

ELEVEN

THE INFORMATION SUPERHIGHWAY AND TRADITIONAL COMMUNICATION: WHERE WE STAND

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Don't embrace technology for technology's sake. Use common-sense to determine when to use new media and when to use more traditional methods. It's great to have electronic relationships, but we will always need old-fashioned human contact.

- Moshe Triwaks.

Three decades ago, Marshal McLuhan, a Canadian professor of Communications foretold the confluence of computers, communications and information into what he termed a Global Village. Little did we know that distances would no longer matter. Information has become so strategic in the new hi-tech village that people across the world are linked seamlessly and instantaneously at a reduced cost, simply and at a speed which only rivals the discovery of electric light, the telephone or perhaps Gutenberg's printing press itself. The information revolution has literally rendered all man-made barriers of physical borders and other contraptions inhibiting its free flow unnecessary and superfluous.

The Information Superhighway

What exactly is the Information Superhighway? Some call it the All-Digital, Simultaneous, Real-Time, Interactive, Broadband, Multi-media, Information Superhighway. However, AT&T's vision simply puts it as bringing people together, giving them easy access to each

other and to the information and services they want and need — anytime, anywhere. The information superhighway is therefore a seamless web of communication and information networks — together with other elements of our national information infrastructure, such as computers, databases, and consumer electronics — which will put vast amounts of information at the fingertips of a wide variety of users. The information superhighway (“I-way” as it is fondly called) is a vast inter “operable” network of networks — embracing local, long distance and global networks, wireless, broadcast and cable, electronic-mail, voice mail, video phones, electronic newspapers, telex news via television (the flat-panel newspaper), video conferencing, satellites and, most importantly, the internet.

The information superhighway, as awesome as it seems, is just evolving and it is still a vision thing. What we would end up with is not exactly known to anybody. The I-way as we know it today is not just an improvement over what existed, it represents near utopian possibilities: revolutions, golden ages, new fortunes to be made, new careers and lifestyles designed as people connect globally without leaving home. This in essence can be seen as the re-engineering of the society in terms of how we live, play, work, travel and communicate. In the areas of education, many more people would be engaged in distance learning and school at home; reputable medical consultants would be able to interact with field health workers and even individual patients; homes would virtually serve as offices without losing productivity and the collaborative work environment of the office as we know it now and the need for physical visits and shopping would be embarked upon only when it is absolutely necessary.

It is gratifying that the African continent, particularly the south, the east and the north are linking up as fast as the Internet and the worldwide web are being developed. The draft constitution of an East African country was recently sent through the internet to constitutional experts around the world. South Africa is particularly strategic in her total involvement in the global networking and connectivity of hi-tech information systems. In several countries along the west coast and Nigeria in particular, only multinationals, high network individuals and some individual business people are linked to the I-way. In other words, most people in these areas are at best observers and peripheral

participants who are stuck in a pothole at the very beginning of the information superhighway.

The hi-tech information technology involves most of the gadgets that are currently in use. The telephone (analogue and digital), cellular phones, computer, fax machines, broadcast television and radio, cable television, line broadcast, on-line computer networks, satellite and wireless networks are all components of the information superhighway. Most of these facilities are available and operational with varying degrees of success and efficiency all over the continent. The important thing to note is that we tend to overestimate the potential of communication technology, forgetting that software and hardware would be ineffective if there were no skilled and creative people to operate them and funds to maintain them. Furthermore, most communication experiments failed dismally because of inadequate attention to the interplay of socio-political variables that would determine the cultural relevance and acceptability of the system. This is why hundreds of crates of computers meant for schools are left in the open for years without anybody worrying about what to do with them.

What Is in I.T. for Developing Countries?

The Information Superhighway has a lot of potentials for the developing nations of the world, particularly those in the African continent, whenever we get connected to the I-way ramp.

These potentials include:

- a. Education would benefit through the enhancement of the distance learning system which the poor, the poor economy and the increased demand for tertiary and professional education has made compelling.
- b. Medicare is becoming very expensive and only the *nouveaux riche* can reasonably afford it. Perhaps the I-way would make it possible for the experienced consultants to serve many more medical institutions and centres through the power of communication. Information storage, retrieval and dissemination in the worldwide web/networks could be very cost effective and minimise the limited expertise loss due to the brain-drain syndrome.
- c. Rural-urban migration in the long run may be contained as

- people, wherever they are, can have what they desire without too much physical movement. Advanced information technology will guarantee jobs and services in all places, be it rural or urban.
- d. Working at home with hi-tech communication may become attractive to the business class who clutter the streets with several vehicles and personnel in different directions in pursuit of valued jobs. It is a potential area that would be explored as we get on to the I-way proper.
 - e. The economy has truly become global and it is only wise to hook on to the Information Superhighways to remain relevant, profitable and prosperous.
 - f. The great strides in information technology would further build the global society with as many nations being able to interact, transact and communicate with other people without losing their cultural identity and preferences.

In order to benefit from the foregoing, it may be necessary for the developing nations that are still preparing to move on to the information superhighway to consider making substantial investment in communication infrastructure howbeit with great caution. Leap-frogging or jump-starting has been recommended as there is no wisdom in starting with gadgets that have long been abandoned for more efficient and cost-effective alternatives. Rather than buy old technologies, it is more prudent to invest scarce capital resources in the current technologies being conscious of the need and capacity of the people to sustain them. In the words of Mayo (1995). "The global leaders of the 21st century will be those countries that have not only invested in the right technologies, but also in the intellectual growth of their people."

Communication Systems in Nigeria

So much for the information superhighway. The Nigerian experience at adopting information technologies is very instructive. Over the years, we have tried several methods of technology transfer, adoption, copying and misstep. Today, it is difficult to pinpoint how far we have gone in our drive to become a technologically developed nation. Whatever stage and type of technology that is imaginable in the whole

world, the internet inclusive is provided in Nigeria. The question really is how extensive and what impact have these technologies on the people and the economy? Surely, our communication sector is not as coordinated and developed as it should be. Underdeveloped social infrastructure such as erratic electric supply, inadequate personnel, primordial technical know-how and the depressed economy have continued to make communication erratic, expensive and unserviceable. Despite the fact that the country has the potential to accommodate the most modern technology in the communication industry, it cannot guarantee the efficiency of the basics such as telephone, not to talk of the now problematic cellular phones and the fax machines that are more of decorations on chief executives tables since they rarely function.

Yet, the television and radio as important sections of the information superhighway have continued to perform wonderfully even under very difficult situations, using obsolete and inefficient equipment. The attempt at cable television is still in its infancy and it may become another good programme gone awry unless the regulatory body steps in to ensure that the service providers do not over-exploit their monopoly which may ultimately stifle the development. Most times, the services rendered are not commensurable with the price paid by subscribers. The story is the same for the cellular telephone. Even the land phones are inadequate and mighty exchanges are politically solicited in places where they may not be fully subscribed for in another two decades.

Computers may be more accessible to people in developed countries as they are more personal, equally interactive and dynamic in solving many informational problems. A Personal Computer (PC) equipped with a modem could get you on line with the assistance of a local internet service provider. Also, we are in the video generation and it promises to be most useful in the less developed nation. When fully developed, video conferencing could facilitate business to the extent that it would save time, enhance productivity and reduce travel while still ensuring great person-to-person contact.

I make the foregoing statements to establish our haphazard and peripheral attempts at joining the world in the explosive and confounding information revolution being witnessed today.

The reasons for this unfortunate and uncoordinated approach is not far-fetched. It seems logical that not much impact can be made as we have neglected the important step of taking into cognisance our technical capabilities, culture, finances and level of communication infrastructure before adopting others. More often than not, our foray into communication and information technology adoption has been more of fancy and the wish to be seen as modern and up-to-date than the desire to make communication work for the people.

This is why successive governments in Nigeria have expended so much on modern communication but limited achievements have been recorded. In less than five years to the magic year 2000, Nigeria is still combining the forgotten analog telephone system with digital and even cellular ones. Could not the country stick to analog and make it function effectively for everybody rather than have more than four systems with none really working satisfactorily? In a town, you may have about three different types of telephone services and each of them is too expensive for the people. We have heard of papers, voice mail and many people were compelled to have answering machines. It is ironic that we have the gamut of what is needed to be well connected in the world's information system but nothing really seems to be working.

The result of all these unplanned communication systems is that we have now found ourselves in the middle of nowhere and our next steps are uncertain. Julius Nyerere humorously stated some years back that while others try to reach the moon, we try to reach our villages. The lesson to draw from this is that we really have to start by communicating effectively with our people in the rural areas who constitute more than seventy percent of our population. It is also these neglected people that constitute the most productive segment of the population of most African countries as small-scale farmers, artisans and traders. Whatever we have to do to achieve better communication must start with them.

In recent times, there has been a conscious effort by the government to boost communication generally in the country through the privatisation and commercialisation programmes. While most government communication agencies are still torn between real commercialisation and depending on government subventions, private

organisations have come to give them very keen competition. Apart from the Nigerian Telecommunication Plc, most others like NIPOST and the electronic media are still largely government-funded and controlled. In this case, the type of business-like decisions that can make dynamic and innovative adoption of modern technologies possible are made difficult because of bureaucracy.

Nigeria parades very interesting statistics on communication. There are 37 radio stations with only 1 owned privately. For television, there are 48 stations spread across the whole country and only 4 are privately owned. Coupled with these are a few cable satellite stations in Lagos, Kaduna and Abuja. While radio broadcasting is more than 60 years old in Nigeria, television is 37 and cable satellite is 10. Telecommunication has a much longer history than all these and one would have expected much progress in achieving a better and more functional national communication infrastructure. This has not been the case and there is need to redress the situation.

Traditional Communication

The invasion of the airwaves by optical fibres carrying large volumes of data at a speed comparable only to that of light from one end of the world to the other notwithstanding, many people in the rural and even urban areas of Nigeria, Africa and indeed many other developing countries are not aware of its existence. They still go about their daily chores the way they know best, using the well-known and established traditional methods of communication which are the basis of Africa's rich cultural and historical heritage.

The efficacy of these methods are not in doubt as they have cemented and sustained the growth of various cultures, indigenous technology, skilled local business enterprises which still form the backbone of most third world economies. At least, most of these people at the grassroots level have been able to sustain their socio-political necessities, making the best of well-tested and accepted communication systems.

Permit me to illustrate how a typical traditional communication medium works. In many communities, there are variants of the *efe* masquerade dance. *Efe* in its ordinary usage could mean jesting. However, the traditional and original concept of *efe* is a powerful

communication medium used to convey serious socio-political messages in a subtle but pungent manner. During an *efe* masquerade dance outing, certain anti-social and distasteful behaviours of individuals are poignantly exposed in songs, dance and drama which leave nobody in doubt as to who the culprit is and what should be done to him. As a result of the genial celebrations accompanying *efe*, it attracts a large following, and bits of information thus gathered are disseminated far and wide. The affected people may become pariah in the community instantly unless socially acceptable atonement is made for the misdemeanour. Most communities all over the country use their creative annual festivals to enable opinion leaders castigate social miscreants and they have served as deterrents over the years and lessons for the young ones. Today we talk of junk journalism because the malfeasance of the high and mighty in the society is exposed. This is why many people are no longer enthralled with the attempt by government to redefine what is in the public and or private interest in as much as the conduct of its functionaries are concerned. The traditional society does not have this ambiguity and that is a plus for its communication methods.

Experience has shown that in spite of the tremendous attraction modern communication holds for all, the basics are still the basics. The electronic mail, video teleconferencing, telephone and the ever dynamic and interactive personal computer can never replace face-to-face communication. As Peterson (1995) puts it, before you can achieve good communication, you must first know and tune into your audiences. This character of the traditional communication with the special efforts of eye contact and list, makes it well suited for the largely illiterate population in these countries. Thus, she came up with an imaginative radio station — WII-FM which translates to “What’s-in-for-me”. Therein lies the secret of traditional communication. Whereas the media hype of the information superhighway may seem to indicate that everybody is into it, we all know that it would continue to be for an extremely few and selected people with the means and even the need to bother about it. What then would happen to the majority of the people still hooked to the old reliable oramedia and pseudo-modern communication? They will and should plan to link up with the superhighway as things must change for the better. The rapid

technology and the demands for greater job performance, economy of scale and comparative advantage requires a modernisation of our old system in order not to be left behind in world development.

Where We Stand

It is not an exaggeration to say that Nigeria is in the league of multi-media interaction, real-time, digital and narrow band information systems. All the new developments in telecommunication as earlier stated are operable and in existence but its influence and impact is certainly insignificant. There is therefore the need to establish practicable and definite strategies to link up with the world.

What we have on ground is an amalgamation of all sorts and there is need for the communication regulatory bodies to harmonise their efforts and decide on what to use the old methods of communication for and the aspects of modern communication to introduce. While the elite business class cannot be stopped from their fancy game of adopting what may not be sustained; the working, middle class, students and the majority of the people must be assisted to make the right choices that will actually help them in becoming more productive, efficient and cost effective.

The Nigerian Communication Commission, Ministry of Communication, National Broadcasting Commission, the various Television and Radio station authorities, private and public, cable television operators and indeed providers of computers and other state of the art communication systems need to sit together and formulate enduring policies that will help the entire population. The recent developments in the electronic and telecommunication fields may well bring the much-touted changes for the better. The privatisation and deregulation programme (Decree 38 of 1992) has ended several years of monopoly by government media and communication service providers. Even then, this cannot guarantee easy access and proper use of information technology. One hopes the National Broadcasting Commission and the Nigerian Communication Commission would take a cue from the American experience as recounted by Reed Hundt:

So when we gave out broadcast licenses, we made a colossal mistake. In the bargain with broadcasters on behalf

of the public we did not ask for specific, concrete, and real commitment from broadcasters to serve the public interest, convenience and necessity.

Notwithstanding these fears, some of the issues that needed to be addressed include:

- a. Checking in-coming information through the internet and other hi-tech information laden systems to ensure that what our public get is what is needed. As already recognised, the internet has a lot of garbage packages that may end up rendering our young ones vulnerable and unmotivated. Do we want free flow of pornography on our personal computers at home?
- b. Nigeria has never been able to standardise the adoption of any technology. Communication technology changes so rapidly and the cost is rather prohibitive. If standards are not introduced, (from what type and range of services do we need to achieve greater results for our level of development?), then there would be problems.
- c. In latching on to the information superhighway, specific information infrastructure would have to be developed to suit the needs of the country in question. That some developing countries such as Brazil, Indonesia and India are up-to-date in information technology is not accidental. They were able to develop and evolve their own systems over a considerable length of time to arrive at where they are now. There is need for Nigeria to begin the same process now for a better future in informatics.

What to Do

That Nigeria as a nation should cruise on the I-Way is not in question. What we need to resolve is how we can meaningfully become an active participant in the new world information order. Below are a few proposals of what can be done to make us arrive where we so much desire to be:

- i. A new beginning in developing enduring information infrastructures that would take cognisance of our cultural heritage, literacy level, capacity utilisation, maintenance culture

and the existing traditional communication systems as necessary starting points. There is a lot of wisdom in taking the people from familiar systems to the more complicated and unknown systems, no matter how efficacious they may be.

- ii. The chaotic and indiscriminate importation and adoption of hi-tech information system we do not have need for is a waste of scarce resources and is counter productive. In less than three years of digital and cellular telephone systems, one is no longer sure if we ought not to have stuck to the old analog system till we can master it. Since Independence, our postal service has continued to decline and one may get a letter to its destination faster on camels than through the post.
- iii. Our media houses are in terrible shapes with disuse and archaic equipment. The attempts made to modernise both the radio and television services have not succeeded since our technology adoption strategies are lagging behind. While we do not need to go back to the rediffusion days, can we not have a standardised system that would be adopted nationwide, thereby making domestication and maintenance better?
- iv. Privatisation and deregulation in Nigeria has opened the floodgate for the “yuppie” millionaires to get into specialised areas they neither have the expertise nor the temperament to pursue. The only newspapers that are professional in the country today are those that are owned by practising journalists who live by the pen. Whenever businessmen float newspapers, they are always ready to pander to their primary interest — profit making. This has destroyed the banking industry and one hopes the same would not be the case with the coming on stream of private radio, television, satellite communication and private telephone services. The lesson from all these is that it takes more than bags of naira to establish communication outfits — the public interest should not be confused with government propaganda.
- v. A symbiotic relationship can exist between the seemingly jet age communication system of the Western world and the rather aged traditional communication systems in Africa in general and Nigeria in particular. The focus of communication is

people, and the only way communication can be effective is when there is a two-way flow. For as long as the majority of the people are illiterate and live in the rural areas, so long would the temptation to go back to the good old days of village mobile film shows, gongs and other local methods of communication be strong.

Conclusion

There is need for developing nations to be extremely careful as we admire and contemplate where to join the bandwagon on the Information Superhighway. If we must know, it is full of several booby-traps for unwary and unprepared information wayfarers. The sheer great immediacy and drama we now experience and the speed at which we can view what is happening worldwide (the O. J. Simpson real-time chase on cable network, the space shuttles, the disaster stories and epoch-making peace records after several decades and years of war) makes it extremely difficult to easily process the data we have on our hands at any given time. Increasingly we are becoming less analytical but mere consumers and passive onlookers. As communication managers, it is our responsibility to ensure that we help our people understand, evaluate and appreciate the advantages and disadvantages of each technology and take due care to use each one appropriately and strategically.

By now, the excitement and attraction to new technologies that have not moved us forward ought to reduce while we become more sober and reflective in our future communication policy formulation and execution. All the leap-frogging and jump-starting will work only if the government and indeed the operators of the systems would work together to create an enabling environment for more purposeful benefits from the comfort, convenience, economic posterity and efficiency that comes with it. Perhaps one day, we may be able to say of today's Nigeria (to paraphrase and project what Gary Arme, said in the *Financial World* of France in the 1990s)... "back in the 1960s, the joke was that half the people in Nigeria were waiting for a telephone and the other half were waiting for a dial tone!" This goal is achievable and whatever it takes, that should be our focus.

I thank you for your attention.

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