

# Counting your chickens in Africa

By [Robin Parker](#)

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Research conferences by their very nature deal in detail. They are not exuberant by nature as many of us in the corporate world experienced during innumerable motivational days. But the participants in last week's Pan African Media Research Organisation's eighth conference, held in Cape Town, were no less than enthusiastic about their work in the difficult terrain of media research in Africa.

Their true commitment and amusement with the rigours of their job became apparent when they relaxed over lunch.

Africa's not for sissies. I know, I spent several years based in its hinterland and travelled the continent extensively. I will not dwell on the airline delays, arbitrary re-routing, customs corruption and blatant hotel and taxi rip-offs. I prefer to remember the quality of people, their enthusiasm and desire to see business done.

So too the researchers representing many countries who are members of PAMRO and fighting an uphill battle to get media firstly to recognise the value of research and secondly to fund it in the understanding that it is the lifeblood of the sales representatives push for greater advertising volumes.

The lunch table chatter reminded me of my own research experiences in setting up what was Africa's largest user-based portal supported by an innovative ISP spread liberally across south, central, east and west Africa. We worked closely with a team from a Scandinavian country. Considering that ours was a complicated, multi-lingual Pan-African portal, we felt the need to research the communities we would serve.

Armed with video cameras, stills cameras, an amusing range of hired or colleagues' cars, we set about reversing up hills where our aged Citroen would not go in Kenya and bumping across dusty plains heading towards bandit territory.

## Of chickens and education

Supping liberally on chicken at each outpost we visited (an honour reserved for visitors and presaged by the site of a chicken legging it to the nearest hill chased by her executioner - the lives of chickens are not long in Africa) and attending a ritual goat slaughter were all part of the experience.

We soon came to realise that our idealised version of what would constitute a service to these people - some accessing on a 286 computer through a dial-up 9600 modem driven by generator and resting on the ubiquitous upturned Coke crate to the accompaniment of chickens scratching in the dirt at your feet - was a far cry from their day-to-day reality. Research won over the day. What we found was desired by the African populations of the countries we serviced was a deep-seated

desire for education and opportunity driven by the Net, not an entertainment medium.

But I digress. It is the nature of research in Africa that is the more intriguing. It was extremely difficult to convince African males to sit quietly for an hour answering questions (worse so if you were a female making the request). This point was raised by one of the delegates over a rather eclectic lunch as caterers tried to provide for the diverse plates. But now, many years later, it has become significantly easier.

But many other trials and tribulations remain. Nigerians delegates regaled us with stories about cellphone snatching in cars at traffic lights. Nothing spectacular there I thought, try the corner of Bree and Sauer in Jozi of an evening.

## **License to research**

But then down to some of the real nitty gritty. Global Positioning Systems (GPS) are used by many to navigate themselves to remote villages. Here they become crime victims as misinformed criminals believe they have their hands of a working mobile.

Hit a village and haul out the laptop (status symbol of note). By the third house the village thief is waiting to relieve you of the tools of your trade.

In other areas people have never seen a laptop and the entire family (in some case village) will gather around to marvel at the invention. Very difficult to get the research done.

Idle fingers reach over and tap unrelated keys, making a mockery of the final analysis.

Strict communal rules in some areas mean that entertaining a researcher is maybe something which should have been discussed with your neighbours, as they have a right to know in the hierarchical structure that governs some settlements, particular communal environments. They'll all join questioning your legitimacy.

In some countries there are worrying developments. The new media laws under Kibaki's Rainbow Alliance in Kenya are a slap in the face of the new democracy we all expected to emerge from the post-Moi era. These laws also affect researchers. Some countries require researchers to apply for a licence to do their job.

## **Power dynamics**

But possibly the biggest obstacle is electricity. Two batteries for your laptop is a minimum requirement on field work. "You are assuming you have access to power to charge them again" came a quick retort. "Dar-es-Salaam only has power on alternative days at the moment".

Unexpected electricity cuts are a feature across the continent from the Cape to Cairo.

The life of a researcher in Africa is not one blessed by the use of technology and reasonable funding in a well-structured and developed environment like we have in South Africa. But a life of cards, paper forms and interviews under a tree. But the feisty members of Pamro are making headway with significant breakthroughs made each year.

Hopefully the days of research such as that done in Nairobi once by a radio station which polled people in its building about their listening habits and then presented it as well-founded research to rubbish its competitors are rapidly declining on the continent.

- For more information on the conference, visit [www.pamro.org](http://www.pamro.org).

## **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

Robin Parker is MD of Bizcommunity.com and is a unique specimen in this industry, having had journalism as well as sales and marketing experience across various forms of media, including print and online, both here in South Africa and inside Africa. He can be reached at tel +27 (0)21 409 7907.

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