

Metissacana

Metissacana is a private limited company founded in Senegal in the early days of the Internet in Africa by fashion designer Oumou Sy, Michel Mavros and Alexis Sikorsky. Its activities focus exclusively on the Internet, information and communication technologies and electronic art, with the objective of bringing Africa out of her isolation and producing African content and services online.

Metissacana delivers the entire range of Internet services, from Internet access, web site design and hosting, development of specific applications, training and consultancy and hardware sales to full network integration.

Metissacana was launched just two months after the Internet first came to the Senegal, at a time when South Africa was the only African nation with full connectivity. Metissacana is in many ways a pioneer: it opened the first cybercafé in Africa (outside South Africa), it was the first operator in Africa to broadcast live radio programmes on the Internet (Sud Fm, followed by Radio Nostalgie Dakar, 1997) and developed a free email address service which can be consulted and created from the Metissacana home page (1999).

During the 2000 presidential elections, Metissacana conducted the first experiment in African online democracy in conjunction with Sud Fm, (live debates between candidates, internauts and the public, online polls and surveys, publication of election results, etc.) Metissacana jointly produced the very first concert to link up Africa with another continent via satellite by broadcasting from its terrace venue to the Montluçon Festival in France. And in 2000 the first e-commerce venture in Senegal was launched in the form of Oumou Sy's online boutique (2000).

In collaboration with the French radio station Skyrock, Metissacana ushered in the age of the *chat visio-phonique* with artists Wock from Saint-Louis and Dizis la Peste, Franco-Senegalese rappers, in 2001. In collaboration with Radio France International (RFI), it organised the second live chat with a head of state (the first ever was with former US President Bill Clinton) with Me Wade in the same year.

In conjunction with its partner Vis@Vis, Paris, Metissacana launched its latest application, public *visiophonie*, in November 2001. Paris-Dakar is the first link on the planet to be connected by a system enabling users to both see and speak to their interlocutor in a different continent in a public place.

As a partner of the country's flagship events—Célébration 2000, Biennale Dak'Art, "Month of the Photo," Sinec, Fidak, Cices, etc.—Metissacana, whose 800m² premises located in the heart of the capital remain open around the clock, has also become involved in the organisation of landmark events such as the Simod fashion week, the Dakar Carnival and the Internet festival.

Metissacana's undoubted success story has given it flagship status as far as the Internet in Africa is concerned. This was confirmed in 1998 when Oumou Sy was awarded the first prize by the Prince Claus Foundation, not only for her talents as a fashion designer, but also for her outstanding contribution to the development of the continent. In 2000 she was again honoured by the Foundation as an "urban heroine," and encouraged to continue to portray a positive image of Africa.



In 2001, Radio France International (RFI), one of the most widely listened-to radio stations in Africa and a broadcaster with undoubted international prestige, awarded the very first “RFI NetAfrica” prize to Metissacana in the person of its co-founder Oumou Sy, thus symbolising the attention it has received from the international press since its very inception.

However, behind the scenes, the grass is not always as green as it may seem and this is certainly true of Metissacana. The telecommunications sector in general, and new information and communication technologies in particular, constitute a political and economic challenge with implications whose full thrust was initially underestimated.

In setting ourselves the goal of “plugging Africa in,” we took on the dual challenge of generating profits, on the one hand, and promoting the development of our continent, on the other—and initially no one believed in our success, not even African providers. The Internet was in fact virtually imposed on the Senegalese government and the national telecoms operator, Sonatel, then still a public service, by President Abdou Diouf, who just happened to be given the right advice at the time. However this sound advice could not prevent the privatisation of Sonatel and its subsequent sale to France Télécom.

The vision of economic development was abandoned because it had become too modern for the tastes of the governing elites of the African states, always dazzled by the power of the West and so eager for recognition that they sold their countries to foreign monopolies.

Senegal was the pioneer of the Internet and new technologies in Africa and set a good example to its brother nations who followed in her wake. Our country proved to the west that Africa is not only ready for but also capable of innovation in this sector—so much so that Senegal was initially technologically ahead of France. Metissacana is proud of the important contribution it has made to Africa’s progress. But Senegal lost its opportunity and its leading edge by presenting the Senegalese telecoms sector to France Télécom on a plate.

This type of globalisation is no less than diabolical: it serves to perpetrate poverty, misery and the isolation of Africa.

The key to this “destiny” lies in the shelter given to African states by neo-colonialism in the guise of the paternalism of the operators of the North. Even if the states of the West seek to revise their approach to decentralised cooperation and relations with the African states, the Western monopolies march on, unabated.

The responsibility of NGOs and international institutions—AKA financial donors—lies in their misappreciation of the terrain in which they operate, a delayed response capacity or because at the end of the day poverty is a source of business for them. We have therefore observed the concern of European states in the face of a duplicity which could give authority to NEPAD, the New Partnership for Africa's development, whose discourse and intentions may seem effective but could be the guise for a new form of state corruption, in particular with an explosion of semi-public companies. Western monopolies and big financial consortia no longer need ideology or the cover of the Western states to develop their neo-colonial strategy. After buying up Sonatel in Senegal, France Télécom went on to acquire the western African telecoms operators one by one, thus re-establishing the monopoly it can no longer sustain in Europe, and in France in particular, in Western Africa. This is a real godsend for this group which is confronted with severe headaches in the west and can make up for part of its losses by colossal profits, so cynically generated in Africa!

In Senegal alone, France Télécom posted an annual net profit of 55 billion CFA francs, i.e. EUR 85 million, in 2000, on top of its real estate earnings and undeclared "Voice over IP" receipts. Such profits are welcomed by African rulers under the pretext that any success is good news, especially if it may be taken as evidence that it is possible to make a profit in Africa after all.

But in the case of Senegal, these laurels have been won all too easily: the profits are siphoned back to France and are of no benefit at all to the citizens of Senegal at whose expense they were generated. Communication costs remain very high in Senegal, despite minimal tariff reductions which were only conceded under pressure and sold as a "favour" to the world at large.

The majority of the country functions on the basis of a national network of telecentres controlled by Sonatel. 13,500 Senegalese villages have no terrestrial phone lines and the only alternative, the mobile phone, has poor coverage and remains extortionately expensive. In view of this sorry state of affairs, how could the Senegalese government, in the person of the minister with responsibility for Nepad, dare to pat itself on the shoulder for having privatised Sonatel?

The upshot is that Metissacana, a private company dependent solely on its own financial resources, has been denied the necessary legislative and social support to offer an alternative to this situation which is restraining and impeding national development. Blocked by a laxist state manipulated by Sonatel and France Télécom which has taken care to turn off the broadband tap, Senegal, an African ITC pioneer in 1996, was left with a broadband of 2 megabits for its entire national traffic in 2001.

In 2001, without any advance warning and under the pretext of outstanding invoices, Sonatel/France Télécom abruptly cut all Metissacana's telephone and dedicated Internet lines while its management was out of the country. The lines remained dead for ten days. During this time Metissacana lost 60% of its turnover to the Sonatel/France Télécom Internet subsidiary which poached its subscribers in a state of total despair, fuelled by a defamation campaign mounted by Sonatel. Although the interruption of Metissacana's lines was in fact lawful as there were indeed outstanding invoices due, it must nevertheless be condemned as unfair competition and abuse of a monopoly. Metissacana has since engaged in legal action against Sonatel/France Télécom.

With this punitive action, Sonatel passed sentence on a company from which it was owed 38,000,000 CFA francs (i.e. EUR 60 000), accumulated over a period of six years, without taking account of the fact that the same company generates an annual turnover



of 400,000,000 CFA francs (i.e. EUR 1,250,000) without any rebate or discount, on the basis of its subscribers logging on to the Metissacana server alone.

This approach, inexplicable from a commercial angle, is bitterly logical when it is a question of eliminating Metissacana, an operator which by condemning the Sonatel/France Télécom monopoly and fighting for a dynamic alternative, has thereby become a legend of the Internet in Africa.

Against this background and in the face of its now bloodlet adversary, Sonatel/France Télécom finally re-opened the broadband tap in 2001.

In this context, the Senegalese government, led by SOPI (the historic oppo-

nents of the previous regime in the form of the electoral alliance of President Wade under the PDS) finally set up a regulatory board in 2002. However the board has proved to be no more than a white elephant: it lacks both the resources to fulfil its mission and the substance to enforce its anti-monopolistic declarations of intent. The curse of the black continent has assumed the guise of a system of governance which is convenient to those who can exploit it and bank on the centuries of African existence under the yoke.

The curse on Africa is no longer its fateful domination by foreign powers; it is programmed in the conscience of Africans with the complicity of their ruling elites. Metissacana has become a nuisance as it has developed a positive image of Africa, in the person of its illustrious director Oumou Sy.

Some people still wonder whether the denial of justice of which Oumou Sy was the victim in August 2001¹ was not the price to pay for this independence and this passion for liberty and truth. The arrest admittedly gave the Senegalese government an opportunity to present itself to the USA as its "blue-eyed boy", in particular in foreign affairs in its relations with Colonel Gaddafi's Libya ... but was this adequate justification for keeping Oumou Sy in unlawful detention for 33 days? The national and international campaign and the substantial and influential diplomatic intervention which finally led to the release of Oumou Sy seem to make it fairly clear that the whole exercise was a failure. It should perhaps be pointed out that the matter has still not been closed because at the time of writing (May 2002, translator's note), the charge against Oumou Sy has still not been dismissed and she has officially only been released on bail.

So there is obviously something else behind the uproar. And certain well-informed opinions suggest that this "something else" might just be Metissacana ...

It is true that only a few days before the whole affair erupted, Metissacana was engaged in negotiations with the government on the famous rural connectivity licence. It is equally true that it was inferred in the course of these negotiations that in view of the dominant position of Sonatel/France Télécom, it might not be "politi-

cally correct" for the Senegalese government to grant this licence to Metissacana. Metissacana is convinced that economic growth and the transition to industrialisation will only be possible in Africa if accompanied by a form of development which facilitates the generation of profits to the benefit of both the national private operators of the African states, the private operators of the west and of course the local populations.

Metissacana is convinced that the Internet and ICTs offer Africa an opportunity to break out of her isolation and become a shareholder in the process of globalisation in its most positive and most constructive sense.

Metissacana is convinced that the Internet is a mass medium which must be accessible and beneficial to all, regardless of whether or not they are literate.

Metissacana has defended these convictions since its inception and has demonstrated their relevance in the field.

A Number of Examples

1. At the end of 1996, six months after it was opened, Metissacana travelled throughout Senegal with a road show providing public demonstrations of the Internet on a giant screen set up in the open air on village squares whereby Oumou Sy, who can neither read nor write herself but is an African language polyglot, explained the Internet to the villagers in their different languages. This was followed by a question and answer session with Alexis Sikorsky: questions were asked by the villagers, e.g. on the going rate for rice, the price of a tractor, the latest French soccer championship results, etc., and the answers were found by logging on to the relevant Internet site which was displayed on the giant screen.

2. Setting up an online radio station in 1997 was not only a pioneering achievement but also an innovation. Beyond the technical breakthrough this represented — there were less than a dozen online radio stations in operation worldwide at the time, and none at all in Africa or France—it also helped Africa break out of her isolation. The African diaspora and African specialists could finally receive news from the continent in real time.

The illiterate listen to the radio, even if it comes from the Internet; all they need is someone to set up the connection. I have heard that children operate the video recorder in European homes because it is too complicated for the adults. What is the difference?

3. 13,500 Senegalese villages have no telephone line. Metissacana and its partner, Alcatel, has devised a connectivity plan: a nationwide network is to be built up to connect every village by combining the various wire-based and wireless techniques, providing not only broadband access but also data transmission, including voice transmission and Internet telephony. As well as the familiar Internet services, services and applications are to be delivered to meet the specific needs of town and village dwellers.

The community-based lifestyle of the villages and the traditional quarters of the African cities point to the viability of this application. This implies that African Internet users should not only be counted on the basis of those able to use a computer keyboard; all the beneficiaries must be included in the statistics, including indirect users.

4. The "Pesynet" project, jointly developed by Metissacana and "Africa Initiatives" and currently in the test phase in the disadvantaged quarter of St. Louis in Senegal, is an example of a value-added service which can make a national connectivity system viable and beneficial to the illiterate. In the context of this project, medical

auxiliaries visit the families who have registered their babies with the “Pesynet” service three times a week, the babies are weighed and the data entered into the Internet database back at the office. This means that without having to leave the surgery, the responsible paediatrician can consult the site after each shift and check the weight curves of the babies. If a curve shows an abnormal development, the paediatrician can send a notification to the medical auxiliaries by pressing a key. With the help of an ID number, the auxiliaries can identify the baby in question and contact the mother. This service is a form of community-based telemedicine adapted to the specificities of the continent which can make an essential contribution to alleviating the dramatic problem of infant mortality. It constitutes a preventive measure which can help save the lives of many babies.

Just imagine the potential spin-off if this system could be rolled out nationwide ... despite the fact that the majority of the babies and the parents involved can neither read or write and in this case do not even come into contact with a computer.

5. In the villages, it is common practice for the villagers to meet around a fire, or at Koran school, to listen to the radio or watch television.

By connecting a computer to a television screen, village cybercentres can deliver on- or offline literacy or popular education programmes in this familiar atmosphere. Our Internet café experience in Senegal confirms that people who have never used a keyboard can be easily assisted by the cybercentre facilitator in the operations they require: information retrieval or reading and writing emails.

We are therefore convinced that there is real scope for the “cyber town hall” concept and the digitisation of administrative formalities, especially since trying to get hold of a copy of a birth or marital status certificate in Africa is tantamount to competing in an obstacle race.

The energy aspect has also been taken into account in the project as Metissacana is working on economical solar energy solutions to supply village cybercentres.

Needless to say, this rural connectivity project is vehemently opposed by France Télécom and its subsidiary Sonatel which are spreading the message that this solution is hopeless; they argue that no more than 200 villages can be connected per year which would mean that it would take almost a century to provide a telephone line for every village in the country. France Télécom has no scruples about implying that Alcatel is incompetent or a trickster.

And, needless to say, this position is supported by the Senegalese government which has put the project on ice—although the dossier was originally referred to none other than the President himself—as it is regarded as “politically incorrect” for the Senegalese government to sign an agreement of this kind with Metissacana.

An article in *Le Point* shows that Senegal is no exception in this respect. The magazine reports a similar state of affairs in Côte d’Ivoire. This confirms France Télécom’s intention of establishing a hegemony throughout western Africa by buying up each of the traditional operators one by one.

From this perspective, globalisation is indeed a difficult virus to eradicate since it is transmitted with the complicity of African governments. Africa thus remains condemned to poverty and isolation by her leaders.

A similar example from a completely different sector is an airline which we frequently use on our travels, Air France. Its monopoly over the African skies allows the national French carrier to apply a 45-kilo baggage allowance on all its international lines—with the exception of Africa where it is only 20–25 kilos.



The answer to Africa's problems lies in the development of democracy in Africa with the emergence of a new generation of politicians really committed to the development of their continent.

The answer to Africa's problems lies in the creation of a legislative environment conducive to the emergence of private industry in Africa which is really concerned about the development of the continent. On the subject of globalisation and decentralised cooperation, the states of the West should steer their energy and their technical and financial resources in this dual direction.

This is clearly not an easy task as it implies that they would have to reconsider their current relations with the African states, and question the real motivations of the institutions, associations and NGOs which act as relays in the field. It would also mean that they would have to assume the risk of working with the private sector. However, Europe should recall its own history: was it not the dynamics of the private and public sector which brought forth the modern world? It is merely a question of political will and being clear in one's own mind. In an age when aircraft crash into the hearts of Western capitals, is it not time to react?

Translated from the French by Stephen Conn

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- 1 On 30 August, 2001 Oumou Sy and 100 Senegalese models were apprehended at Dakar airport as they attempted to board a charter plane bound for Libya to attend a cultural show as part of the celebrations to mark the 32nd anniversary of the coup which brought Colonel Gaddafi to power. Oumou Sy was arrested under charges of trafficking the young women for the purposes of prostitution.