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Mar 23, 2016 · 5 min read

iHub Research: The Big Picture

This post is part of the iQuarterly publication by iHub Research, a series of reflections from the team on our work, and on technology and society. It originally appeared on the iHub blog.

Over the past five years, the iHub has supported the local technology entrepreneurship ecosystem by providing a sandbox and access to resources for new ideas to develop into viable businesses. Several of these ventures have gone on to thrive and scale, both to create new jobs as well as to acquire new market segments and generate revenues.

iHub Research, founded at the first anniversary of the iHub, was based on the unique positioning of the organisation, to not only to serve the community via a physical space, but also *be a hub of knowledge entrenched in the tech community that fuels innovation and an understanding of opportunities*. **iHub Research is focused on giving an international platform to local technology research and scholarship and on surfacing the most relevant information to influence decision making by our stakeholders**—our startup community, tech industry, academia, government and international bodies.

We commonly do tours at the iHub, and for those of you who have visited us, you must have heard the following statement as part of our one-minute elevator pitch: *iHub Research studies the intersection of technologies and governance as well as technology innovation and entrepreneurship*. This article reflects on why we focus on these two thematic approaches to technology research and what we believe the future holds for iHub Research.

Over the four years of our existence, we have successfully *completed over 50 consultancy and grant-funded projects*, spanning from studies of the use of mobiles by those earning less than USD 2.50 a day, to understanding how education technologies improve learning outcomes in local schools. More often than not, our clients approach us with

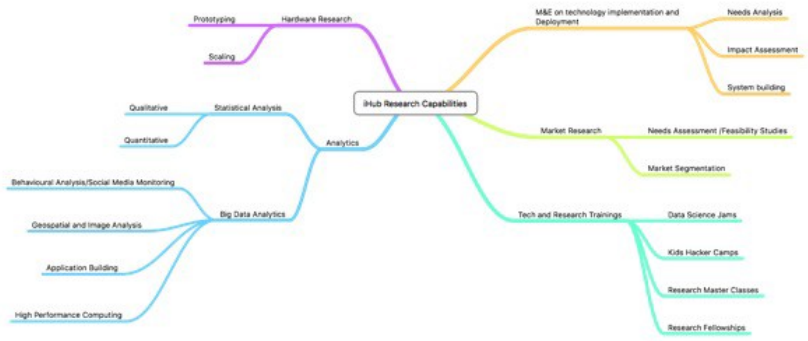
specific objectives or required outcomes from a desired research study, and we work closely with each of them to design studies that realize these objectives or affirm/reject a stipulated hypothesis, on the influence of technology use to aspects of their work or projects. (*Are you a startup interested in research services? Here's how you can help us help you*).

Two things have since become clear to us as we work on more projects and take on new clients. We tend to gravitate towards projects that investigate the potential or impact of innovative uses of technology in solving a societal need; as well as projects in subject areas that are of extreme personal interest to each researcher on the team.

As engaged citizens, we want to impact our country in ways we know best, using technology. That is why governance features strongly, particularly in grant-based projects. We classify governance projects as those leveraging ICTs towards improving access to information, increasing accountability, transparency and active engagement between public institutions and populations, as well as delivering services in different sector areas. These are typically projects initiated by a lead researcher's area of interest and we realize that these passion projects may not be commissioned by a specific client (thus mostly grant-funded) but we pursue them because of the strong belief that *technology is an enabler, and can be a key driver for improving how we are governed*. We, however, do not blindly proposition for the use of technology in each instance, and have boldly pointed this out in the past, in our recommendations; there are instances where technology has not been successful in achieving the intended outcomes. (*Read more on the Governance and Technology research thematic area here*).

The focus on tech use for efficient service delivery in social sectors ties neatly with our second pillar of research—technology innovation and entrepreneurship. When we look at all the wildly successful tech companies in our ecosystem, they are using innovative technologies to improve how different services are delivered—in health, access to finance/inclusion, education, access to information and other sectors. Technology entrepreneurship has fueled the spirit of our ecosystem. It is only fair then, in fulfilling our vision of catalyzing the growth of this ecosystem, that we surface relevant information that can push our entrepreneurs' businesses to grow and scale.

We recognize that there is still more research to be done in this area, including the documentation of failed approaches, and how entrepreneurs are learning from that. We are however, ramping up efforts and resources to build one of the largest tech entrepreneurship databases, useful not only for local entrepreneurs as they venture out, but also to prospective investors as a baseline for understanding the local technology ecosystem. We have collected a lot of data in the past about our entrepreneurship community and we want this to work for you. We have studied IP issues that technology start-ups face, created an African Technology Innovation Index, options for securing financing for startups in Kenya and other critical elements in an entrepreneur's journey. However, we are discontent by figures coming out of our research, that over *70% of young business only make revenues of less than USD 3000 per month*. This is not enough to sustain a team or to scale in the market and we would like to be at the forefront of designing interventions that help our technology ecosystem thrive through our research.



iHub Research Capabilities

For instance, through our Builders-in-Residence (BIR) program, we are providing early stage mentorship for hardware innovators and also a segue into more formalized incubation at initiatives such as Gearbox. Additionally, we offer our clients a specialized package—market and user experience research. We do not just want to poll who your potential users will be but by working closely with our UX lab, we can provide you with recommendations on how you can design or package your tool to effectively meet their needs, and ultimately achieve your goal as an innovator or industry player. We are also building cutting edge data research and analytics technologies, solving those difficult problems and giving new insight into your own products or data that

you are collecting. (*Read more on what it means to be a maker, and the dilemmas faced by innovators in emerging fields of interest like hardware*).

Running iHub Research as a lab allows us to experiment towards knowledge creation, foster a culture of curiosity and be innovative in the way we do our research. Looking to the future, we hope to strengthen our footprint, continue to provide authoritative research outputs in the region and raise the bar of innovative tech outputs coming from the ecosystem. We have tested the model and are now looking to scale further. This includes looking keenly at how we innovate on our market research methodologies, backed by our UX expertise; we want to also build thought leadership and ground breaking work in Internet Governance, Data Science (*here's what we've been doing so far*), Cyber Security, Internet and Human Rights, EdTech (*read highlights on previous EdTech work here*), Com'preneurship (competition entrepreneurship), investment research and supporting our ecosystem partners with R&D.

Stay updated on our work by following us on Twitter: @iHubResearch, and signing up for the iWeekly Newsletter.