

**MediaGlobal – New York, USA, June 1, 2010**

Source: <http://www.mediaglobal.org/article/2010-06-03/social-networking-in-africa>

## Social networking in Africa

*By Rachel Pollock*



Solomon Tilewa is the Bishop of West Africa. (Photo credit: Africa Digital Diaries)

The Zanzibar Beach boys are a group of young men who share a passion for football and come together to support their favorite teams in the English Premier League. Because their small island off the African coast lacks basic technology, the group has been forced to come up with innovative ways to obtain information about their favorite teams. Borrowing laptops from tourists and locating Wi-Fi signals became a way to not only access information regarding football, but also a way of increasing English language skills and broaden their knowledge of social networking technology.

The story of the Zanzibar Beach boys is one of many that will be featured in African Digital Diaries, a grassroots project aimed at showcasing hundreds of Africans who will soon be known as “Online Heroes.” These stories will appear on an open and free website using podcasts, blogs, and videos. A team of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) specialists will work with diarists to make the voices of groups like the Zanzibar Beach boys heard around the world.

Founders of African Digital Diaries, Adam Salkeld and Stephen Haggard, have contributed to e-learning in a variety of ways. Salkeld is a documentary film-maker whose work has appeared on BBC, PBS, and Arte. Haggard’s background is in media consultation with a focus on education and technology.

Salkeld told **MediaGlobal**, “We understand that access to ICT in Africa presents many challenges. Our Online Heroes demonstrate ingenuity, adaptability, and above all a passion for learning and sharing as they overcome these barriers. Africa’s Online Heroes may use relatively simple technology, like SMSmessaging on mobile phones for example, but the important thing is that they are connecting to the digital world. These connections open the gateway to learning and sharing that can benefit all.”

On 27 May, the eLearning Africa 2010 Conference was held in Lusaka, Zambia. The aim was to launch African Digital Diaries and to introduce some of the Online Heroes. The conference provided a forum for delegates and representatives of leading public and private education and technology organizations to share ideas about the future of social networking and ICT in Africa.

In attendance at the conference was President Rupia Banda, the Zambian Minister of Education and Bishop Tilewa Johnson from Gambia, also known as the “Facebook Bishop.” The Facebook Bishop became widely known for his use of Facebook and Twitter to keep in touch with his followers and to bring together people of different faiths. He believes that these social networking sites can provide a safe environment for Christians and Muslims to engage in meaningful and rewarding dialogue with each other.

His speech at the conference called for a new approach to social networking in Africa, embracing the advantages but cautioning against the dangers: “We must hold fast to the good aspects of our culture, and not take on aspects of other cultures that can be harmful. When working on platforms such as Facebook and Twitter, you are inevitably part of that culture of self-promotion, irreverence, and transient value, which these systems are built to foster. Those are not our values. As Africans, we teach the values of respect, tact, and diplomacy. These ways are too strongly rooted, and too precious for us to allow a technology to trample over them. We will in time, I hope, develop our own African “netiquette” as we invest more time and trust in online work and life.”

Social networking in Africa has the potential to make positive contributions to African communities in a number of ways. The Online Heroes featured in African Digital Diaries have formed clubs, educated rural farmers about new advances in agriculture, and built religious platforms using Facebook. While it is important for Africans to acknowledge the possible downfalls of abusing these mediums, social networking can be a very useful tool in education and cross-cultural communication.