

Will the mobile phone be the tool for a wider Internet access in Africa? The latest statistics show a remarkable growth of mobile web users with Facebook being a major incentive to bring people online, however costs for data traffic on mobile phones are still a major obstacle.

The latest figures for mobile phone penetration stand at [47% of users throughout Africa](#) .

Moreover, according to a

[recent press release](#)

, from the mobile browser firm Opera, the mobile web is exploding: "Triple-digit growth rates are routine in the region where page views in the top 12 countries in Africa increased by 182% year-over-year, unique users increased by 124%, and the amount of data transferred increased by 160%."

According to an [O'Reilly research](#) , Facebook is the [top-ranked site in Africa](#) and has the fastest growing members rates in developing countries as follows:

1. South Korea 73%
2. Iraq 52%
3. Angola and Haiti 41 %
4. Democratic Republic of Congo 39%
5. Mongolia and Cambodia 38%
6. Nigeria and Thailand 37%
7. Ecuador and Romania 34%
8. Cameroon and Belarus 33%
9. Ethiopia and Brunei, Yemen 32%
10. Tanzania 31%

Already [100 million Facebook users](#) worldwide access their profiles through mobile phones. Also it seems that without mobile phones, the growth of Facebook would have been much slower. In an interview by Balancingact, Dennis Gikunda, Programme Manager of Google, says: "Using the Internet (in Kenya) is no longer about setting up an e-mail account. You either go to a social network or you use your website. Self-expression has become a form of entertainment where the audience is the medium. [...]" [A recent survey of](#)

[Pasha Centres](#)

(new version telecentres in remote locations) found that 33% of respondents were using Facebook"

One of the challenges for the mobile web in Africa is the high prices for data connections which is why "[70% of mobile data users spend less than 20ksh \(0.2466 U.S. Dollars\) on a monthly basis](#)". It was significant therefore that in May 2010, Facebook announced the [0 initiative](#)

: zero-cost-access to Facebook members, who have mobile subscriptions with 50 selected mobile operators in 45 countries. So, even people with no airtime (mobile phone credit) can

engage on Facebook. In Africa the offer applies to the following countries: Ivory Coast, Guinea-Bissau, Rwanda, Sudan, Uganda, Swaziland, Madagascar, Democratic Republic of Congo and Benin.

[Erik Hersman calls it a paradigm shift](#) : “What they [Facebook] have realized is that the only way to increase penetration in the developing world is to cover the data costs for their users (or, if lucky, snooker a mobile operator into not charging them for it)“. This is not a financial model that other smaller commercial outfits could copy, but it fits very well with Facebook’s strategy to be [visible everywhere](#) .

For the meantime, costs will still be an issue. A quick search for latest prices in different countries and providers show that while the mobile web has become cheaper in recent years, it is still only affordable to a fraction of users:

- With [Zain in Ghana](#) a mobile user pays about 0,20 Ghanaian Cedi (GHS) (0.14 US Dollar) per MB ).
- In [Tanzania you have to pay Zain](#) 15,000 Tanzanian Shilling (10 US Dollar) for a 100 MB ().
- Or [in Nigeria with MTN](#) users have to pay 1500 Nigerian naira (0,10 US Dollar) per MB ().
- [MTN Uganda](#) offers a monthly 100 MB mobile data package for 8,300 Uganda shilling (3,70 \$) ().

Although 1 Megabyte alone allows the exchange of many short text emails, it does not last long when accessing different websites often not customized for low-bandwidth use. But that is a topic for another post.

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