Africa.com: The Self-Representation of Sub-Saharan Nations on the World Wide Web

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In a textual analysis of government Web sites of 29 sub-Saharan countries, we evaluate how African nations use the Internet to construct a self-image for the world. Our analysis finds that the sites echo the ongoing struggle over the definition and purpose of the nation-state in relation to a global economy. Rather than representing a variety of domestic concerns, African countries present a “reflected” identity mirroring Western interests. Their governmental Web sites position the nation as a “brand” and construct citizens as exotic Others who can be marketed to foreign investors and tourists. The tensions between primordial loyalties and modernizing ambitions dissipate in favor of branded identities celebrating ethnicities and natural beauty to attract global investments. Moreover, the technological logic and aesthetics of the Internet reinforce the dependence of these texts on Western knowledge production. Our analysis challenges common assumptions of both post-colonial and Internet research.

The authority of the nation-state as a political entity and ideological force is in dispute. Globalization and transnational capitalism threaten the ability of nations to maintain political and economic sovereignty within their boundaries. Post-colonial and historical scholarship have confronted nations’ elaborate and often violent attempts to maintain an “imagined community” by controlling the Other (Anderson, 1991; Said, 1979). Between this contested past and an ambiguous future, a space of negotiation has opened around the purpose and competency of the nation-state. The problematic vision of the nation is especially pressing for countries in the developing world, where a colonial legacy and attempts at modernist nation building collide with what is often called the post-nation era. Africa, as perhaps the most disenfranchised continent, presents an important example of this ambivalent state of affairs not only in the economic and political spheres, but in the cultural realm as well. Its countries are falling further behind in the international arena even as they continue to struggle to create a national identity within the confines of imposed colonial boundaries.

Communication scholars have shown how traditional mass media have been
instrumental in constructing and maintaining the idea of the nation in the developing world and the West (e.g., Martín-Barbero, 1991; Nordenstreng & Schiller, 1993). The new information technologies offer another conduit for the negotiation of an evolving national identity. In an attempt to disentangle the discourse of nationhood in a digital age, we analyze official government Web sites of sub-Saharan African nations. These official Web sites constitute a text in which three interrelated issues intersect: 1) the construction of a national imaginary in a postmodern world, 2) the potential of the new communication technologies to construct national identity, and 3) post-colonial sensibilities concerning the legacy of nationalism. The Internet has been both criticized and praised as a challenge to the cohesiveness of the nation-state (e.g., Harasim, 1993; Castells, 1997; Sunstein, 2001) due to the medium’s presumed qualities as a decentralized, non-hierarchical, interactive and global entity. This often overlooks the strategies of nations using the new communication technology to build and maintain their unity. Given the problematic situation of the nation-state, our study analyzes the discursive response by African countries to the challenges of globalization. Certainly, government Web sites in Africa as much as in the rest of the world are part of national governments’ public relations or propaganda efforts. If we take Anderson’s (1991) idea that nations are “imagined communities” a step further, then active image work is a crucial factor in the cohesiveness of a nation. In this media-saturated time, the control over representation in the media is especially important. These public relations efforts by governments deserve special attention by communication scholars because they illuminate the relationship between power and culture and their mediated representations. The sites under investigation in this study exemplify an active attempt by governments to shape the image of their citizenry and to project it to the world. Our concern is to evaluate how the contested idea of the nation translates into the rhetoric of these sites. What are the discursive strategies used by these nations to present themselves online to their citizens and to foreigners? How do African nations employ these Internet PR sites to overcome their disadvantaged profile on the world stage? Is the Internet as a new medium another tool for nation building, or does it create a forum for a “reimagined community” (Morley & Robins, 1995, 37)?

Our textual analysis finds that the sites reflect the ongoing struggle over the definition and purpose of the nation-state in a globalized era. Even as these young nation-states use new technology to create or maintain a shared identity for their citizens, their governmental Web sites often construct the nation as a brand (signified by slogans and logos) and its citizens as exotic Others who can be marketed to foreign investors. The discourse of these governmental Web sites is one of response—a reflection of Western, especially U.S., American dominance. We also conclude that the potential of the Internet as a neutral or balancing force in global information flow tends to be exaggerated. These sites present only a limited force for altering Western dominance over representation and knowledge production. While Internet scholars often celebrate the open, unconstrained or authority-defying text of the Web (e.g., through hyperlinks) we present evidence of a more problematic discourse of this new type of communication: The logic of the Internet—governed by U.S. technological
conventions combined with Western control over Internet symbols, aesthetics and “hyperlinkable” information archives—creates a resilient textual form. This text implicitly privileges the Western gaze and “virtually” colonizes (Everard, 2000) the cyberspace claimed by these African nations. The tension between the primordial loyalties and modernizing ambitions of developing countries dissipates in favor of a branded identity celebrating ethnicities and natural beauty, which compromises national interests even as it conforms to global ambitions.

To make our case, we first highlight the situation of the Internet in Africa. We then present our textual analysis of 29 sub-Saharan government Web sites within the theoretical framework of nationalism as a discursive construct. We interpret our findings within the broader context of media globalization, international communication and the new technologies.

Searching for Africa on the Web

Africa in Cyberspace

Internet researchers so far have focused on computer-mediated communication originating in the West, mostly bypassing Internet texts produced outside the Western world. However, the dizzying growth of the Internet in Africa in the late 1990s warrants increased attention by communication scholars. In 1996, only 11 countries were online. In 2001, all 54 countries and territories were connected (Jensen, 2001). This increasing Web presence has taken place despite the many problems of infrastructure and cost (Robins & Hilliard, 2002). Almost all countries have some form of local or internationally hosted Web portal, unofficially or officially representing the country with varying degrees of comprehensiveness. However, those who have access to the Internet tend to be urban elites in business or government. Rural access is virtually nonexistent. And, while many in-country nongovernmental organizations have their own Web site with basic descriptive and contact information, many of these are hosted by international agency sites such as the U.S. Agency for International Development (Jensen, 2000). Due to high international tariffs and lack of circuit capacity, many African Internet sites are hosted on servers that are in Europe or the U.S.. With the exception of some Internet service providers in southern Africa, almost all of the international Internet circuits in Africa connect to the U.S. (Jensen, 2001). Everard (2000) finds that as networks are increasingly being run on behalf of developing states by global telecommunications firms, the profits are being repatriated offshore: “Indeed, (a country) can become worse off as it becomes hostage to monopolistic practices and increasingly dependent on the single telecommunications supplier” (40).

The Web sites under analysis in this study are part of this new African drive fostered in part by Western commercial initiatives to connect the continent as part of transnational telecommunications expansion. Herman and McChesney (1997) detail how the growth of the information superhighway, enabled by privatization and deregulation of telecommunications in countries around the world, has been accomplished with little questioning of the superiority of the market and the profit motive. They see both privatization and deregulation as having been stimulated by the desire for profits by
telecommunication firms and bankers working with local elites, Western governments, and the institutions of global capitalism. As a result of pressure from the West, African countries have denationalized and privatized their telecommunications sectors, opening them to international actors whose goals are to discard old technology and to sell telecommunication services to profitable urban and business users.

The development of the Internet in Africa is marked by familiar historical and political-economic patterns that have situated the continent’s people among the world’s most poor and disenfranchised. Many utopian claims are being made on behalf of the Internet as an agent of transformation in all areas, especially education, healthcare and international networking. The emergence of the information society is seen as an opportunity for Africa’s poor to overcome the traditional systemic disadvantages they have faced, and to give the countries a “voice” in the international arena. Those trying to connect Africa say access to and control over information are central to positive change (USAID, 2000; Bray, 2001). However, critics have warned that the new technologies are being developed and implemented in ways that reinforce existing power structures (Dutton, 1996), with the rhetoric of such institutions as the World Bank and the International Telecommunications Union echoing that of the dominant neoliberal paradigm of development: that new digital technologies, neutral and transferable from one context to another, will drive positive social change (Nulens & Audenhove, 1999). Thus, the growth of computer technology in Africa has been instigated by the recent boom of the telecommunication industry in tandem with neoliberal globalization principles. These trends favor a private, for-profit model of telecommunication expansion, which is legitimized with an often academically supported belief in communication technology as an indispensible yet neutral promoter of development.

Collecting a sample of Web pages on or by African nations brought us closer to the inequalities of cyberspace. At the superficial level, most African countries have a presence on the World Wide Web; yet, a closer examination shows that many sites are constructed and maintained on servers outside Africa. Four main types of official Web sites dominate virtual space: sites generated by the tourist industry, by non-governmental organizations, and by Diaspora communities, and those promoting international investment. Many of these sites originate from and are controlled by Western-based institutions. Thus, non-Africans and expatriate groups noticeably shape the virtual presence of Africa.

Our search experience points to problematic aspects of cybercommunication. We encountered a multitude of technological problems with many Web sites (whether hosted within or outside of Africa). Many sites were not stable and crashed repeatedly. Others were not indexed in standard Western search engines. Also, many sites did not seem to have the resources to update the pages and keep links active, a problem less common on professionally produced Web sites in affluent countries. In the case of the African Web sites under investigation in this study, the technological difficulties and overwhelming affiliation to Western host institutions are thus indicative of the “massive global inequalities in access
to ownership of communication facilities” (Golding, 1998, 75).

**Analysis of Web Sites as a Text**

The Internet has been a challenge for media researchers trying to find appropriate methodological designs for their studies. While some researchers try to adapt current methodology, others focus on developing new strategies that help them study all aspects of the medium. Traditional administrative research has struggled to adapt the method of standardized content analysis to Web content. McMillan (2000), who compared early Internet content studies, found potential quandaries in almost all stages of the research setup, from developing research questions to sampling, data collecting and coding of information. The biggest challenges were the idiosyncrasies of Web pages, including multi-media formats, hyperlinks and their temporary nature, and users’ active reading strategies. This has led some researchers to argue that the very nature of Web content tests the limits of positivist methodological and epistemological postulates (e.g., Newhagen & Rafaeli, 1996).

Our study is situated in a cultural studies framework. Some critical and cultural media studies approaches have embraced the novelty of the medium and focused on the development of new methodology to explore the Internet (e.g., Cubitt, 2000). The non-linear and ephemeral aspects of Web content connect to cultural-critical scholars’ poststructural concept of “text” as an unsettled, open and shifting process of meaning making, never fully fixed between encoding and decoding (Barthes, 1975; Hall, 1980; Landow, 1997).

Our textual analysis interrogates government Web sites of sub-Saharan nations. Textual analysis is a qualitative reading of text that concentrates on the cultural and ideological assumptions of media content and form. This method involves the analysis of multiple levels of signs, symbols and other signifiers in the text. The context of the analysis is the political economy and symbolic structure of the cultural product under investigation. It identifies how the preferred reading of the text relates to the dominant ideology. We base our analysis on the poststructural concept of text, but we also are aware that any analysis asks the researcher to “fix” the text under investigation in time and space, even if temporarily. In order to allow for the fleeting material of Internet content, we did not download the sites onto our hard drives; rather, we repeatedly accessed our sites via their URL addresses over a period of several months (January to August 2001) during which time some changes to the pages may have occurred. To facilitate the reading of our description of online content, we do not include Web addresses in the body of this article. Rather, readers should refer to the list of country Web site addresses cited at the end.

One limitation of textual analysis is that it can exaggerate the poststructural idea of the productivity of the text, leaving the reader (here the Internet user) as a constructed and rather passive subject formally constituted by the text (Ang, 1991). To avoid this epistemological trap, we have refrained from statements that make assumptions about the different possibilities of reading or interpreting these Web sites by different users around the world (which could be the topic of a follow-up study). Yet, the idea of the text as polysemic taken to its extreme overlooks inherent contingencies of pos-
possible interpretations (e.g., Condit, 1989). Thus, we invoke the construct of the “preferred reader” as a way to analyze which audiences are privileged in the discourse of the text, showing some of the assumptions on which the production of the texts was based.

We limited this project to the evaluation of Web sites by sub-Saharan African nations (excluding South Africa) for two reasons. First, the continent of Africa consists of 54 countries and territories, which are distinctive in their political structure, (colonial) history, population and economic situation. Our selection of countries follows a common but flawed geographical categorization of African nations used to analyze a group of countries that is relatively homogeneous with regard to certain factors. South Africa’s history and economic situation make it an exception in this category, thus leading us to exclude the country from this study. Second, limiting our study to these countries permitted us to include all Web sites instead of only a sample for an in-depth analysis of several levels of hyperlinked pages on each site. Our selection of the sub-Saharan classification, then, is tied to historical and political conditions and methodological efficiency, but also is sensitive to the problems that accompany the practice of scholarly categorization.

We define “Government Web sites” as Internet sites produced or initiated by a national governmental institution (such as a Ministry of Information), which are sanctioned by the political leadership of the given country. Several of the sites were maintained by the respective embassies in the U.S. or U.K. (e.g., Angola and Tanzania). In the few cases where apparently no official state institution had directly sponsored or produced a site, we accepted semi-private or commercial sites as long as the person or organization maintaining the site established a clear governmental endorsement of the Internet effort (e.g., Togo).

We arrived at our sample of 29 Web sites by following a multi-step search strategy. We first turned to several established online resources, primarily the UNESCO libraries portal, which is updated daily, and South African Internet researcher Mike Jensen’s pioneering work for the African Internet Society Initiative (Jensen, 2000, 2001). Even so, some of the hyperlinks on these pages were no longer active, and several countries were not represented. We then did a search for “African government websites” on the Google search engine, which led us to academic sites, including one at the University of Birmingham in England (African Information Centre, 2001), which produced the addresses for several more sites. AfricaOnline, the continent’s largest commercial portal, yielded the official site for Zimbabwe. Ultimately, we were not able to locate government sites for Cameroon, the Central African Republic, Guinea-Bissau, Liberia or Somalia. Although most of the pages had English-language versions, several were in French (e.g., Senegal, Burundi).

Analysis: Nation and Identity

The legitimacy of the nation-state in theory and practice has become contested. Transnational corporate interests, media globalization, multicultural movements, immigration and postmodern subjectivities are named as possible challenges to the dominance of nation-states, and to national identity as the most significant bond forged in modernity. While this is a major theme
of contemporary anthropological, political scientific and post-colonial scholarship (e.g., Anderson, 1991; Bhabha, 1990), much less attention has been given to the strategies nation-states employ to defend their position in this struggle. We are interested in understanding how the countries under investigation utilize Internet sites to lend themselves authority and authenticity. Norton (1993) reminds us that political systems are maintained not so much through allegiance to static institutions, laws or constitutions but are collectively and dynamically realized and can be examined in the texts of everyday life and popular culture. The Web sites are repositories of symbols and codes that can be read with regard to the ideological assumptions of creating national identities.

Everard (2000) makes an important observation for the globalized information age. As nation-states’ ability to control political and economic conditions within their borders diminishes, their role in the “identity economy” (95) is more important than ever to balance global and local economic inequalities. He explains how states are trying to claim cyberspace as “another economy of signs. It is national space within which exchanges take place in a manner which is constitutive of identity” (58). We apply Everard’s general ideas to a specific example of virtual national space, and investigate the discourse of national self-representation established in these Web sites. Traditionally, as Appadurai (1996) notes, national legitimation involves several aspects:

The nation-state relies for its legitimacy on the intensity of its meaningful presence in a continuous body of bounded territory. It works by policing its borders, producing its people . . . , constructing its citizens, defining its capitals, monuments, cities, waters, and soils, and by constructing its locales of memory and commemoration . . . . (189)

Our analysis of Web sites shows that the same national markers are articulated in virtual space. Images, texts and hyperlinks are used to reaffirm the nation in its borders, to construct an identity of its people, and to manage its collective memory. This work of self-representation is often ambivalent, and escapes one-dimensional interpretation. The discourse oscillates between motifs of modernity coded as capitalist progress (links to investment opportunities, tourism and national achievements) and as tradition (links to historic descriptions and tribal differentiation, with images of the pre-modern life, and nature and wildlife as signifiers). In the following, we describe in more detail the discursive strategies employed in these sites. Based on Appadurai’s definition, we explore three major aspects guiding the textual legitimation of the nation: the symbols and signifiers of nation, the articulation of the citizen, and the representation of past and present.

**Nation as a Brand**

The investigated Web sites highlight the struggle of African nations to define both themselves and the purpose of the nation-state in a globalized era. They also reflect actual inequalities with regard to capital, technology and power. Overall, the text presents a contradictory national cyberidentity that is marked by an effort to market the branded nation to global economic interests.

The post-structural idea of the discursive construction of the nation explains only one aspect of the “imagined com-
munities” of these Web sites. Most sub-Saharan African nations are colonial constructions, decided on the drawing boards of the empires. One of their main struggles after gaining independence was to unite the country as a nation. “Nation building” connected to the goals of “development” and “modernization” became a major national task. In this struggle, the media (mostly controlled by the state or, less often, an elite) were seen as instruments of cohesion. This developmental model of the media, however, has been challenged by the influx of transnational telecommunication corporations. Thus, most government Web sites no longer directly reflect the presumption of a developmental purpose, leaving this to nongovernmental agencies. Instead, government Web sites are constructing a symbolic sphere of cohesion. The Internet seems to offer another chance to symbolically construct and maintain national identity. What are some of the signifiers of nationhood? Ubiquitous on these pages are the symbols of modern nation-states—coats of arms, flags, maps—often juxtaposed in a postmodern pastiche with such images of nature as waterfalls, beaches, palm trees and game animals. Malawi’s homepage, for example, features a photo montage of the Parliament building, a herd of elephants, flowers, a luxury hotel swimming pool next to a mockup of a conical, thatched-roof hut, and, at a distance, a lone boy sitting in a beached dugout canoe. The juxtaposition signifies, perhaps, a land unthreatening to Western visitors, with the locals at a comfortable distance, but still “African.”

Countries have branded themselves on these official Web sites; the slogans of both Botswana and Namibia are “The Gem of Africa,” while Ghana is “The New Gateway to Africa,” Malawi “The Warm Heart of Africa,” Swaziland “The Switzerland of Africa” and Uganda “The Pearl of Africa” (so named by Winston Churchill). Tanzania offers “Your African Safari Dream.” Burundi is introduced as “The Heart of Africa,” while Rwanda is the “Land of a Thousand Hills” and “Mozambique means business.”

Many of these sites present their countries as locations for tourism and investment above all, rather than as places where their citizens live and work. A typical example is Malawi, whose text emphasizes “openness” and “accessibility” for foreigners; its investment promotion agency “facilitates the entire process,” making the country “an attractive process” for private investment in all sectors, including public education. And, as a confirmation of neoliberal agendas, “trade unions are not a strong force.” Expatriates are invited to “enjoy favourable working conditions such as reasonably high salaries, fringe benefits including company house, car, free education for children, a medical scheme and local holidays.”

Another country that welcomes outsiders is Namibia, where “wilderness and modern amenities co-exist happily.” It is “an ageless land . . . a country of compelling beauty, abundant sunshine, and unconfined space.” Its “unspoilt [sic] landscapes” generate “a sense of freedom.” Investors can find “large, untapped human resources, skills and capabilities” as well as the lowest corporate taxes in southern Africa, export processing zones and no capital gains tax. A smiling President Sam Nujoma devotes most of his message to welcoming investors to “take advantage . . . (of) a world of opportunity,” and he lauds his country’s “enabling economic environment and a
friendly and hospitable people.” Namibia positions itself as a new frontier (but with high-tech appliances), a place where Westerners can pursue their latest Manifest Destiny.

Not all countries pursue Western money so unabashedly. The utilitarian homepages of Mozambique and Tanzania, for example, present basic information on political structures, climate and geography, only then linking to sophisticated commercial travel and investment pages. Mozambique, with a socialist government that is opening its economy to the private sector, appeals to the outsider with images of sunsets and palm trees, but it also delineates a political agenda. The site details national policy that obviously considers tourism a necessary evil. Mozambique’s economic policy is similarly detailed; the country has opened itself to foreign investors, but has earmarked the gains for the poor. Ambivalence is obvious, however; with hundreds of millions of dollars in foreign investment, the site notes, “the international community’s support and assistance for the peace process is vital to its success.”

Tanzania, although no longer pursuing a socialist agenda, also sends a mixed message. Its symbols of the past—the Uhuru (freedom) torch, and the coat of arms with the word “Umoja” (Unity)—coexist with the slogans: “Land of Kilimanjaro and Zanzibar” (the premier tourist destinations), and “Rediscover the wild, romantic Africa of your dreams.”

Few official government sites present readers with the poverty and turmoil some of their countries face in extreme. Three exceptions are Sudan, Sierra Leone and Rwanda. Sudan admits to being “buffeted by civil war, chronic political instability, adverse weather, high inflation, a drop in remittances from abroad, and counterproductive economic policies . . . .” Wartorn Sierra Leone’s spartan homepage is dominated by an emotional pledge of allegiance to a nation that is loved, “her honor to be defended, so help me God.” A link brings viewers to a photo of “the brave—the Sierra Leone amputee.” Rwanda’s site provides an extensive section on the 1994 genocide that brought the current government of Paul Kagame to power, and his party’s efforts to stabilize and rebuild the country. The link “Genocide” is one among many on this professionally produced Web site. Closer analysis reveals that the site was produced by the Internet design company Quabe, based in Washington, DC. The Quabe Web site states in dynamic marketing language the task of providing a public relations Internet site for a country that has experienced atrocities:


The design concept and the actual Web site provide contradictory information. While in the above quotation the country is called an “emerging nation,” the “history” link constructs a national continuity to a “pre-colonial Rwanda [that] was a highly centralized Kingdom.” While one should not overinterpret this contradiction, the Web company’s writing hints at its conviction that the Internet can create a new nation. A “fusion of national symbols” is used to package and commodify the
idea of the nation as a public relations construct.

There are instances that refer to the potential of the Internet to give an equal voice to African countries, as many cybertheorists envision. Several states stress the potential of new communication technology to help make their many voices heard in the imagined global public sphere. Some professionally designed sites may counter the international news flow that tends to limit reports on Africa to negative stories of disasters and wars. Burundi, for example, emphasizes that its Web site is constructed to “discover the other image” (“Le Burundi sur Internet: Découvrez l’autre image”). Other sites refer to the fact that they provide the users (tourists and investors) with information otherwise unknown about their countries. As such, the sites are less about unifying a nation and mobilizing an “imagined community” internally than they are about claiming a space in the global public sphere. For example, Angola notes: “In launching this site we hope to provide our long-time friends and those who are just beginning to learn about our country with a comprehensive source of information on Angola.” Thus, developing a “cyberface” (Mitra, 1997) to the world becomes an obligatory aspect of national identity work. Often, local and expatriate visitors in chat rooms and guest books connected to these sites comment on the importance of having a Web presence and the appropriateness of the site as an authentic reflection of the country (see guest book at Sierra Leone Web site). Not having an Internet presence is equated with not existing at all. This also motivates expatriates with Internet access to construct semi-official Web sites to give information about the home country. For example, Senegalese expatriate Amadou Thiam, living in the U.S., invites visitors on his professional and stable Web site (“The Resource for Everything Sénégalais”) to “come and discover the land of Teranga (hospitality)! . . . Please feel free to browse and learn more about my beautiful country” (Thiam, 2001)–while the official Senegal site is still under construction and prone to server access problems. This Web presence concurrently shows the promise and the obstacles of the egalitarian and democratic potential of new technologies. As Mitra (1997) explains in a study of Indian Diasporic Web sites, expatriate groups can use these sites as a means of producing a “cyberface for themselves” (177) and to engage in an “in-group” conversation that helps them negotiate their Diaspora status. These sites extend a common usage by Diaspora communities who use global electronic media to negotiate their identity (Appadurai, 1996). However, the openness of the Web also obligates these groups to produce a public image as a public relations effort geared toward outgroup members (Mitra, 1997). Beyond that, a significant number of African expatriate Web sites serve to establish and popularize resistance groups against dictatorial regimes. These efforts can function as a counter-forum for international “cyberpolitics” (Hill & Hughes, 1998).

The positive “other” image presented on African government Web sites is, of course, tied to their main intention, i.e., to generate interest for business and tourism. Many countries present themselves as a brand and emphasize factors that might give them a competitive advantage in the neoliberal marketplace. This approach reflects the fact that corporate globalization positions different countries and
regions in direct competition with each other to attract investment and tourism. On these government sites, the most comprehensive information details tourism and investment opportunities in an attempt to develop an international market presence. The most professional sites have the strongest outreach to Western business interests. They also tend to use and link to Western sources (e.g., CIA Factbook) to legitimize their claims. This attention to the West in a highly competitive situation limits the potential for a pan-African identity and, indeed, the idea of pan-Africanism is rarely invoked. Thus, these government Web sites are positioned as Africa.com, as opposed to Africa.org.

The Citizen as Other

The branding of the nation also establishes the concept of a citizen, with people often displayed in stereotypical African representations. The sites rarely address their citizens as potential users of the sites. While this may reflect the limited reach of Internet communication on the continent, it overlooks the growing number of (albeit mostly elite, urban) users in these countries. Most sites offer outsiders a self-exoticized identity. The citizens are presented as often-stereotypical exotic Others catering to the Western gaze.

Judging by the images presented on these Web sites, few ordinary people populate these countries. Namibia displays vast stretches of desert rather than its vibrant capital city, Windhoek. Only one person each is featured on the Kenya and Zimbabwe Web sites, and those individuals are the authoritarian rulers Daniel arap Moi and Robert Mugabe. As one goes deeper into the sites, the citizens begin to emerge as mine or dock workers, fishermen, farmers, and members of tribes. There are no middle-class professionals, and very few women. Also conspicuously absent are such influential ethnic minorities as Indians and Chinese.

The images of people in these Web depictions celebrate folklore, rural life and the past. Even though few locals can be found on these sites, those who are—aside from the politician or industrial worker—live mostly in the village, wear traditional clothing and belong to one or another “tribe.” But all are laboring to build their country. In Angola, the citizens “are now at peace and working to build a stable, democratic and free market republic.” Angolans are portrayed as belonging to one of nine ethnolinguistic groups, all of which are referred to in the third person, echoing the condescending tone of colonial classification: “The Tchokwe are generally seen as active and hard-working people . . . They are excellent builders and businessmen . . . They are gifted with a vibrant sense of assimilation . . .” Malawians, who live in the “warm heart of Africa,” also are depicted as inseparable from their ethnic groups and local languages. Their culture is that of the past, of “traditional dances and rituals” that the country is trying “to keep intact,” not just for outsiders, but “even for locals; the museum conducts a series of cultural activities in schools and public places so that those who have no contact with village life can benefit.” The people of Swaziland, where King Mswati III is Africa’s last absolute monarch, live in “Africa’s best-kept secret . . . the Switzerland of Africa.” A bare-breasted village beauty welcomes visitors to the “hot still beat of the African lowveld,” where “visitors to the Kingdom cannot but feel
and appreciate the warmth and friendliness of their hosts... For all the modernisation that has come to Swaziland, the people have preserved their age-old culture and traditional ceremonies.

On Sudan’s site, all images and writing emphasize life in harmony despite the brutal realities of decades of civil war between the Arab, Moslem North and the black, Christian and animist South. A photomontage presents oases, women of both Middle Eastern and black African heritage, Arabic script and a black male villager. Uganda, where hundreds of thousands perished because they belonged to the “wrong” ethnic group depending on the dictator of the moment, calls itself “a country of many contrasts... created by the union of many peoples” who enjoy “spontaneous dancing and music.”

Several groups are directly or indirectly addressed on these Web sites: the global community understood as business interests and Western tourists, and to a lesser degree expatriates. Much less emphasis is on the concerns of the citizens within the countries, who apparently are not the preferred readers. Typical of these sites is Malawi’s. Although it claims to be “useful for the visitor and the citizen alike” there is little, if any, content for its citizens. Most of the 19 links from the home page—including investment, mining, labor relations, immigration, business, international memberships, diplomatic missions and trade contacts—show that the site is written for investors, tourists and expatriates. The same can be seen on Togo’s site, as it “offers special advantages to North American investors” and describes a “youthful and eager work force, a pro-western, market-orientated government, and a liberal investment code,” which presumably are enticements to the foreign reader to visit and to invest.

The language on other sites is even less coy. Uganda speaks directly to the Westerner: “If you are looking for a comprehensive source of information about investment opportunities in Uganda, hot tourist attractions or simply you just want to know about the different peoples of Uganda, this site will be valuable.” Swaziland uses the first-person plural to directly connect the text to the non-African preferred reader—the tourist in particular:

Some of us have never grown up. To travel satisfies our yearning to explore the world when we first opened eyes as a baby child. If you had the good fortune to be nurtured on the novels of Sir Ryder Haggard, you may still have boy-like yearnings of Africa, yearnings never to be satisfied in the “concrete jungle”. If so then Swaziland is for you!

African-American tourism, a growing market for West Africa, is implicitly addressed. Several countries in this region make a point to highlight landmarks of interest to those seeking their roots. Both Senegal and Ghana note their tourist developments at slave shipping points, and Sierra Leone retells the story of the slave ship Amistad, which was commandeered by its human cargo on the way to the New World. Africans in the Diaspora also are sometimes addressed on these sites. Mozambique’s Web site gives updates on chronic flooding; Sierra Leone features an active chat room.

In sum, the preferred readers of these Web site are Western investors, tourists and, to a lesser degree, the expatriates of these countries. The failure to address more directly their citizens reflects the so-far limited access of Africans to the Internet. As long as West-
ern users dominate cyberspace, Web authors will cater their texts to these audiences. But the limited potential or willingness to envision an African user as a potential reader directly aggravates the problematic representation of the citizens. They are constructed as the exotic Other for consumption by the non-African reader. These representations privilege the subject position of the Western gaze. The self-exoticizing discourse objectifies the citizens and reduces the complexities of living in sub-Saharan Africa. The Diaspora voices in the online guest books and chat rooms support this discourse by extending representations of national pride. However, these voices have a so-far unfulfilled potential to counter or rewrite official national image construction.

Past and Present Online

Analyzing the way the text is positioned between past and present provides another dimension of national identity work and highlights the connectedness of this text. The control over history and collective memory is one of the major legitimizing instruments of any nation-state (Hobsbawn & Rangers, 1983). On many of these Web sites, history begins with European colonial penetration. In Angola, Portuguese explorer Diego Cao lands at the mouth of the Congo River. In Uganda, the explorations of John Speke, Richard Francis Burton, Henry Morton Stanley and David Livingstone are highlighted. Thus, the markers of the modern era are defined by the presence of outsiders. In Malawi, history “is linked with the life of the Scottish missionary explorer, David Livingstone” (1813–1873). The site gratefully acknowledges his “appeal to other missionaries to come and fight the slave trade in Central and East Africa.” Botswana also is kind to its colonizers:

The industrial revolution in Europe had created a need for new markets and raw materials . . . . Missionaries were to play a major role in the lives of Botswana, acting as mediators in disputes with other white men and bringing a religion to the country which today is central to many Botswana lives.

Similarly, the main historic marker on these sites is the gaining of independence from the imperial powers, and little information is given on what has happened since. After Independence, Kenya “embarked on the road to peace and stability, which has made it possible for the country to realize great strides in development. She has had only two Presidents since independence.” Even as Daniel arap Moi’s dictatorship is virtually ignored, so too is that of Malawi’s Dr. Hastings Kamuzu Banda, whose nearly 30 years of authoritarian rule is described in one bland sentence. Western acknowledgment also is an important historic marker. For Angola, the link “The U.S. Recognizes Angola” makes 1992 a watershed year, with a photograph showing U.S. President Bill Clinton shaking hands with Angolan President José Eduardo dos Santos at the White House.

Uganda has turned its history over to private enterprise by linking the reader from its homepage to visituganda.com, a commercial site. Several other country sites link to the CIA Factbook for current data. This indicates that many African countries lack the resources to tell their own history (e.g., to build museums or maintain archives), which forces them to rely instead even today on colonial and
Western accounts of the past and present (see Cauvin, 2001).

The existing Web architecture produces an even closer link to Western archives (e.g., in hyperlinks to the CIA Factbook or the country reports of investment consultants such as Ernst & Young) and reestablishes the West as the main producer of knowledge. Many cyberculturalists celebrate the potential of the Internet as a means for new, more egalitarian communication and for the production of distinctively different communicative practices and texts. Landow (1997), for example, argues that the potential of hypertexts to blur the boundaries between primary text and annotations, between author and reader, will lead to new ways of writing. This “textual openness” (33), he notes, will promote “non-hierarchical, multicentered, open-ended forms of politics and government” (285). Yet, our study suggests some major limitations to the autonomous potential of cybertexts. The new medium does not seem to offer the authors (here African governmental institutions) new practices of writing beyond the technicalities of the new medium (hyperlinks, inclusion of sound, graphics, etc.). Not only do the signifiers and symbols used on these sites bind the text to its own history, the hypertext links also reinforce the authority of the knowledge production by Western institutions.

Derrida’s (1976) poststructural concept of infinite chains of signifiers locates texts as “always already” there. On these Web sites, the text is constrained in two ways. First, the self-exoticizing strategies are based on colonial imagery of wild Africa, now packaged as an ethnic brand that can be marketed to Western investors. Second, the architecture of the World Wide Web adds another dimension to the resilient net of representations. The text is bound by the established standards of the Internet, whose logic and aesthetics reflect U.S. American values (Flanagan, Farinola & Metzger, 2000). African Webmasters without many resources have to rely on graphics, fonts and arrangements borrowed from other sites that tend to originate in the West (many of them by graphic designers for software companies such as Microsoft). Moreover, the connectedness of the Internet (with hyperlinks to Western archives and other bodies of knowledge) reinforces this dependency and constricts African countries’ contributions to the production of knowledge. This does not support Shield’s (2000) optimistic outlook on the dynamic and democratizing potential of Internet communication through “liminal” (151) hypertext links, which create “web-pages [that] do not distinguish between internal and external, the native and the foreign” (152). These Web pages blur these boundaries, but, as a consequence, undermine African authority over the text. Instead of providing an outlet for vernacular communication (and aesthetics) or an equal voice on the world stage, these Web sites further bind the African texts to Western systems of representation. The logic of the new medium controls the dissemination and presentation of information and the symbolic life of these countries online and renders them “‘virtually’ colonized” (Everard, 2000, 57). This net of resilient Western colonial and contemporary representations aggravated by the Internet’s indexical logic constitutes the relationship between the text and the audience, what Burke calls “identification” (1950). The text compels a subject position that supports the status quo. Identification can be activated only by an acceptance of prob-
lematic colonial representations and mostly Western forms of knowledge production.

One potential escape from these Western signifiers and systems of meaning would be to undermine or transcode them. Martin-Barbero, speaking from a Latin-American perspective, has encouraged developing countries to take “the imported (communication) technology as energy, as a potential to develop on the basis of the requirements of the national culture,” hoping that this will lead to “anti-design” and “parody,” and change “the function of the technology to make it an instrument of a cultural identity” (1991, p. 379). Yet, the sites we analyzed did not offer examples of subversion; rather, they seemed to recreate given power and communication inequalities. The fact that the sites are constructed with a business motive in mind has perhaps restrained the opportunities for subverting moments.

Conclusion: Nation Building, Postmodernity and Global Capitalism

A stream of post-colonial research has investigated how the West (academia or media) has represented Africa (e.g., Mudimbe, 1988; Pieterse, 1982; Tucker & Shah, 1992). Much less work has tried to analyze media texts generated on the continent itself. This study begins to fill this gap by utilizing the Internet as an accessible source of texts produced by Africans. Our study is grounded in the cultural studies notion that the major cultural reaction to globalization is the ongoing search for identity. In this global “identity crisis” (Morley & Robins, 1995, 10) the media, including the Internet, are important arenas of negotiation. These mediated ideological struggles should be of great concern to communication scholars. We used African government Web sites to explore how dominant structures within particular nations assert their role in the global imagined community. While identities in Africa are formed on several levels—global, pan-African, and local—the national level is an important and resilient category. When postmodern scholars theorize the implosion of the nation-state in a globalized area, they fail to notice the defiant efforts of national governments (in the West as much as in the “Third World”) to hold on to the construct of nation (for example by controlling and managing an image).

Our analysis of sub-Saharan government Web sites finds that the online discourse of national identities relies on traditional categories of the Western modernist concept of nation—the nation as a homogenizing force—by naturalizing and marketing a geography, culture and history. On these Web sites, these aspects of national sovereignty are re-affirmed in their colonial and current center-periphery contingencies. This is achieved by demarcating borders in symbols, logos and slogans, with detailed descriptions of ethnic and rural life as “national” culture, and with historic accounts relying on imperial and (hyper-linked) Western sources more than on those from Africa. Post-colonial scholarship has pointed out how Western empires have created their identity as a negating identity against the Other. The West is accepted as superior simply because it is not “the rest.” This implicit hierarchy leaves open the question: how does the “rest” construct an identity? Our sites hint at a distinctively different strategy. The identity is not a negative against the Western Other, but a re-
lected identity. The African identity is constructed with the Western gaze internalized. Its work of representation is achieved through Western construction, which casts certain groups of citizens as the Other. The statement this text communicates is not “This is who we are,” but “This is who we are to you (the West),” or “This is who we want you to believe we are.” The last statement indicates a powerful and active moment in this construction of national identity. Even if we stress the connectedness of these sites to colonial and Western representations, we do not downplay the spark of sovereignty inherent in this image work. Creating and controlling an “image” is an important and powerful competency for these African nations. It gives them, at least to some degree, a chance to actively manage how they are perceived in the West.

By mapping the discursive strategies through which national identities are created on Web sites, we use these texts to indicate an identity in transition at a specific historic moment. Our analysis is part of a larger interdisciplinary project which asks for the study of the cultural, discursive and “janus-faced” ideological construction of nation and nationalism (Bhabha, 1990, 3). Such a project involves investigating

the nation-state in the process of the articulation of the elements: where meanings may be partial because they are in medias res; and history may be half-made because it is in the process of being made; and the image of cultural authority may be ambivalent because it is caught, uncertainly, in the act of “composing” its powerful image. (*emphasis. in orig.;* Bhabha, 1990, p. 3)

Yet, the poststructural theorizing of the text should not overlook the material and historic conditions within which this text is articulated. Definitions and concepts of what constitutes nationalism, nation and nation-state have been shifting over the years (see Hutchingson & Smith, 1994; Pecora, 2001). The nationalism of the independence movements in Africa was fed by the anti-colonial drive against European empires. But the post-colonial independent states found themselves within colonial borders divided by a variety of languages, religions and ethnicities (Birmingham, 1995). This led the governments of the new states to “build a nation,” to fuse an artificial geographical entity to a symbolic and ideological unity—the homogenizing policy of “nation-statism” (Davidson, 1992). Concurrent with the goal of nation building were the goals of modernization and development. At its worst, this led to the suppression of regional and ethnic particularities combined with nepotism and corruption in the name of national unity. The history of coercion, economic failure and violent ethnic confrontations has led post-colonial African scholars to propose political entities beyond the idea of the nation-state based on multi-ethnic communities (e.g., Hameso, 1997).

While a detailed account of the problematic idea of nation building goes beyond the scope of this article, it is important to note when analyzing government Web sites that the history of nation building, including actual and ideological struggles, governs the ongoing transformation of the concept of “nation” for African countries. Almost 40 years ago, Geertz (1963) saw an intrinsic ideological tension in all new independent states in the developing world. These states, he argued, are caught between the two extremes of “primordial bonds” and “civic sentiments.” The primordial ties, on the
one hand, lead people to establish an identity based on ethnicity, language, religion, geography and cultural habits. Civic ties, on the other hand, are fostered by the desire to organize an efficient modern state with higher standards of living, and the aim of “playing a part in the larger arena of world politics [and] exercising influence amongst nations” (107). Geertz was sure these two poles—the pre-modern primordial ties and the modern civic dynamic—could not be reconciled, because “the new states are abnormally susceptible to serious disaffection [from the civil state] based on primordial attachments” (109). He worried that this inevitable tension triggered by a “disaffection based on race, language, or culture threatens partition, irredentism, or merger, a redrawning of the very limits of the state, a new definition of its domain” (111). Considering the latest wave of ethnically stimulated battles, Geertz’s analysis reads like an early accurate prognosis. Yet, extreme cases such as Rwanda’s should not overshadow the fact that many sub-Saharan countries seem to have settled in their borders. Our analysis hints at a discursive resolution of these conflicting extremes that Geertz could not have foreseen. These sites reflect new historical contingencies such as neoliberal World Bank policies, transnational globalization, and post-Cold War ideologies. Most countries seem to have given up on the economic autarchy movements so popular right after independence. They now present themselves in the midst of a global economy as potential production sites and markets for a global economy. The primordial/pre-modern aspects are re-packaged for postmodernity. In a sanitized celebration of multi-ethnicity, tribal connection and beauty of nature and land, the “primordial” becomes the postmodern branded identity. No longer constructed as a signifier of backwardness or hindrance to economic development, multi-ethnicity becomes an interesting backdrop that might provide the nation the special niche and distinguishing “flavor” that can bring a competitive advantage in the global rivalry for investment. Thus, the major goal of nation building remains—to raise the standard of living for a given population. But this nationalism is constructed within global capitalism; primordial identity, then, functions as a commercialized identity to be sold to global interests (e.g., tourists and investors).

It is unclear if the idea to replace nation building with image politics can be successful in attracting foreign investment and perhaps raising the standard of living. Moreover, a homogenized identity under a common goal might reduce ethnic conflict, thus accomplishing the unfulfilled promise of nation building. However, this homogenization also may further threaten subaltern groups within these countries. Instead of integration based on multi-ethnic equality, this mediated public relations image presents a sanitized version of Africa that caters to Western tastes. It neglects the ideal of nation building and its anti-colonial and autarchic motives, and instead reflects re-colonialization and international dependence. The need to present a unified image limits the space for multiple voices or open representation of a transnational identity that embraces multi-ethnic origins. Moreover, African states are positioned against each other in their efforts to build a niche image in the global market. This leaves less room for pan-African solidarity.

Still, the nation-state can provide a
crucial site for establishing a common, if fragile, bond that may help overcome ethnic struggles and ensure economic success. The Web sites we investigated exemplify the discursive aspects of this situation. Creating a national identity has two directions—toward the citizens of a country and toward the “Others.” As we show, these Web sites foremost are instruments of external communication, to use public relations terminology. The image created tends to invoke ethnicity and nature in a nostalgic package that, connected to an ideology of modernization, caters to the neoliberal global market.

While we stress the constructedness and transience of this image, we do not agree with cultural theorists who call these types of manufactured identities “fake,” “false” or “fabricated” (e.g., Harvey, 1987; Morley & Robins, 1995) for two reasons. This argument assumes paradoxically that there is a real, “authentic” identity that can be achieved beyond its contextual dependency. It is the social construction of any identity that has allowed cultural analysis in the first place. In addition, having Western cultural scholars judge the “authenticity” of identity work in sub-Saharan countries recreates the colonial and post-independence academic discourse (e.g., Orientalism) that found a Western elite judging cultural production in the rest of the world. Prominent African scholars have repeatedly objected to the problematic epistemological imposition of Western cultural studies theory on Africa (Tomaselli, 1998). Our study wants to highlight the problems of a branded identity while, at the same time, emphasizing the geopolitical context that shapes this identity work—specifically, the international competition for global capital and investments. Our approach, then, challenges assumptions of both post-colonial and Internet researchers. It is the strength of post-colonial research to show the resilient discursive colonial connections to be found in contemporary cultural texts. Part of our analysis echoes this approach by interpreting discursive strategies such as self-exoticizing and the reliance on colonial historic accounts. But as much as colonial history is just one hyperlink among many other links on these sites, their ideological construction is not only a response to the colonial past. The image work that these countries perform mostly reflects current global economic and political inequalities and is connected to the reliance on public relations identities all over the world. The marketing of national, regional or local identities is the cultural reaction to transnational competition for capital. The incentive to produce a PR image is the same for sub-Saharan countries as it is for their European and North American counterparts, where it has led even individual cities and regions to brand themselves as sites of production and consumption in the global market (Harvey, 1987).

Internet researchers tend to emphasize the revolutionary potential of the Web to undermine the influence of national governments and prioritize the “resistance” of (often Western-educated, affluent) users. Other cyberresearch focuses on the threat of “data-veillance” by political and transnational marketing organizations. Both approaches downplay the nation as an accepted and resilient marker of identity for both individuals and political elites. Moreover, while the Internet as an archive and producer of images may transform some conditions of cultural and media production, our study demonstrates that the aesthetic and
logic of the World Wide Web also reinforces center-periphery imbalances of knowledge production.

One limitation of our analysis of the discursive construction of these nation-states is that it may connect us to the problematic history of this construction—the attempt to present a monolithic unity and alleged coherence with the simultaneous exclusion of the Other, as the “negative identities” of European nation-states have done (Morley & Robins, 1995). In this case, the Other of African nations is often within their own borders (subaltern ethnicities). The ugly face of nation building created unity by scapegoating or disadvantaging tribal communities. Thus, we emphasize that we use the nation-state not as an utopian idea, and acknowledge its conflicted tradition (Hamelink, 1993). Instead, as Morley and Robins (1995) point out, “identity has been, and can be, experienced in ways that are richer than those offered by the nation-state...because they are more difficult, because they involve negotiation with, and more importantly, commitment to what is different” (24). Yet, our analysis also shows that computer-mediated communication in a globalizing economy does not automatically transcend old categories such as nation and the nation-state, as many cybertheorists hope, but may reinforce them and fill them with new, corporate, meaning.

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