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TREND IN ICT AND ITS IMPACT ON MASS COMMUNICATION

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ABSTRACT

This paper identifies a new, dynamic, and triangular trend in mass communication media selection and uses. It describes the phenomenon under the newly coined terms of *combimediasm,* *supplemediasm,* and *substimediasm.* The effects of the phenomenon on the mass media, mass communicators, mass media owners, and mass media audience were analyzed to arrive at the conclusion that, in the main, Information Communication Technology has been a blessing to mankind.

INTRODUCTION

It is contestable that Marshall McLuhan had Information Communication Technology (ICT) in mind several decades ago when he coined the phrase "global village" to prophesy that electronic communication would unite the world. But certainly, that prophecy is today, a living and stupendous reality as the Internet in particular, and ICT in general, have almost literally and spatially turned the world into one small village. ICT, or what others call Computer Mediated Communication (CMC) (Stafford *et al,* 1999:659; Wright, 2000:100) has done more than touch every facet of human communication: it has become the soul and central nervous system of communication process at all levels. Like Joseph (2003:14) has rightly observed: "the Internet has revolutionized the computer and communication world like nothing before," for, according to him, "the Internet has a world wide broad-

casting capability, a mechanism for information dissemination, and a medium for collaboration and interaction between individuals and their computers without regard for geographical location."

Essentially, this boils down to one fact: ICT or CMC has created a dynamic situation in which one can communicate instantaneously, spontaneously, and simultaneously at the interpersonal and mass communication levels, with people who may be located in the next room, or dispersed among the farthest continents.

Most probably, this makes ICT aided communications sound very complex. But interestingly, the whole communication process from message encoding to feedback receipt (Heibert *et al*, 1974:7) may take only as short a time as a few seconds. Nevertheless, CMC is as effective and cost efficient as when town criers addressed communal gatherings in ancient village squares (Okoro, 1998:27).

UNDERSTANDING ICT

ICT is easier described than defined. Why? Simple: there is no consensus perspective on the key word "technology", and hence there are divergent conceptions of ICT. For instance, while the instrumentalist school of thought views technology as a fabricated tool that is morally neutral (i.e. neither good nor evil substantially), other thinkers link it inseparably to the history of industrialization. A third school thinks technology is a synonym for novelty: "the most recent developments…the Internet, multimedia, and other new communication technologies" (McOmber, 1999:140).

Owing to this difficulty in defining "technology", and by extension "ICT", this writer proposes to use it synonymously with "CMC" and to take it as encompassing all the mini, medium, and macro computer-based telecommunication hard ware and soft ware which facilitate instantaneous, simultaneous, and spontaneous communication at all known levels, whether-few to-many, or many-to-few, and irrespec-

tive of geographical locations of participants in the process. Specifically, ICT, inter alia, embraces communication hardware and software like computers and their programmes; earth orbiting satellites and satellite dishes; audio and video cable networks; web cameras and web TVs; modems and scanners; fixed, wireless, and mobile telephone cum videophone systems; fax and telex; teletext and teleprinter; videotext and teleconferencing; the World Wide Web (WWW) and of course, the Internet (Joseph, 2003:22; Popoola, 2003:51).

THEORETICAL AND HYPOTHETIC FRAMEWORK

This paper is premised on a framework of two theories and one hypothesis. These are:

1. The uses and gratification theory,

2. Media dependency theory and,

3. Media substitution hypothesis.

Uses and gratification theory is a postulation that an individual would prefer the use of a particular communication medium over others owing to perceived higher satisfaction potentials of that medium. In other words the theory refers "to the use of a particular medium in the belief that beneficial attributes of that medium allow the user to obtain gratification more readily than other media" (Stafford *et al* 1999: 663).

Furthermore, Denis McQuail (1987:234) has averred that:

> *The ... uses and gratification research tradition rests ... on the notion of a passive audience and it*

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> *involves a number of assumption*
> *which a key item is that the audi-*
> *ence makes a conscious and mo-*
> *tivated choice among channels*
> *and content on offer.*

Conversely, media dependency theory is the submission that an individual's level of dependence on a medium for satisfying his needs is proportional to the importance he attached to that medium. Essentially, the difference between these two views is that while the uses and gratification theory answers the question "where do I go to gratify my needs?", the latter answers the question "why do I go to the medium to satisfy this goal?" (Ball-Rokeach and DeFleur, 1976).

However, the media substitution hypothesis, according to Krugman, Jeffres *et al* and Lin, "suggests that the introduction of a new medium encourages a restructuring in the way consumers view established media" of communication (Atkin *et al,* 1998:476).

CONTEMPORARY TREND IN MASS COMMUNICATION

At whatever level communication in the society is examined, whether intra personal or inter personal, group, or mass communication, a para-dox is evident: contemporary human communication is becoming more complex by the day, but simultaneously, it is being simplified by the use of ICT. Also glaring is a new dynamism in media selection and application: a contemporary and phenomenal trend, which this writer proposes to describe in its triangular dimensions as *combimediasm*, *supplemediasm* and *substimediasm.*

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Combimediasm

Communication
Media

Supplemediasm

Substimediasm
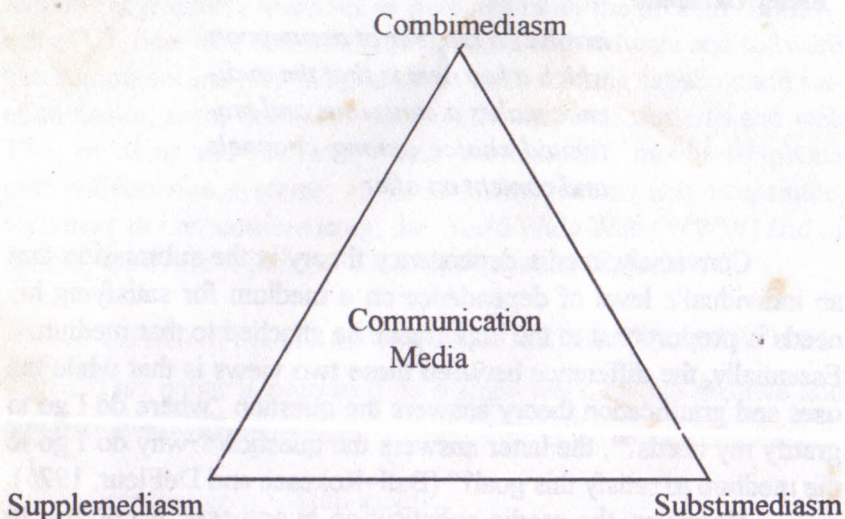
Triangular Trend in Media Selection and Application

At the apex of the triangular trend is *combimediasm,* and in the context of this paper, it is the regular selection, application, and combination of elements of ICT with one or more elements of the conventional electronic and print media in order to send or receive messages. Thus in a situation where an individual and or a mass media conglomerate such as Daar Communications, Minaj Broadcast International, BBC, or VOA regularly receives and or disseminates information through ICT, in combination with any or several of radio, television, and newspaper or magazine, that is *combimediasm*. It is also *combimediasm* at the individual level, when a person uses his mobile phone handset and a news magazine to access weather reports and political updates respectively. Similarly, it is *combimediasm* when a media conglomerate uses the World Wide Web and television to reach its audience.

At base one of the triangle is *supplemediasm* and this, in this

writer's conception, is the regular selection, application, and supplementary use of one or more elements of ICT with one or more elements of the conventional electronic and print media. This true-life story is an apt illustration of *supplemediasm*. In 2003, international and local mass media were awash with stories about the surgical operations conducted on the Iranian Siamese Twins. But due to persistent power cuts where this writer lived, he missed seeing the complementary pictures of the twins on television. He had only BBC radio to depend on through his battery-powered transistor radio for audio reports on the story. However, *his* desires to see the pictures of the twins motivated him to visit an Internet café, and after logging on to www.bbc.co.uk, he was gratified. That is *supplemediasm* at the individual receiving end of communication. At the originating end of mass communication, the same phenomenon of *supplemediasm* makes BBC to disseminate different aspects of the same news items on the radio, television, magazine, and the Internet.

At the second base of the triangle, this writer has observed, is *substimediasm*. This refers to the outright substitution of elements of the conventional electronic and print media for regularly selected and applied elements of ICT. *Substimediasm* can be observed in the communication habits of many people. For instance, snail mails have been discarded for e-mails, and many have neither written nor received old-fashioned hard copy letters for years. Little wonder the Federal Government of Nigeria is down sizing its Postal Service in order to ultimately privatize the money-draining corporation! Even e-mails are being sidelined for the comparatively personal text messages facilitated by the short message service (SMS) of mobile phone services providers. Many advertisers now place their messages exclusively on the Internet. Higher institutions now award degrees in online journalism and their products serve the needs of online audience. Mobile phone services providers reach their customers directly through SMS. People who have fairly unrestricted access to the Internet may prefer online versions of newspapers and magazines to the hard copy edi-

tions, etc. That is *substimediasm.*

To encapsulate, it could be stated that the three fold contemporary trend in mass communication is a new dynamism in media selection and application as a way of coping with the complexities of ICT in modern communication.

IMPACT OF ICT ON MASS COMMUNICATION

Given the media substitution hypothesis cited earlier, and the finding that "… adoption of a given media innovation is most powerfully related to adoption of other techniques …" (Atkin *et al* 1998:447), it is highly probable that ICT or CMC will have profound impact on mass communication, mass communicators, and mass communication audience. For instance, Pearse and Dunn (1998:437) have noted that " … when people adopt home computers, their time with other media declines." It is therefore the goal of this paper to analyze some of the positive and negative effects of ICT on mass communication, from the mass media owners, mass communicators, and mass communication audiences' points of view.

ICT as Boom to Mass Communication

In more ways than one, ICT is a blessing to society because it facilitates, complements, and supplements the process of mass communication. A few illustrations would drive this point home.

1. Feedback

There is a consensus that the communication process is incomplete without feedback and ICT facilitates this important stage, both in the electronic and in the print media. In broadcasting, ICT has virtually bridged the gulf between broadcasters and their audience or viewers as far as feedback is concerned. For instance, mobile phones enable many broadcast audience or viewers to contribute to on-air programmes through the expression of opinions, grievances and commendations.

This technology also enables the audience to send short text messages to broadcast stations for the purposes enumerated above. E-mails sent via the Internet also come in handy for same reasons. In the print media, readers who wish to send their letters to editors, etc, also use elements of ICT.

2. Information Storage, Retrieval and Updating

The endless task of information storage, retrieval and updating in the process of mass communication has been made easy by ICT. Computer memories conveniently store information that would otherwise require many large rooms of paper files. Broadcast and print media transcripts can be conveniently accessed. Thus, it is common to hear statements like these on air: "for more details, visit our website at www dot BBC dot UK forward slash", or "for more information, log on to www dot VOA news now."

3. Facilitation of Multimedia cum Multidimensional Access to Information

ICT also facilitates multimedia or multidimensional access to information initially gleaned via a particular medium or source. For instance, in the illustration about the Iranian Twins cited earlier, the writer was able to access complementary pictures of the audio only information obtained from BBC radio. He was also able to download and print detailed text on the story. In other words, ICT made it possible for him to access the audio, print and "television" dimensions of the same story.

4. Facilitation of Information Sourcing and Reporting

ICT has significantly enhanced production processes in mass communication by easing communications problems among reportorial, desk, and production crews. With the advent of e-mails, Internet telephony and mobile phones, reporters no longer need to travel long distances physically in order to beat crazy production

deadlines. They now exploit the potentials of ICT to "telefile" their reports and get them published or aired instantaneously, spontaneously, or simultaneously. Thus, it is common to hear statements like these on air: "and with that e-mail report from BBC's Sola Odunfa in Abuja, we end this edition of Focus on Africa," or "earlier, my colleague... spoke with him on his mobile phone...." Furthermore, by broadening information base, and by effectively neutralizing the spatial barrier between information collectors, information sources, and information processes, ICT significantly enhances mass communication.

5. Audience Empowerment as Mass Communicators

ICT has also made the audience to double as mass communicators. For instance, in broadcasting, when a member of an audience participates in a live phone-in programme, he automatically broadcasts to the mass audience of that programme. In the case of the Internet, its user is even more of a mass communicator. Prior to the advent of the Internet, only the very rich have access to mass audience through their hegemonic influence on the mass communication media. Now however, every Internet user is a potential mass communicator, particularly in the creation of personal home pages and web sites. Thus, as Dominick (1999:647) had noted "...anybody in the audience with the right hardware and minimal computer skills can become a mass communicator, (since) unlike other forms of personal expression, the contents of a web are automatically published on the Internet, giving people the opportunity to express themselves in front of a potentially huge audience who would not otherwise know of their existence."

6. Facilitation of Interactive Integrated Marketing Communications

In the realm of Integrated Marketing Communications (IMC), ICT has unfolded the dynamic dawn of digital interaction between

marketers, manufacturers, advertisers, and target prospects. Thus in spite of spatial barriers, participants can execute every step in the marketing process. Marketing research can be conducted on the Internet. Orders can be placed on-line. Advertisements can be sent directly to individual e-mail addresses in addition to the fact that they can be published centrally on their host's web site.

7. Facilitation of Communication Education

ICT has made it easier to obtain and give education in all areas of mass communication through ICT facilitated distance learning. For instance, one can acquire basic training in journalism from the comfort of one's home and get certificated through the Internet. Furthermore, ICT has facilitated the broadening of the communication education curriculum. Institutions here and there are mounting courses in on-line journalism at various diploma and degree levels. Furthermore, on-line libraries are a tested and certified rich source of knowledge and information about mass communication courses, institutions, and authorities.

8. Facilitation of Newspaper and Magazine Production

ICT has also profoundly enhanced production process in the print media. Manual production techniques that were noted for their tediousness have given way to ICT aided techniques that are sought for their speed, accuracy, and lesser user-stress. Like Okoye (2000:95) had noted, "up to the end of the 19th century all typesetting was done by hand." But now, he added:

> *The computer has revolutionized typesetting and cut by three quarters the time formerly needed to produce newspapers. With the Desktop Publisher (a programme on the computer), copy can be typeset, edited, proofread and pages designed, thereby producing the camera ready artwork (CRA) which is simply filmed, plated, and printed.*

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ICT as Doom to Mass Communication

Without prejudice to the beneficial impacts of ICT on mass communication as discussed earlier, one does not need a magnifying lens in order to identify its negative impacts. Some of these are examined below.

1. Marketing Potentials of ICT as Threat to other Media

Owing to the user initiative friendliness of the pervasive Internet, its marketing, advertising, and general commercial potentials cannot be over estimated. And when one considers the multimedia nature of ICT which makes it a visual, and audio-visual media of mass communication, one would be in order to ask: why duplicate efforts and waste money in the process of advertising in other media, when an internet advertisement is perhaps equally effective, probably more efficient, and certainly the cheapest option? The answer can be imagined: many advertising agencies would become redundant as advertisers can bypass them and post their messages directly on the Internet.

Meanwhile, upholding the core assumptions of the uses and gratification theory, research findings suggest that a medium's perceived credibility varies directly with frequency of use. And although there are conflicting reports on the relative believability of ICT (especially the Internet) over other mass media by its users, there is a growing consensus that the credibility of the Internet is on the rise, especially among its users (Johnson and Kaye, 2002: 620). In other words, if people, according to the uses and gratification theory, find more gratification in ICT, they may significantly reduce their use of other media. This would reduce advertiser's patronage of such media, which would in turn lower the revenue of such media.

2. ICT May Undermine the Influence of other Media

Apart from potential loss of revenue by other media due to growing dependence on ICT, there is the possibility that people's reli-

ance and dependence on other media (apart from ICT) would drop from *combimediasm* and *supplemediasm* to outright *substimediasm*. To express this in questions, one may ask: who needs broadcast stations anyway, when one can get the pictures and read the messages on the Internet? Who needs to wait for tomorrow's papers when one can download and print the same message from the Internet? Why wait for BBC radio *news hour*, VOA *news now*, or CNN *world news* when one can access both the audio and video versions of the same information **here** and **now** on the Internet?

3. **ICT Undermines Gate keeping and Promotes Mediocrity**
The user interactiveness of ICT, especially the Internet and the World Wide Web is both a boom and a doom to mass communication. The positive side has been discussed earlier. However, on the negative side, ICT is a doom to mass communication because it undermines the quality control function of professional mass communicators, a function known as *gate keeping*. Simultaneously, it promotes mediocrity in media contents by empowering the mass audience to contribute to the contents of the Internet and the World Wide Web. Some or most of these contributions are bound to fall below professional standards because they originated from untrained mass communicators. These contributions would either have been denied access into the media by professional gatekeepers, or at least, they would have been modified to conform to relevant professional standards.

4. **ICT Undermines Communication by Unwieldy Extension of the Public Arena**
The public arena is the modern day manifestation of what Okoro (1998:27) described as "market place or village square" It is a venue of convergence for societal discourse. Today however, the public arena is more of a psychological space than a geographic location. Golding and Murdock (2000:77) have described the public sphere as the notion that modern communication and cultural industries should

be structured on the model of early period of capitalism when the arena was open, diverse in contents, and accessible to all groups in the society.

Certainly, ICT conforms to this notion. However, it has widened the arena so much that it has become unwieldy. For instance, it has been estimated that there are "4.5 million (web) sites which are interesting and educational" (Soyinka, 2005:10). Now, one may ask: how many life times does one need to access the information on these sites which, to compound the issue, are perpetually changing almost per second?

In a nutshell, ICT has widened media and media contents beyond the capacity of one mind to grasp if selective exposure, selective attention, selective perception, and selective retention are not consciously exercised. The alternative would be audience apathy due to confusion.

5. ICT Corrupts Communication in Society

ICT provides a fertile breeding ground for obscenities, indecencies, pornography, invasion of privacy and other issues that are considered unethical in mass communication parlance because of their potentials to corrupt and thereby injure society. On the Internet, for instance, "there are numerous websites waiting to entice the immature, the gullible, the easily swayed and the vulnerable" (Soyinka, 2005:28). People can access pornography and other materials that are otherwise restricted by appropriate regulatory bodies.

And worse still, hackers often invade people's privacy by sending spam (unsolicited) mails and virus to peoples' e-mail accounts. They can also corrupt websites by modifying their contents without their owners' knowledge, thereby misinforming unsuspecting ICT users.

CONCLUSION

This writer does not pretend to have proved either way that ICT is a definite boom or doom to mass communication. Certainly, only well coordinated and replicated studies can be used to obtain such proof.

Nevertheless, it can be asserted without fear of contradiction that, in spite of its shortcomings, ICT has brought immense benefits to mass communication, mass communicators, and mass audience. One can therefore not throw away the baby with the dirty bath water: the cake of ICT must either be eaten wholly or done away with in its entirety.

However, in the light of ICT's unwieldy extension of the public arena and its potentials to corrupt society as discussed above, government should set up a regulatory body similar in function to the National Broadcasting Commission. The body should be empowered to make and enforce rules guiding Internet publication and access to potentially corrupting materials on the information superhighway.

Nevertheless, the writer takes the view that relevant authorities should also improve on ICT infrastructures and policies so that every *Jegede*, *Megida*, and *Okoro* would have unrestricted but regulated access to the Internet dominated public arena. This is imperative because as Abrahamson (1998:14) had speculated:

> *The Internet will continue to evolve*
> *informationally…. It will, to an ever*
> *greater degree, continue to be trans-*
> *formed into a vehicle for the provision*
> *of very specific high-value informa-*
> *tion to very specific high consumption*
> *audiences.*

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