

Africa's time to shine

By [Jared Mlko](#)

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It's Africa Month, which is a great time to reflect on where we are as a connected society and what role we as African digital citizens have to play in the near future.



Jared Mlko. Image by Gregor Rohrig

There's a principal in the business world called 'second mover advantage', which contradicts conventional wisdom, stating that later entrants to a market have an advantage by learning from the failings of the pioneers before them.

Whilst pioneers prove to be perfect primers, it's the next group of ripe minds that have the potential to truly evolve the idea and to make a success out of it. Look no further than this; Google was the eleventh search engine, Facebook followed after Friendster and MySpace, and I'd bet to watch out for Walmart taking on Amazon.

“ Africa is perfectly positioned to capitalise on this second mover advantage. And this, I believe is applicable to both the individual as well as business. ”

On an individual level, African users have an opportunity to enter into public discourse with empathy, appreciation and willingness to seek out opinion that challenges their own. Healthy debate is being held captive by the digital mob and extreme minorities, and African society by large could shine a brighter light on how to conduct oneself online.

Why so much aggression and one-sidedness online?

Well, a lot of this can be attributed to the design of social media algorithms which value 'engagement' above all else which, as a result, favours what I call the 'four horsemen of trending topics':

1. Controversy
2. Sensationalism
3. Outrage
4. Victimisation

This, according to ex-Facebook executive Chamath Palihapitiya, has "ripped a hole in the fabric of society". A chilling

statement. If all the information that gets surfaced is insidious, well no surprises we've grown to anger.

'Unintended consequences'

All too often major tech platforms cite 'unintended consequences' in defence of this polarisation and divisiveness we find ourselves in today. What is meant by 'unintended consequence', is that there are certain unforeseeable, or even unavoidable consequences that occur as a result of meaningful change.

These consequences are not always desirable and there is very little that can be done in prevention of these. I don't agree with this fatalistic position, especially if we are to apply a design-thinking mindset, of which its core tenet, "design is a behaviour", implies design can determine behaviour and even predict the outcome.



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Just look at the demise of Mxit and the unintended consequence of servicing a loyal 'Nokia' user base meant it missed the wave of the smartphone revolution.

How to avoid those mistakes

To avoid these kinds of mistakes, African entrepreneurs should start by studying already established companies to analyse their operational, executional and product shortcomings, and improve upon them.

“ Innovation is both iterative as well as disruptive, and the reality is that disruptive innovation is mostly the exception. Startups nowadays have access to so many affordable resources, guides and online tools, that really anything can be built with very little technical know-how. ”

The questions that need to be asked from the offset are “should we be building this?” rather than “can we build this?”, and what unintended consequence can we anticipate, given our design?

We are certainly at an ethical crossroads as we enter the age of the fourth industrial revolution, where technology is becoming its own autonomous force. As African digital citizens we get to leapfrog into these exciting times with less 'digital baggage' our predecessors carry.

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New perspective and fresh voices are crucial for further development and this is what Africa can gift to the rest of the world.

So as more of Africa comes online, there is an opportunity to usher in a new wave of digital dialogue, as well as commerce, designed to connect society rather than rip it apart.

How poetic it would be for Africa, the cradle of civilisation, the so-called 'dark continent', to lead us into a brighter future.
#Wakandaforever!

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Jared Molko is a digital marketer by trade, a psychologist by passion and delving into the intersection of both fields to bring about deeper more meaningful experiences online.

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