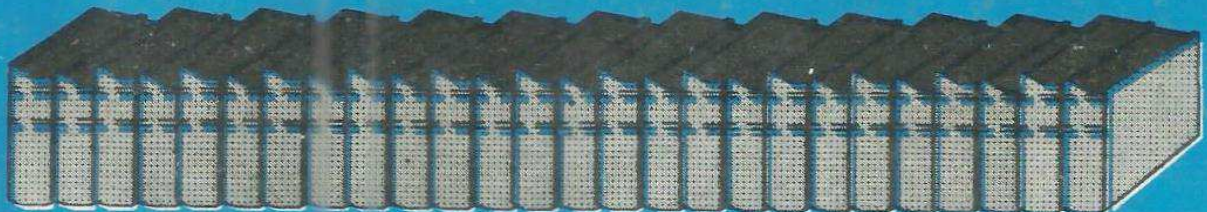
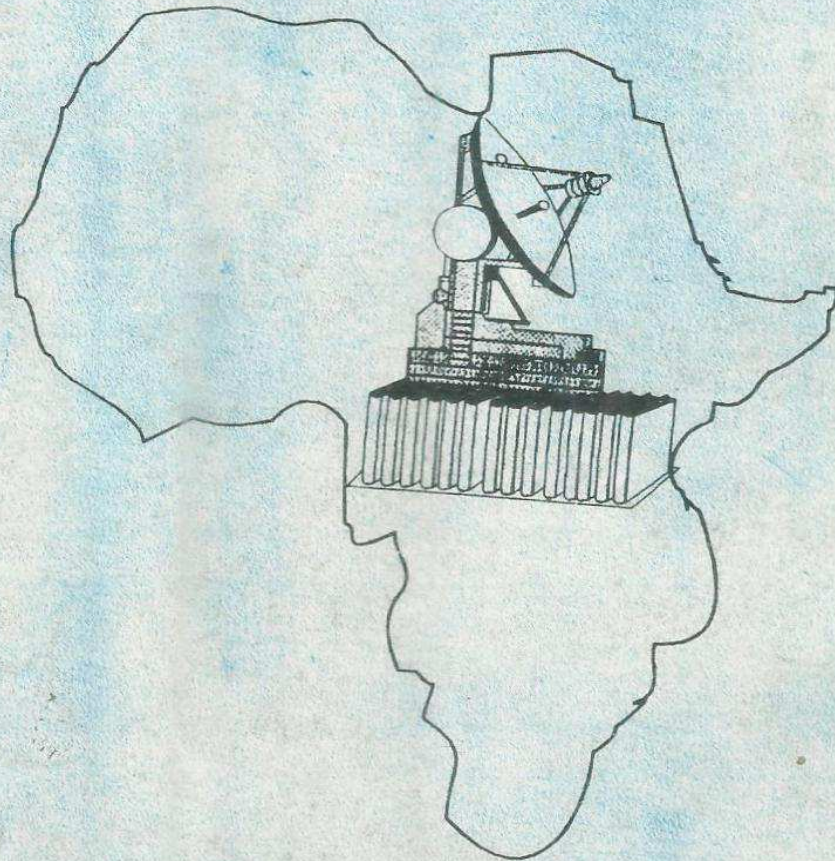


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BRIDGING COMMUNICATION GAPS IN NIGERIA THROUGH INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY

BY

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INTRODUCTION

Two main concepts are thrown up in this title namely, 'communication gap' and 'information technology'. Ordinarily both concepts do not have hidden implications but the trouble lies with the function which the one is expected to perform using the other as vehicle. However, both concepts are sometimes misunderstood because of the assumptions that are often times misapplied when both become the subject of public discourse. It is therefore pertinent for me to give, at this juncture, more than a conjectural viewpoint of the two mutually self-defining concepts.

First, the term communication gap is used to describe a situation in which a failure of understanding which arises from a lack of information exists, especially between different age groups, economic classes, political factions, cultural groups as well as institutional or organisational set-ups. It is sometimes used as a synonym for information gap, (and in fact can be interchangeably used) to express the same notion. But the latter concept deals principally with issues of inequalities arising from information distribution. Furthermore, as Watson and Hill (1993: 92) have noted:

Such inequalities are mostly the result of educational or social class differences with the advantage being enjoyed by the better educated and those in higher-status groups.

Thus communication gap can be seen as the product of a communication dysfunction which creates a lacuna between regular communications as well as between potential communicants either as individuals or groups. Clearly it is an unacceptable condition which limits interpersonal and other communication relationships in society.

Communication gaps can exist in homes i.e. within families and between family members; in institutions, work places; in the community between the citizens, and between states and nations among others.

Among the various contexts of communication or information gap, the one found within homes or families appears to be the least relevant when the issue of information technology is discussed. In homes, the available technology is in fact usually intended for use between families, or within families (intra-familial communication). It is plain commonsense that you do not need information technology to talk to your wife or children in the home. Even where you use information technology in the home there is the risk that over dependence on it or overuse of this technology can create communication gap. This point is underscored by the fact that communication in the home is ~~not~~ for human beings in direct transactional relationship. For example, a call bell is irritating even to a steward as it reduces the loss of energy in shouting names. A particular family head is known to have devised a call formula for each of his five children like the captain in the classic musical Sound of Music who used a whistle formula for the same purpose. This approach rather than narrow the emotional gap among such families tends to widen it and creates a sense of communication anomie, a critical state of emotional perplexity arising from the contradictions and confusion in the communication environment. In this paper technology is seen as a facilitator not a hindrance. Therefore, only feasible options will engage our attention.

The second concept, 'information technology' refers to the wide array of technological devices which are employed to facilitate human communication. A graphic description of information technology (IT) is given by Watson and Hill (1993: 92) as 'Microelectronics plus computing plus telecommunication'. Another definition views IT as:

The acquisition, processing, storage and dissemination of vocal, pictorial, textual and numerical information by a microelectronics-based combination of computing and telecommunications. (The UK Department of Industry, 1981).

This UK Government view states that in the UK alone as many as 65% of the working population earned their living from 'information occupations', which are listed to include banking, education, defence, police, manufacturing,

transport and space exploration. These technologies include radio (wireless telegraph), telex, E-mail, facsimile transmission, telephone, computer (communications), HDTV, teletext, videodisc, videotext, closed circuit television, television, data links, digital television, and a new hybrid technology called telefirst.

Writing about such new technology in television Joel Brinkley (1997) highlights the importance of HDTV (High Definition Television) which replaces the box-like old set with a wide-screen format and doubles the number of lines and thus produces a better picture. This digital system provides an opportunity for internet-like interactivity and has the potential of consummating television's marriage with the home computer. High Definition Television (HDTV) has been in use in Japan and recently in the United States. It is primed to enhance picture quality and high fidelity sound production which should eliminate 'snow' on our screen, a noise element which distorts visual communication and has a potential for creating a communication gap between communicants.

The possibilities of IT, as Watson and Hill (1993: 92) have noted, are seemingly endless once the potential buyer has the money to pay for the hardware, the software and the service. In stock are laser beams carrying 30 channels of speech in digital form, cordless telephones (mobile phones), scanning devices which read the printed word out to the blind; telephones for the deaf, voice recognition typewriters which read your typing back to you and programmes which translate one language into another, and the internet-the fairy tale route into the world's information superhighway".

However, the two concepts further link us to another term which can be seen as a product of the 'bridging' of communication gap. This is the concept of 'information society' applied to the present stage of development in the industrial societies whereby information has become 'the central and most significant commodity'. Information and wealth are seen as one and the same thing. It is a commodity as well as a social and cultural resource which has raised questions of social allocation and control, along with such associative problems as privacy, access, commercial privilege and public interest.

It is a commodity because today, many speak of the commodification (commoditization) of communication in our increasingly commercialized society. Living in an information society makes our building blocks the ideological state apparatuses which feed on the knowledge industry. And

within our information society where the knowledge industry operates, categories of media and functions are identified by Cassata and Asante (1979: 43) as comprising the following; Mediators, Transmitters, Data providers, Data gatherers, Maintainers, Supporters and Educators.

These functions are all predicated on the information technology (IT) in use in various countries and reflect the level of development of each of those countries. Thus in the information society, computers, and related electronic systems are employed to link all sections of human society at the international, national and local government levels and subsequently bringing about a network of relationships in politics, economy and the socio-cultural environment. All these are new possibilities informatics creates for the individual. They constitute a new source of power which goes beyond national boundaries.

In our information society, communication surrounds man's life just as water surrounds fish. And as Wilson (1997: IX) has noted, communication 'gingers man into the great joy of living'. It is this critical function that should in fact promote the bridging of the gap in human society. But the reality is that man seems to relish this ambiguous adventure in life creating conflicts and seeking ways to manage them.

Under Nigeria's present stage of development the primitive socio-political and economic culture foisted on the people by the military has made the realization of an information society an illusion given the progenesis that the Nigerian Military is anti-intellectual and feudalistic. An informed society is a product of an information society.

2. COMMUNICATION TECHNOLOGY AND THE THIRD WORLD

This supposed village consciousness is largely a product of the emerging communication technology which is currently pervasive in the developed world but is gradually making incursions into the Third World of which Nigeria is a part.

Under Nigeria's present developmental goals this gradual embrace or acquisition of technology is often addressed through a policy vision sometimes in exactly referred to as 'technology transfer', a misnomer for the acquisition of technological know-how, from the more developed economies.

Unfortunately, Nigeria is unable to realise its potentials technologically in spite of the economic-ideological challenges which its perennial political instability and bad governance pose. For instance, economic and political sanctions which have been imposed by the European Union (EU), Canada and the United States rather than encourage internal positive creative efforts have tended to stultify growth because of the absence of a political motivator and inspirer. Thus in the face of the worldwide mediamorphosis which has brought about dramatic changes in the world of communication, Nigeria still remains a poor recipient of change with a strong and rather curious acquisitive instinct and fascination for technological hardware.

Technological innovations are currently controlled by a small number of countries and by a few transnational firms. Their acquisition still continues to be at a prohibitive cost to Third World countries.

In spite of being aids to effective communication and acting as communication bridges, the new technologies can be both master and servant depending on how they are used. For example, in the globalization of our communication efforts there is the fear that the resultant effect could lead to 'ever powerful, homogeneous and centralized networks' which in turn would accentuate the centralization of the public or institutional sources of information, of strengthening inequalities and imbalances and of increasing the sense of irresponsibility and powerlessness both in individuals and communities'. (UNESCO, 1981: 32).

However, when Marshall McLuhan spoke of the 'global village', he was indeed speaking of a world whose diversities, imbalances, fears and differences have all been brought under a common focus thus leading to the elimination of these distortions symbolically through our shared concern and determination to put an end to them. The 'global village' is a sort of borderless world in which communication media would transcend the boundaries of nations. This village consciousness gives a sense of human beings all connected and wired together.

3. BRIDGING THE COMMUNICATION GAP

Bridging the nation's communication gap has been what the numerous talk shops organized by the UN and other agencies have been all about. But the rhetoric of the global village has remained distorted through what Colleen

Roach (1996: 27) refers to as a 'sort of gobbledygook globalization rhetoric' which is manipulated by transnational communication agencies as sometimes represented in CNN and other world networks.

But the availability of information technology does not guarantee the elimination of communication gaps since human beings have to initiate its use in all cases. But there is no doubt that the availability of information technology is crucial to the bridging of communication gaps in respect of certain social contexts.

In a real village, as Schiller and others have noted, people speak to each other. But in the world of the new information technologies, there is the looming fear and reality of the Western World (mostly the United States) trying to entrap the rest of the world through media imperialism and cultural synchronization.

Bridging the gap is nothing but an expression of hope hinged on the usually misplaced notion that more technology and more information would necessarily create a greater understanding. And this is further hinged on another notion which assumes that all of the world's problems are communication problems. Of course, we all know they are not. And all of the world's problems cannot be solved by more and better communication. In fact, the present situation is that of information glut rather than that of the absence or insufficiency of communication. You can only bridge a gap if there is an existing understanding of the need to do so and if the exercise is going to be of use to both parties i.e. be mutually beneficial to them. A false consciousness is sometimes created which equates the act or intent of communication with success or effectiveness.

Thus the question is: Is there a communication gap between and within nations or between and within organizations? If so, is technology the answer? What about attitudes, cultural diversities and uses to which the technology can be put and the needs it can gratify? Why do these gaps exist? If we understand why, then we may be close to bridging them. For example, the mass media, as some researchers have shown, create, widen or narrow communication gaps. It was thought at some point that the increasing flow of information from the mass media might help to decrease gaps. What is true and real is the fact that the media have the potential to close gaps. But sometimes as old gaps are closed new ones are opened.

In other non-mass media situations such as the University, where the media are not the main channels for interpersonal or inter-departmental communication, the role of information technology can be more felt in teaching and research. The already collapsed structures of our University system provide a testimony to what the absence of information technology can cause. There is a widening gap between Nigerian Universities and their counterparts in some parts of the developing world and most especially the developed world.

At present, at the University of Uyo Library, efforts are being made to access information through the internet. Plans are afoot to have our own website as very few current journals are available. No wonder some researchers present research papers whose references remind one of the beginnings of science in antiquity. The students in the sciences are still titrating manually when they have chemicals to perform experiments. Their counterparts elsewhere obtain more accurate and reliable results through computerised systems.

But again one is tempted to ask: what country are we speaking of? Is it Nigeria where electricity supply is always more readily available as water in the Kalahari desert? How can you operate an information system under a primitive system such as Nigeria's? (If only the nation could have a leadership that understands what education is all about then the people could talk about beginning from the beginning). Regrettably, the notion of bridging communication gap through information technology remains a pipe dream. You cannot bridge the gap when a Minister of Education equates playing football with teaching in the university.

Even the simple telephone service does not work in most Nigerian universities, lecturers who wish to talk to their colleagues in other departments have to abandon whatever they are doing to trek the long distance to deliver their message with minimal distortion. I think you can bridge the gap if (and a big IF) all the enabling conditions for success exist. But we must bear in mind the fact that media availability is not the same thing as bridging the gap.

4. IMPERATIVES TO BRIDGING COMMUNICATION GAP

In order that the existing communication gaps within the country may be bridged, the following minimum social economic, political and technological imperatives must be put in place:

4.1 SOCIAL IMPERATIVES

For an urgent social transformation to take place and for communication gaps to be bridged the following must exist:

- (a) An open social system where the values of education, social norms and values and civic and social responsibilities are upheld as well as the respect for human dignity.
- (b) The promotion of the physical and psychological well-being as well as general welfare of the people as a community.
- (c) Promoting conditions which foster the spirit of self-discipline, respect for civil society and democratic governance.
- (d) Dissemination of news, current affairs and advertising messages in order to encourage national understanding and international peace. This should be done through the application of the fairness doctrine.
- (e) Promotion of education in all its ramifications in order to provide a replaceable resource base for the perpetuation and acquisition of knowledge and technical skills.

4.2 ECONOMIC IMPERATIVES

For this reason the following economic conditions are desirable for closing the gaps:

- (a) Fostering free enterprises and a strong economic base for the country.
- (b) Promoting of indigenous enterprise and economic and industrial base.

- (c) Creation of an enabling environment for the production and consumption of local products for the knowledge industry.

As Roya A khavan-Majid (1992: 21) has noted, the economic challenges posed by the new technologies has assumed different implication in different countries and that the potential for commercial exploitation of new broadcasting technologies has created pressures for liberalization and privatization which in turn has also opened up vistas favourable to market competition.

4.3 POLITICAL IMPERATIVES

The following political conditions are necessary for effective communication.

- (a) An acceptable standard of leadership mobilization, succession and legitimation as applicable to democratic societies.
- (b) Respect for human rights and international obligations as culturally and politically feasible.
- (c) Total elimination of military rule and its abuse of the national constitution.
- (d) A restructuring of the political divisions of the Nigerian state.

4.4 TECHNOLOGICAL IMPERATIVES

Communication is about technology. Therefore, in order to bridge the communication gap the following technological imperatives must be realised.

- (a) Small is beautiful. Small but cheap new technology must be acquired to endure effective communication among the people.
- (b) Adequate maintenance skills and replacement parts must be assured for the nation so as to guarantee continuous use of equipment.
- (c) Electricity, telephone, and other infrastructural facilities must be in place so as to reduce cost of services.

Clearly, without some efforts at making some minimum standards provisions for fostering intrapersonal, inter-personal, intraculture, intercultural, transnational and mass communication, bridging the communication gap would remain a kind of ignis fatuus.

These conducive conditions are urgently necessary for the effective bridging of the information gaps that exist and cut across all societies. This bridge is not like an everlasting linkage but the bridge of broken communication promises stretched out on the human path of hope and understanding. This bridge is a critical linkage for humanity in these times of uncertainty and when expression could rekindle our hope.

Furthermore, it is equally important for us to reflect here on the uses and abuses to which communication technology can be put. Largely we have already examined its positive uses. Yet it is clear that technology which can be used to better the lot of mankind can equally be used to retard man's progress or create communication gaps.

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