

THE IMPLICATIONS OF INTERNET ON THE MEDIA AND THE PRACTICE OF MASS COMMUNICATION

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ABSTRACT

Internet has emerged as a communication medium and its impact on society, commerce and the government is already phenomenal. As the nerve centre of the new media technologies, it has revolutionized the whole business of mass communication. This paper therefore examines the media convergence that the Internet has created and its revolution of the nature of mass communication. It also explores the various dimensions by which the digital revolution has affected all aspects of media profession, from production, distribution, storage and use of media content, to the practice of media profession.

INTRODUCTION

The Internet is most appropriately thought of as a network of networks. Its growth in Africa, in recent time, has been incredibly fast and it is rapidly changing the media industry and the practices of mass communication.

The various facilities on the net- email, Usenet, World Wide Web, FTP and remote login, have brought much dynamism and interactivity to the practice of mass communication. The electronic mail allows a person to send, receive and store messages. The Usenet allows one to join a group through which exchange of information is made possible across the globe. The World Wide Web provides unlimited access to information, including text, audio and picture, satisfactory enough for whatever purpose one desires. In addition, one can transfer a file from a

known directory through the file transfer protocol to be used anywhere one finds himself for herself.

The same applies to remote login which permits access to any data file provided one knows the directory. The possibilities offered by the Internet have great implications on the practice of mass communication, impacting on the way all media are produced, distributed, displayed and stored.

CONVERGENCE CREATED BY THE INTERNET

The traditional lines between media are disappearing. The Internet has eroded the distinctions among media, thus merging them up into one. It is interesting to note that the internet does not supplant existing media; rather all media influence each other, and each medium has its place. Thus, the theme of media convergence resonates in any discussion of the

internet and the changes it brings to the media profession.

Convergence is altering almost all aspects of the book industry and its relationship with its readers. Internet now offers an additional way for writers' ideas to be published, distributed and sold (Baran 2004). E-books and e-publishing are now on the rise, providing opportunities for new authors to get published instantly, thus overcoming the challenge of delay with traditional publishers.

Online newspapers and webzines (online magazines) are also emerging in Africa. Nigerian newspapers such as *The Guardian*, *Punch*, *Thisday*, *The Sun*, *Vanguard*, etc are now available on the Net. Others are purely online based and are offering various services to their readers.

Furthermore, convergence has brought the delivery of radio directly to individual listeners over the Internet. Traditional, over-the-air stations also have their web-based stations with differences in their programmes. An example in Nigeria is Radio Lagos 93.7 found on www.radiolagosfm.com. Others are web-based only and they permit the simultaneous downloading and accessing of their audio files. Also, convergence of television and the Internet, just underway, holds the potential to reinvest both media, particularly because of the promise of fuller interactivity.

THE CHANGE IN MASS COMMUNICATION MODEL

The traditional mass media follows a "one-to-many" model of

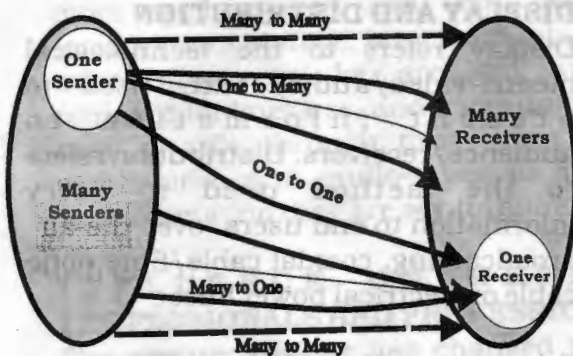
communication. In other words, one source speaks at one time to many people who constitute a homogeneous mass audience. Messages sent from these media are designed to appeal to and reach mass audience. Everyone who is tuned to a particular radio station will hear the same commercial and moviegoers see the same version of film. Generally, the mass media communicate with the public as a mass audience rather than an individual human being. This model is of course different from the interpersonal model, which is "one-to-one" model of communication.

The marriage of computing systems and the Internet has given rise to a hybrid model of communication. A "many-to-one" model is a cross between mass broadcasting and interpersonal communication. With mainframe computers, local and wide area networks, and other databases, large amounts of information are entered by many different sources and are stored until retrieved by individuals who select only the information they want or need (Kaye & Medoff, 2001).

Thus, mass media grow from one-way communication to incorporate interactive communication. Since the Internet allows individuals to select information based on personal preferences, in this way, the Internet is not only a mass medium but a new interactive medium also.

Thus, new media technology has changed the flow of communication from a linear to a three dimensional form of information: mass (one-to-many), interpersonal (one-to-one) and

computing (many-to-one). But more significant is the emergence of the fourth mode of communication. Just as you have information being entered from many different sources, many individuals too are selecting this information as required or needed by them. So we have the "many-to-many" model of communication. The model below shows the web - based communication pattern.



THE INTERNET-BASED MODEL OF COMMUNICATION

INFLUENCE ON TRADITIONAL MASS MEDIA

In the traditional competitive arena, each medium has strong points and offers advantages over the others. Radio is convenient and portable. Television is visual and captivating, and print is absorbing and can be read any time, any place. But the web can be listened to while attending to other activities, graphic and video displays make it attention grabbing and compelling, and information is achieved for future retrieval and can thus be read anytime.

INFLUENCE ON MEDIA CONTENT

On the Web, radio and television sites deliver audio, video ad text and online newspapers can be read, seen or listened to, blurring the distinctions among the media (Dizard 1997:4).

Radio and TV content is limited to the amount of available airtime, and print by the number of pages. These restrictions disappear on the web. No space constraints or time limits. Cyber-delivered news and entertainment are not confined to seconds of time or column inches of space but are free-flowing; with lengths determined by the writers or web-page designers.

The Web, however, is limited by bandwidth. Bandwidth is the amount of data that can be sent all at once through a communication path, such as a telephone line. It determines the amount of data that can electronically flow through the Net, but it affects the speed of information flow than the amount of content allowed. Bandwidth limitations are becoming less of a concern, especially with the growing trend of fiber optics.

The decentralized nature of information dissemination on the Web means that traditional methods of source checking, editing and establishing accuracy and credibility may not be used. This brings up the question of source credibility. Generally, when using traditional media, people are aware of the information source. Audience rely on these sources and believe them to be trustworthy, accurate and objective. But how reliable and accurate is Web

information especially when posted by an unknown source? So, there is a source credibility problem with some information available on the net.

INFLUENCE ON AUDIENCE

Radio and Television are single-source media that reach large audiences simultaneously, while others, like telephones are intended to reach only one receiver at a time. The Internet has the capability of reaching people all over the world simultaneously e.g. thousands of web users access the same site at the same time.

INFLUENCE ON MESSAGE DELIVERY TIME

Media can be differentiated according to whether information is transmitted and received in an asynchronous or synchronous manner. For asynchronous media, there is a time delay between message transmission and reception e.g. Newspapers, books, magazines, videotapes, CDs and films are asynchronous media. For synchronous media, there is no perceptible delay between the time messages are sent and the time they are received. Media like radio, television, telephones, are synchronous.

Internet combines both asynchronous and synchronous resources. E-mail, Usenet, Newsgroups are asynchronous because messages are stored until accessed by receivers. Internet chat rooms, and virtual conferences where users type in messages simultaneously and directly to other users and Internet telephone are synchronous media.

Interactivity also comes along with synchronicity. However, not all synchronous media are interactive media e.g. radio and television broadcasts are synchronous but are not considered interactive. Phone-In programmes on radio and television talk shows are more of feedback mechanism than true interactivity.

INFLUENCE OF INFORMATION DISPLAY AND DISTRIBUTION

Display refers to the technological means-video/audio, text, used to present information to audience/receivers. Distribution refers to the method used to carry information to end users -over-the-air-broadcasting, coaxial cable/fibre optic cable or electrical power lines.

Television audio and visual images are broadcast over the air, carried by coaxial or fibre optic cable or delivered via the airwaves. Newspapers and magazines are text-based printed media distributed by physically transporting them.

The Web display audio, visual and textual information distributed from one computer to another via a complex network of telephone lines and cables. The web thus displays and distributes information using a combination of technological means and electronic methods.

INFLUENCE ON INFORMATION STORAGE

Prints store past issues, so limited by space. Television and radio stations rely on small CDs and videotape libraries. The Internet utilizes the process of digitization to allow almost limitless storage capabilities. Digitization process transforms analog signals (continuous waves) into a binary or discontinuous signal that can be compressed (reduced) and thus more easily stored and sent. With Internet data storage, large amounts of information can be archived and retrieved for later use, and users do not have to rifle through torn pages or garble-video and audio-tapes to find the information they are seeking.

INFLUENCE ON MEDIA PROFESSIONALS AND PROFESSION

The new technology has changed the job pattern of media professionals. They now rely more on experience in and knowledge of practical uses of technology (technical literacy) in producing both traditional and new media (Hoggatt 1999).

The nature of operation of media has dramatically changed. A newspaper editor no longer needs to carry papers all about in the process of editing. Since the computers are networked, s/he only sits at her/his office and accessed the stories in the reporters' computer right from his own computer. Along with this is the disappearance of the dummy sheets, since the pages can easily and quickly be planned on the

computer with far better quality.

The situation is not different in the broadcast industry. The new technology has brought ease and better quality in the production and distribution of programmes. The use of digital camera, digital recording and storage system have brought a new landscape into the pattern of media practice.

Furthermore, the public relations practitioner 'has the world as his parish' through the net. He is able to reach millions of people through his websites, affording people to ask bugging questions directly and answers are provided accordingly. It becomes easier and cheaper to interact with customers thereby creating a forum for club members to share their thoughts on the services they have bought (Wright 2001). Internet has also opened a new world for advertising. Advertisers now have greater opportunity to make their products and services known across the globe in a far cheaper means.

Finally, Internet has affected the curriculum of communication studies. ICTs and the Internet have become part of fundamental courses offered by schools and institutes to award degrees in communication studies. This is, of course, necessary because cyberology-knowledge of cyberspace use- has become an integral part of communication.

CONCLUSION

The impact of the Internet is obviously enormous. As already presented, the digital revolution has affected all aspects of media profession, production, distribution, storage, use of even the media professionals and the profession as a whole. Nonetheless, there seems to be no end in sight to the revolution currently being witnessed as more innovations are daily being turned out. Indeed, ours has become a world of information technology.

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