

Demystifying Universal Acceptance: What does a multilingual Internet look like?

Part 1: Multiple languages on the Internet



Expected outcomes (Questions/discussion points)

At the end of this session, participants will get a clear understanding of:

- Why it is important to have more languages on the Internet
- Challenges of creating and sharing content in other languages
- Strategies for creating and contributing content in native languages
- Stakeholders involved in the processes

On 24 June 2021, AccessPlus in collaboration with partners, successfully organized the 1st webinar on Universal Acceptance, which had 5 speakers and 37 participants from across the world. The discussants focused on the topic “**Why a multilingual Internet is important**”, from which they shared different perspectives from their viewpoints, including some of the challenges of creating and sharing content in other languages. Below are some key highlights that were picked out from the various panelists.

The session was moderated by **Solana Larsen**, the Editor of the Internet Health Report, Mozilla.

Anasuya Sengupta, Co-Director and Co-Founder, Whose Knowledge?

Ms Sengupta shared that we have an Internet that does not look, sound and feel like most of us. The Internet, in terms of content, is minimally multilingual, yet our identities are tied to languages. Sengupta stated that language is a container of knowledge and if we do not have people for whom the language is critical then the way the content is designed and understood becomes limited. “It’s not just about translation which in most cases is from English to localised languages but design platforms for the people with the people”, Sengupta said.

She further emphasized the need to decentralise content leadership and the need for various experts to join or lead community led projects on Universal Acceptance. “The way I want to see a world in which multiple worlds can live is the same way I want to see an Internet in which multiple internets can live” - *Anasuya Sengupta*.

Joe Hildebrand, Principal, Fractional CTO Associates

Three main things that were particularly difficult when it comes to aspects of decolonising the Internet considering the complex structure of the Internet that involves people (cultures, identities, etc.) and political will to bring people together making the technical complexities more challenging and those include:

1. Free form text - The text running on the browser that feels like a relatively simple problem, however it is relatively solved because some few people have made it happen, however there are no succession plans available for when these few people are not there.
2. Text that goes into each program for instance in Zoom, which is a complex problem and currently no standard in place for content that goes into these programs.
3. How to identify email addresses in different languages the same way on the Internet. If all text compared is in English it is relatively easy however when we use people’s names as identifiers then the issue becomes more complex.

Joe highlighted the need for adequate representation and voices in the development of the Internet. It should not always be about having enough English to be part of the conversation.

Bonface Witaba, Researcher/Language Activist

Mr. Witaba, who has been involved in translating content particularly translating Kiswahili language on the Internet on Facebook, ICANN Wiki, Global Voices and many more, emphasised

a strong need for a multilingual Internet to ensure that inclusion is achieved. Witaba shared that there are over 7,000 languages spoken around the world, with 28% of these spoken in Africa. Kiswahili alone has about 150 million speakers, yet when you look at content online, it is invisible at 0.08%. This means that English continues to be the lingua franca of the Internet, which hampers ways in which indigenous peoples can get online. He added that 17 million people have no reason to get online because the Internet is not in their language. Witaba emphasised the need for a multilingual Internet so that inclusion is considered.

Rebecca Ryakitimbo, Community Engagement Fellow, Mozilla Foundation

Ms. Ryakitimbo who has recently started working with Common voice, a platform by Mozilla where people can donate their voice to contribute to the voice data set which can be used and accessed anywhere, believes that inclusiveness is the ideal kind of Internet. She shared that she lives in a foreign country where French is the main language, making it difficult for her to watch local TV programmes because she does not understand the language. She likened this analogy to Internet access. If one does not understand the language on the Internet then they cannot connect. She emphasized the need for an inclusive Internet, and having diverse languages on the Internet while considering both gender and language.

Remy Muhire, Community Fellow, Mozilla Foundation

Mr. Muhire's work on Kinyarwanda and Luganda languages, includes identifying use cases and drafting strategies around voice collection and text corpus creation on the Common Voice platform. He noted that there are many initiatives on the African continent around FinTech and government services. He shared a personal story about helping his family member to use an Artificial Intelligence (AI) voice-enabled TV, which was in English, yet she only speaks French and Kinyarwanda. He also shared a case study of people sharing their M-PESA access details and passwords with group administrators so that they could be helped with contributions to the local savings scheme. The reason for this was because the platform is in English, which many group members did not understand. From these stories, Muhire highlighted the need to have USSD codes translated into local languages to enable the local communities to fully utilise the online transaction services available to them.

Please watch the [recording](#) for details.

We appreciate the support from our partners: Mozilla, Internet Society Uganda Chapter, Internet Corporation for Assigned Names and Numbers (ICANN), Ministry of ICT and National Guidance (MoICT&NG) in Uganda and the National Information Technology Authority - Uganda (NITA-U),

The next webinar is scheduled for 29 July 2021 at 15:00 UTC. [Registration](#) is open for the series. Persons who registered for the previous webinar do not have to register again. We look forward to engaging with you again!

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