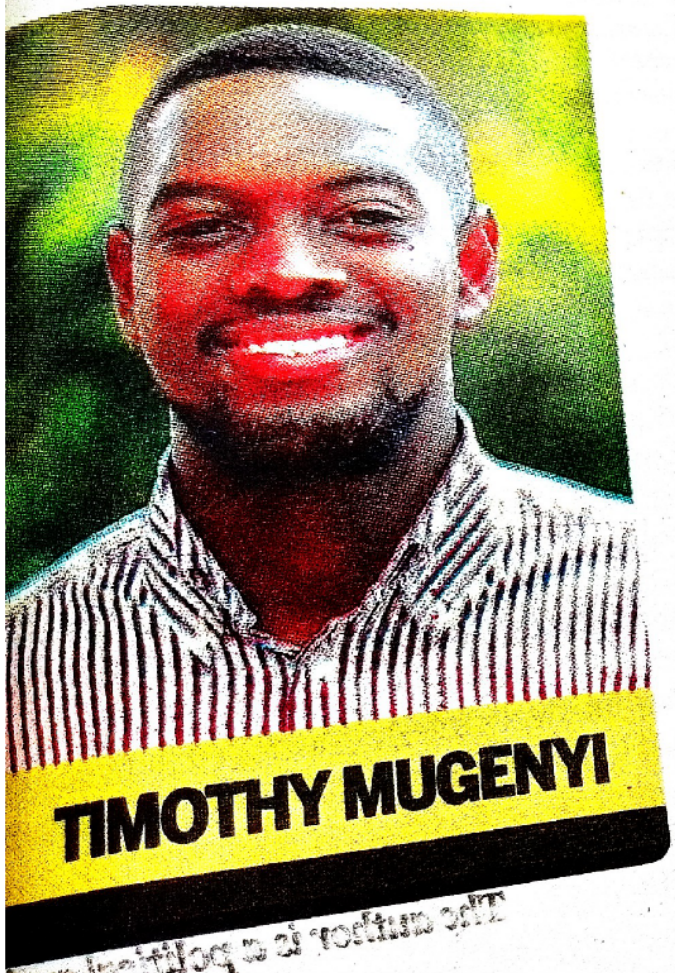
How Internet access is bridging Uganda's digital divide



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I am reminded of an interaction I had within Nakivale refugee camp. We stopped by a stand selling rolex (chapatti laced with eggs and tomatoes) and spoke with some young gentlemen deeply engrossed in a video whilst sharing a smartphone. When we asked if they knew about the internet hotspot recently set up in the area, with enthusiasm, they responded saying it is "Kyakabi!" They appreciated that the hotspot saved them costs of buying data, and that it was easy to use – just the kind of service they were looking for.

I probed deeper and asked what they were using the internet hotspot for. They said: "To learn new ways of making rolex and also to get trends on TikTok!" My colleague immediately ordered a rolex and it was good. This got me thinking, if the internet creates opportunity for a rolex maker on a shared device, what transformative power does it truly have on communities?

I sought to ask what some of the people in these rural areas use the internet for, and the answers were simply aligned with increased productivity and development. A market lady orders beans and groundnuts from farmers, and they send videos to verify the quality. A vacist awaiting results said they do free online courses to certify in areas of study, so that when they join a university, they are better. A butcher picks out a goat for slaughter with video calls. All these are made possible with the internet.

Internet offers an opportunity and a multiplier of progress when coupled with the knowledge and tools in the hands of the user to unlock the right opportunities. Which shows a particular rift that comes to light in digital inclusion and connection in the outskirts of major urban centres, with many being offline in these areas, either due to lack of knowledge, devices or internet costs.

The absence of this access creates a divide that is technological, educational, economic, and social. It affects communication and knowledge sharing – a fabric of modern life.

There is a great need for increased low-cost internet options for some of these rural areas or communities, as well as an increase in digital literacy. There have been a number of strides in the field of connectivity and inclusivity of access. Globally there are initiatives like Giga and the works of the internet society. Locally, there are efforts by different actors, including UCC's USACF and the different players in the space.

The major call is to see that we have internet present in the hands of every citizen in the village or town, so that progress towards development is a collective effort.

During the recent internet shutdown, one thought kept crossing my mind: how we as an economy have gotten so used to utilising the internet and how it has turbocharged our lives alongside

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