

The new data normal for Africa

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4G coverage has steadily been replacing 3G coverage in Africa in 2016 and in 2017 it looks likely to be the year higher speeds and better coverage will drive new data uses. Globally 4G provides six times the average speed of 3G.



Image by 123RF

In November 2016 OpenSignal published its report on levels of coverage and average speeds of 4G globally. This is based on 500,687 users and 17,065,628,107 sampling points. The global average for 4G download speeds is 17.4 mbps and the fastest is Singapore at 45.86 Mbps. LTE-Advanced networks deliver the top of the range speeds in the reported countries.

The report only takes three African countries - South Africa, Tunisia and Morocco - all whom are in the vanguard of 4G roll-out. Tunisia exceeds the global speed average at 21.69 mbps, Morocco achieves 18.09 Mbps and South Africa 15.43 Mbps. On this basis, 4G in other African countries is most likely to be between 5-10 Mbps, the range at the bottom of Open Signal's sampled countries.

OpenSignal data for coverage works on the basis of the percentage of times a user had access to a 4G network. So if 50% of the population has coverage, the availability of 4G data will be around 50% who have access. South Korea has the highest with 95.71% of the sample able to access 4G. South Africa has a 63.12% access to 4G, with Morocco on 59.82% and Tunisia on 53.72%.

The report provides global speed comparisons of 3G(3.3 Mbps) 4G (17.4 Mbps) and Wi-Fi (10.8 Mbps). It does not break out these comparisons at a country level. However, most data users in Africa know that Wi-Fi and 4G deliver much faster speeds than 3G, even if the differential is much less pronounced.

What the OpenSignal report does not measure - and which is key to many of the new and emerging data uses in Africa - is consistency. It's no good trying to stream a film on 4G (or indeed any connection) if the connection breaks in the middle and leaves it hanging just as the suspense is building.

African regulators have long tracked Quality of Service for mobile voice and a significant number have fined providers who have fallen below the standards they have set. But so far no regulator has tracked the quality of data connections in Africa. Arguably this is more important in Africa because the majority of people access the internet on a mobile phone.

Recently the Rwandan Government announced that it would achieve 92% population coverage by 2017. This is a little down from the 95% Olleh Rwanda Networks promised when we covered them in October 2015 but there or thereabouts.

Two things mark out Rwanda as unusual against other African countries. Olleh Rwanda Networks is a single wholesale provider. Whatever else may be wrong with it, speed of attaining almost full coverage is not one of them. Secondly, Rwanda is a geographically compact country with a high population.

Nevertheless, 4G coverage will soon match 3G coverage in a significant number of African countries. Increased speeds have to be matched by consumer friendly prices. Some countries have chosen to sell 4G as a separate premium product at a higher price to 4G. Others like Safaricom in Kenya have kept the same price for both 3G and 4G.

The biggest fear among most Africa data consumers I talk to about 4G is that their bundle will simply run out more quickly. The #datamustfall campaign in South Africa pointed out that data rates in South Africa were still higher than for Nigeria, an undoubtedly higher cost country. Current data prices are still too high but when they get to the right point, 4G speeds and wider 4G coverage will deliver a whole new set of data uses.

Source: Balancing Act publishes a wide range of video and other resources, which can be found on the [original of this article](#) on their website.

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