

Business Snapshot

BY MICHAEL MENEER

African News Service Calls the Hill Home

“Before you can act, you must know.”

Aminata Sall's words are more than inspirational. They represent the reality of her work at Capitol Hill-based AllAfrica.com. The Senegal native spends much of her day digesting news articles from more than two-dozen French-language newspapers in Africa. She's responsible for organizing and updating the French-language version of AllAfrica.com, an Internet clearinghouse of news and information about the African continent.

Sall is one of three full-time staff people who update AllAfrica.com. The staff adds about 1,000 pieces of information daily from 120 news organizations around the world—newspaper articles, press releases from governmental and non-governmental organizations, and statements about Africa by world leaders.

AllAfrica.com also has an archive of more than one million articles, which are sold to individuals and news search engines such as Lexis/Nexis, Factiva, and Bloomberg, according to Assistant Managing Editor Margaret McElligott. She says AllAfrica.com gives back 50 percent of the revenue to the news organizations that authored the content.

Visitors are often surprised by the volume of content produced by the small staff, McElligott says.

Staff members also do original reporting from DC, Johannesburg, South Africa, and Lagos, Nigeria. The website generates about 12 million page views per month, according to McElligott.

She credits AllAfrica.com's software system with allowing the staff to efficiently load new content. The software system retrieves articles about five times per day. Staff at the 920 M St., SE, headquarters skim-read each article, then categorize and post them to the website.

Articles posted on the website are not copy edited by the AllAfrica.com staff, other than to make headlines clearer to readers, according to McElligott. She says this is based on the belief that AllAfrica.com viewers visit the website to read articles as they were originally written.

Plus, the company doesn't have the staff to edit all the articles anyway, McElligott says.

She adds, “We're a small organization and don't have many resources.”

Surviving the Dot-Com Bust

AllAfrica.com's Chief Financial Officer Matambira Mate agrees, adding that AllAfrica.com started doing business at the tail end of the 1990's dot-com boom.

But she says things are getting better. Internet advertising, for example, is becoming more of a profitable endeavor for companies like

AllAfrica.com, and accounts for 40 percent of the company's revenue, Mate says.

Selling news content at a profit, on the other hand, is a new model that is still being tested, Mate says. The Zimbabwe native says the key to future success will be packaging information in a way that generates a premium price. For example, AllAfrica.com may start custom packaging news content for specific client groups, like colleges and universities.

Indeed, only 20 percent of the company's revenue comes from the sale of news and information, according to AllAfrica.com founder Reed Kramer. He credits the company's survival to a mixed-revenue stream of news and information sales, advertising, and technology services.

AllAfrica.com has had great success providing technology services for a fee, which accounts for 40 percent of the company's revenue, Kramer says. The company's chief technology officer developed the software system behind the website, and leads a consulting group connected to AllAfrica.com called Xymbol.

AllAfrica.com is marketing its technology in North America and Africa, Kramer says. In Africa, he says the company is trying to recruit new clients that coordinate national AIDS programs.

And though the company has yet to be profitable, Kramer says that will change by year's end. AllAfrica.com's revenue model has proven a solid approach, according to Kramer. He also credits several “angel investors” for their support, as well as avoiding the heavy spending associated with the dot-com boom.

“We proved ourselves right by surviving the dot-com bust,” but, “it continues to be a struggle,” Kramer says.

But AllAfrica.com isn't solely profit driven.

“We want AllAfrica.com to be a huge financial success, but we also want to contribute to [solving] the social issues that plague Africa,” according to CFO Matambira Mate.

AllAfrica.com's goal is to be the premiere source of information on topics ranging from African investment to AIDS, Mate says. She says the African stock market has some of the highest returns in the world, and that in the future foreign investors will need more information to help them make investment decisions.

Capitol Hill: Portal to Africa

Back at her workstation at AllAfrica.com, Aminata Sall talks about her life on Capitol Hill. Sall says she walks to work, and enjoys stopping in at Murky Coffee on Seventh Street, SE to buy croissants. She's also a fan of Capitol Hill Tandoor and Grill on



A busy day at the AllAfrica.com office.

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Eighth Street, SE, though her recreational time is limited. Sall also works part-time at the CVS on the corner of Seventh Street and Pennsylvania Avenue, SE.

Her family in Senegal is always surprised by how much knowledge she has of African current events, Sall says. She adds that she has learned more about Africa during two years working at *AllAfrica.com* than she learned during the entire time she lived on the continent.

Sall rents a basement apartment on the Hill from another Senegalese named Abedou Mahtar Ba. He is also the president of *AllAfrica.com*.

Ba has been spending most of his time recently in Lagos, Nigeria, where he is setting up a new African headquarters for *AllAfrica.com*.

Ba says the new office is designed to boost operations in Africa. Specifically, it will help make *AllAfrica.com*'s news content more timely. Right now, new content is added between 9 a.m. and 6 p.m. EST. The new Lagos office will allow the website to include more African news as it happens.

The Lagos office will also be a sales and business development hub for the company, Ba says. It will focus on developing new advertisers and content providers in the 23 countries of Central and Western Africa.

Ba says *AllAfrica.com*'s expansion is important for two reasons. First, new content from Western and Central African news organizations will make the Website more comprehensive. And second, the new content providers will be strengthened because of the revenue-sharing benefit of affiliation with *AllAfrica.com*. He calls this democratic development through support of a free press.

The expansion is welcome news to *AllAfrica.com* user Noelle Lusane. She works for U.S. Rep. Donald Payne (D-NJ), the ranking member of the subcommittee on Africa of the House International Affairs Committee.

Lusane says she visits *AllAfrica.com* daily, and compiles stories for the congressman that highlight the news of the day in Africa.

"It's difficult to get news on Africa that's accurate and not skewed...It's important to get news from African voices," Lusane says.

Another user, Malik Chaka, works for a congressman on the other side of the aisle, Rep. Edward Royce, (R-Calif.). Royce is Vice Chairman of the Africa Subcommittee and previously chaired the body.

"Prior to a hearing, I'm going to make a B-line to *AllAfrica.com*," Chaka says.

Like Lusane, Chaka says he briefs his boss regularly on African issues. The volume and variety of information from around the African continent helps him present a balanced view, Chaka says.

Aminata Sall says she is buoyed by the fact that people like Lusane and Chaka use *AllAfrica.com*. She says she feels that her work is helping Africa by educating the U.S. government about important issues facing the African continent.

"It's a duty for all Africans to do something for the continent," Sall says.

Michael Meneer writes about local businesses each month in the Voice. Ideas for future Snapshots should be sent to editor@voiceofthehill.com.

Business Bit

New arrival **Old Siam Thai Cuisine** restaurant offers a new flavor to the burgeoning list of restaurants on Barracks Row. The owners of Old Siam have completely renovated the space that was once Mickey's watering hole.

The small lounge area and bar in the front are cozy. The establishment currently seats 75, but ongoing construction will soon increase capacity. The main dining room is well suited for lunch or an early dinner on sunny days—skylights give the feeling that one is eating in a courtyard. And the place is affordable. Lunch entrees range from \$6.95 to \$8.95. Dinner entrees are \$8.95 to \$12.95. The Old Siam is open for lunch seven days a week from 11:30 a.m. to 4 p.m., and open for dinner at 5 p.m. The Old Siam Thai Cuisine is located at 406 Eighth Street, SE. Telephone: 202-544-7426.

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