says, ‘come here to send e-mails and also to look for business partners abroad on the Internet’.

The interviewees even find that activities that are culturally sensitive, such as music or newspaper articles written for a national audience, are aided by searching the Internet, generally on western content sites. Lamine, a student who is also a member of a band, provides a good example. He visits cybercafes once a week, usually goes with his artist friends. They visit sites that specialize in music, such as KaZaa.com, a site that features musical sound production and file sharing. He is interested in knowing what types of sounds people or groups abroad produce and thinks he can progress in his field by learning and comparing what he is doing with what others are doing. He hopes to take part in chat rooms with American rap groups.

Niger’s presence on the Internet is very weak, which increases the tendency to seek out foreign websites. The small number of Nigerien websites is devoted primarily to making the country known to foreign tourists and investors, so they tend to address foreign needs and preoccupations. Focus on Niger, a kind of Niger portal hosted by a returned American Peace Corps volunteer, is typical of the websites about Niger on the Internet. These sites can be classified into five categories: information on Niger, current news about Niger, maps and flags of Niger, photos of Niger, and websites that originate in Niger. Of all these websites, only those in the last category display Nigerien content, including Nigerien newspapers online. The others are designed by various international organizations, foreign universities and embassies to help make the country known to the outside world, but they typically include foreign perspectives on Niger. Nigerien forums and discussion groups, such as Tamtainfo.com, AERNUSA (Association des Etudiants et Ressortissants Nigeriens aux USA/Association of Nigerien Students and Nationals living in the USA) and Internet Niger or Agadez-Niger.com, are essentially made up of members of the Nigerien Diaspora in the United States, France and other countries.

Back to reality: What are the changes that the Internet brought about?

Clearly, computers and the Internet are the objects of all sorts of expectations and aspirations, but one may ask whether the Internet has brought any
significant change to the lives of Nigerien users, especially the lives of those young people. Are they now part of a global Internet community with access to the outside world and, if so, does this affect their social and economic conditions in a way that makes a positive difference?

For computers and the Internet to have any significant impact on the social and economic conditions of people living in a country, there should first exist a ‘critical mass’ of those devices and a significant level of access to these technologies. This is far from being the case in Niger since only a limited number people in the country own a computer. In the International Telecommunication Union Digital Access Index, which ranks ICTs access in world countries, Niger is classified as the country with the lowest index (0.04). Access to computers, which is an urban phenomenon, is gained primarily through fewer than 100 cybercafes scattered throughout the capital of Niamey, and a few other cities. Although the Nigerien government has designed a policy to make access to computers and the Internet possible through its NICI plan, schools remain unequipped, as are workplaces, particularly the national administration. With the exception of international NGOs and agencies, access to the Internet or Intranet systems is still not available for civil servants and other workers.

Therefore, digital opportunities offered to young people are very limited. For example, the country’s primary university, Abdou Moumouni University of Niamey, which has more than 8000 students, is equipped with only a few hundred computers. It implemented a small ‘computer room’ in 2000 and a ‘campus numérique francophone’ (Francophone Digital Campus) in 2003 (Abdelkader 2004). By 2004, only 25% of university teachers had access to e-mails and other forms of digital communication in their work places and almost 30% of them had no e-mail addresses and 60% had never done an Internet search (Abdelkader 2004: 55). It was only in April 2008 that 350 laptops were distributed to the corresponding number of Abdou Moumouni University teachers (Agence Panafricaine de Presse 2008). Before that, only a tiny percentage of them were equipped with laptops.

As for the students, few can afford to buy laptops since most students come from poor rural families. Those who cannot afford them gain access through the ‘Campus Numérique’, the ‘Salle Informatique’ computers, or cybercafes.

Given the low level of access to computers and the Internet, it is clear that the dreams and expectations of young people of changing their situation through the use of those devices are unlikely to be fulfilled. The use of computers and the Internet depends on material conditions (infrastructure and equipment) that simply do not exist in Niger. The ideology of ‘leapfrogging’ development through ICTs tends to downplay the necessity of those conditions. As Clevenot and Douyere (2008: 1) state, for a ‘knowledge society’ to be possible, institutional, educational and technical developments must first take place.

**CONCLUSION**

The representations and expectations associated with computers and the Internet among the study participants are first related to culture and languages. In spite of the language barrier, the Internet is seen as a ‘free space’ that makes ‘free choice’ possible. Most of young people interviewed do not see the Internet as a threat to their culture. They think that it is possible...
to use the Internet for their own interests or to control its use in order to avoid its ‘bad effects’. More importantly, computers are what give access to the outside world. Computers help build networks, help acquire skills and offer employment and business opportunities. Ownership of a computer is seen as an important way to gain status or escape from the conditions of poverty and ignorance and its use is seen as capable of changing lives. Computer users are seen as participants in a new world, the world of globally interconnected people. The future is also seen in relation to computers that are destiny-changing devices, both individual and collective destinies. They are understood as a factor of national development that should be given prime importance. Thus, in young people’s view, a link exists between the Internet, technology and development. The same kinds of ideas are being embraced by people everywhere in Africa who equate the use of information technologies with modernity and development. However, the economic conditions of Niger and of most other African countries, characterized by a very low level of access to those technologies, are a serious impediment to their dreams because ICT-based development depends on material conditions (infrastructure and equipment) that are not found in those countries. Therefore, people should not abandon the task of developing their nations solely through the introduction of new technological devices, no matter how efficient or useful those technologies are.

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