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Hungry for New Content, Google Tries to Grow Its Own in Africa

By [NOAM COHEN](#)

MOUNTAIN VIEW, Calif.

“THE farmer and the cowman should be friends” is the hopeful refrain of Oklahomans in the Rodgers and Hammerstein musical “Oklahoma.” After all, their activities rhyme: “one likes to push a plow; one likes to chase a cow.”

Alas, the cultivators and the grazers seem destined for conflict. The largest online grazer of them all, [Google](#), has repeatedly come upon fences as it roams the Internet seeking new material for search results.

There is China’s corner of the Internet, for example. The government there allowed Google to enter but insisted that its computers ignore writing and photographs about the Tiananmen Square crackdown in 1989, say, or the status of Tibet or political dissent in general.

Google agreed to those conditions — that material simply doesn’t show up when someone looks for it at [google.cn](#) — though it says it is now refusing to abide by those rules in light of a hacking attempt emanating from China.

Another barrier Google recently ran up against involves authors and publishers concerned by the company’s effort to digitize books in university libraries. Many of these are so-called orphan works, for which copyright holders could not be found, and so without securing permission, Google unleashed its page scanners. Only recently has it tried to settle with the authors and publishers so it can put the works online.

Then there are the gaps in the Internet, barren because large populations in the Arabic world, Africa and much of India lack the means or education to create Web sites and other online content.

But Google can do something that cowboys can’t: create more real estate. The company is sponsoring a contest to encourage students in Tanzania and Kenya to create articles for the Swahili version of [Wikipedia](#), mainly by translating them from the English Wikipedia. The winners are to be announced Friday, with prizes including a laptop, a wireless modem, cellphones and Google gear.

So far the contest, Google says, has added more than 900 articles from more than 800 contributors.

“Our algorithms are primed and ready to give you the answer you are looking for, but the pipeline of information just isn’t there,” said Gabriel Stricker, Google’s spokesman on search issues. “The challenge for searches in many languages for us no longer is search quality. Our ability to get the right answer is hindered by the lack of quality and lack of quantity of material on the Internet.”

Sitting in a Google cafeteria, Mr. Stricker outlined all the ways information eludes the search engine — wrong language, not digitized, too recent, doesn’t exist but should. Feeding the maw is clearly an obsession of Google’s. After all, the search engine’s comprehensiveness is an edge against a new, well-financed competitor, Bing from [Microsoft](#).

In e-mail interviews, two of the finalists in the Swahili contest said the arrival of Google on their campuses changed them from passive users of Wikipedia to active contributors. Still, they expressed mixed feelings about receiving material rewards for sharing knowledge.

One of the finalists, Jacob Kipkoech, a 21-year-old from the Rift Valley of Kenya who is studying software engineering at Kenyatta University in Nairobi, has created 17 articles so far that were given points. Among the topics were water conservation, [Al Qaeda](#) and afforestation, the process of creating forests.

“Wikipedia has been a good online research base for me,” he wrote, “and this was a way I could make it possible for people who can’t use English to benefit from it as well.”

Another finalist, Daniel Kimani, also 21, is studying for a degree in business information technology at Strathmore University in Kenya. He said that contests were an effective way to attract contributors but that “bribing,” or paying per article, “is not good at all because it will be very unfair to pay some people and others are not paid.”

“I believe in Wikipedia,” he said, “since it is the only free source of information in this world.”

Swahili, because it is a second language for as many as 100 million people in East Africa, is thought to be one of the only ways to reach a mass audience of readers and contributors in the region. The Swahili Wikipedia still has a long way to go, however, with only 16,000 articles and nearly 5,000 users. (Even a relatively obscure language like Albanian has 25,000 articles and more than 17,000 contributors.)

Mr. Kimani and Mr. Kipkoech represent one of the challenges for creating material in African languages. The people best equipped to write in Swahili, or Kiswahili as it is sometimes known, are multilingual university students. And yet Mr. Kimani wrote that he used “the English version more than Kiswahili since most of my school work is in English.”

Translation could be the key to bringing more material to non-English speakers. It is the local knowledge that is vital from these Kenyan contributors, the thinking goes, assuming that Swahili-English translation tools improve.

Mr. Kimani wrote one entry in English and Swahili about drug use in Mombasa, the second-largest city in Kenya. It says that the “youth in this area strongly believe that use of bhang or any other narcotic drug could prevent one from suffering from ghosts attacks.”

Now the article lives in English and Swahili, although the English Wikipedia editors have asked for citations and threatened to remove it.

It is yet another obstacle as Google the cowboy becomes Google the farmer.

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