

Nov 04, 2016 by *Adam Clayton Powell, III*

Gallup/BBG survey: ‘Massive’ increase in mobile phone, Internet use in Nigeria ^[1]

WASHINGTON – The use of mobile telephones and the Internet have soared in Nigeria in the past few years, with clear implications for BBG and VOA activity in West Africa.

These were the major findings of a survey released here this morning by the Broadcasting Board of Governors and Gallup organization.

73% of Nigerians now reporting owning their own mobile phones, up from 52% three years ago. Cell phone use is more prevalent in cities – 85% of urban dwellers have their own phones. And cell phone use increases with education: among Nigerians with post-secondary schooling, 95% own a cell phone, according to the survey.

20% of Nigerians reported using the Internet – again stronger among the educated and urban dwellers. But that is misleading: Nigerians using their telephones to access the Internet – especially for email, Facebook and other social media sites – do not count that as Internet use. Facebook alone is used by 23% of Nigerians, a number higher than those reporting they use the net. And according to the survey, Facebook is the primary reason most Nigerians want to use the Internet.

“Access to Facebook and other social media sites is a primary driver,” said William Bell, Director of Research for the International Broadcast Bureau. “People get on the web because they want to get on Facebook. What we’ve discovered is that Nigerians don’t think of Facebook as the Internet.”

One major reason African use of the Internet is growing so rapidly is that, unlike in the U.S., the cheapest low-end cell phones can go online.

“You don’t need a smart phone to go on the web,” said Bell. “Facebook can be used with very, very simple phones.”

Low-end cell phones may have difficulty displaying Internet video, but audio is not a problem: Africans’ use of mobile phones to listen to radio was another trend documented by the survey. 39% of all cell phone owners said they listened to the radio on their telephones. The reason: again, unlike telephones in the U.S., African cell phones come hard wired for radio reception.

“Almost all mobiles sold in Africa have FM chips,” explained Bell.

In addition, the major African cell phone companies all provide and enable audio services, even to the least expensive low-end cell phones. And in Africa, Gmail runs on SMS – not the Internet – so anyone can use email without going on line. These larger trends will be a major focus of a report on African digital media scheduled for publication next month by the National

Endowment for Democracy.

BBG commissioned the survey to help plan future activities and investments for U.S. international broadcasting in Africa, and the implications for journalism are clear, starting with news gathering:

“All of the technological issues raised here facilitate citizen journalists,” added Bell.

And consumption of news has changed dramatically in the past three years: 26% of all Nigerians said they get their news from SMS text messages, and 13% reported getting their news from the Internet. And while broadcasting is still named by more Nigerians – 60% said they get news from radio, 53% from TV – many of them are listening to radio news on their telephones. 54% said they get their news from friends, but again the cell phone is critical, because these are largely friends’ email and SMS messages.

That means VOA must be on mobile phones – and in formats that can be easily shared.

If anything, today’s data underestimate the penetration of cell phones, because the only question asked was whether respondents owned their own mobile phones. Earlier Gallup surveys in June and last September asked follow-up questions of those who answered no, asking whether they used cell phones. From the earlier data, millions do, using phones owned by relatives and friends.

When I asked why the follow-up question was omitted this time, Bell said the focus was on people using their own phones because those data are more useful for VOA and other broadcasters. But even using the higher threshold of ownership rather than use, the headline is the rapid growth of digital media and cell phones.

“The big takeaway is the rise of mobile media, mobile phones,” said Bruce Sherman, Director of Strategy and Development for BBG.

But with all of the growth of digital media, who listens to old-fashioned radio receivers? The poor, the old, and people who live in rural areas.

““It is the lowest income group that is listening to the radio,” said Robert Tortora, Gallup’s Chief Methodologist and Regional Research Director for Africa.

And the oldest radio broadcast forms are very much alive.

“Short wave radio is still prevalent across northern Nigeria,” added Sherman.
