Advances in Globalization: Prospects and Dilemmas of the Internet and New Media

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Abstract

The world is quickly transforming into a global village that transcends all physical barriers. By virtue of globalization, we are all increasingly living in one world, where individuals, groups and nations have become interdependent. While social, economic and political factors have played a role in this transformation, technology has been the main driving force. Globalization has been driven forward by the development of information and communication technologies that have intensified the speed and scope of interaction between people all over the world For many years, traditional media's such as newspapers, radio and television have fulfilled the information needs of society. Whereas the traditional media's met the communication needs of the time, they did not fully overcome challenges of timeliness, interaction and reach. Advances in globalization have nonetheless overcome these challenges through the emergence of new media's. The technological revolution that has driven globalization is largely engineered by communication which has spurred global growth in many sectors. As a result, the world has witnessed the unprecedented growth of the internet and the emergence of new media's. It is with this in mind that this paper interrogates how the internet as a form of new media has affected society. This paper sought to review literature on the challenges of new media and the use of new media guided by the uses and gratification theory.

Introduction

The Internet Revolution

Social, political and economic paradigms which drive globalization are all dependant on communication. As a result, effective and dependant communication systems are key to the dissemination of information in a timely, accurate and reliable means. While traditional media's have played this role over time, their limitations cannot be gainsaid. In lieu of this, the mass media has not been spared from the changing global dynamics that are being propelled by technological advancements. The growth of the internet and the emergence of the new media's have worked towards solving the traditional challenges of time and place. In essence, the internet has compressed the world to one global village where geographic disparities do not necessarily impede communication. By virtue of this, "the notion of the timeliness of news has been completely redefined. Technology has allowed reporter and news organizations to transmit information almost instantly...." (Craig, 2005, p. 6).

The internet is a communication system linking people around the world (Huckerby, 2005, p.1). While the internet traces its roots from the United States of America military and research advancements in several universities (Giddens, 2006, p.594), the past two decades have witnessed its transformation from a specialized medium to a true mass medium (Craig, 2005, p. 6). In the light of this, "advances in communication technology, mainly the internet, have catalyzed an information revolution, which has accelerated the rate of change and pace to human civilization" (Barnett, 2007, p.158). The internet revolution has mainly been engineered by constant improvement in the capabilities of computers, the digitization of data, satellite communication and fibre optics (Giddens, 2006, p.594).

The past two decades have witnessed an unprecedented increase in internet usage worldwide. The internet has emerged as the fastest growing communication tool ever developed......around a billion people were estimated to be using the internet by 2005 (Giddens, 2006, p.51). According to Carlson (2007), research from Comscore Networks indicates that "Some 747 million people aged 15 or older used the Internet worldwide in January 2007, a 10 percent increase from

the same month a year ago". The same research further points out that "among the top 15 countries (ranked by penetration), internet audiences in developing countries India, the Russian Federation and China increased the most in 2006, growing 33, 21 and 20 percent, respectively". Coupled with this increase has been the simultaneous emergence of new media's that are technologically driven. This widespread use of the internet and mobile phones is deepening and accelerating processes of globalization (Giddens, 2006, p.51).

The New Media

The last two decades have witnessed the transformation of the traditional media into digital through the application of technologies. Shapiro argues that the "emergence of new, digital technologies signals a potentially radical shift of who is in control of information, experience and resources" (Shapiro, cited in Croteau and Hoynes, 2003, p.322). The new media is altering the meaning of geographic distance, increasing the speed and volume of communication, providing opportunities for interactive communication and an overlap and interconnection of previously separate forms of communication (Neuman, cited in Croteau and Hoynes, 2003, p. 322).

The concept of new media was founded in the later part of the 20th century to encompass the amalgamation of traditional media such as film, images, music, spoken and written word, with the interactive power of computer and communications technology, computer-enabled consumer devices and most importantly the Internet. Most technologies described as "new media" are digital and contain technologies that enable digital interactivity (Wikipedia). New Media today represents a mix between older cultural conventions for data representation, access, and manipulation and newer conventions of data representation, access, and manipulation (Fruin & Montfort, 2003). According to Mc Quail (2000), the new media could be categorized into interpersonal communication media, interactive play media, information search media and collective participatory media (p.127). Examples of new media include the internet, computer multimedia, computer games, CD-ROMS, and DVDs. Through the new media, traditional mediums such as television and newspapers have been digitized to correspond to the technological revolution. This has been due to the increasing use of the internet against other traditional mediums of communication.

The new media has opened up the communication space and offered diverse forums for expression through blogs, websites, pictures, and other user-generated media. It is as a result of the evolution of new media technologies, that globalization occurs (Flew 2002). It has led to the establishment of virtual communities that transcend geographical boundaries, eliminating social restrictions. Cairncross expresses this great development as the "death of distance" since new media "radically breaks the connection between physical place and social place, making physical location much less significant for our social relationships" (Cairncross cited in Croteau and Hoynes, 2003, p.311). Consequently, Rheingold observes that "People in virtual communities use words on screens to exchange pleasantries and argue, engage in intellectual discourse, conduct commerce, make plans, brainstorm, gossip, feud, fall in love, create a little high art and a lot of idle talk" (Rheingold cited in Slevin, 2000, p.91). This is further accentuated by Turkle who notes "making the computer into a second self, finding a soul in the machine, can substitute for human relationships" (Turkle cited in Holmes, 2005, p.184). As such new media has the ability to connect like-minded others worldwide. While there could be misgivings on the potential of the internet to destroy traditional media, John Givens offers an assurance in the sense that new media technologies and services supplement rather than replace their predecessors (Given, 1998, p.46).

Theoretical Perspectives

With the emergence of the internet as a leading communication medium, so has been the need for theory to guide the development of this field. Many theories currently applicable were previously developed for the traditional media's. Theoretical activity on internet use is still developing hence a lot of possibilities are still evident in this area. In the light of these theoretical developments, Mc Quail points out "internet as a new media, changes the role of the audience. The balance of audience activity shifts from reception to searching, consulting and interacting" (Mc Quail, 2000: 120).

Several theoretical models have been advanced such as the *Hypodermic model* which assumes that the media *'drugs'* the audience destroying its ability to think critically about the wider world (Giddens, 2006, p.608). The *two step flow model* by (Katz and Lazarsfeld 1955) defines the media in two stages, the first being the media reaches its audience and the second being the audience interprets it through their social interaction with opinion leaders who shape audience response. Similarly Stuart Halls (1980) *reception theory* looks at the way audience class and cultural background affects the way it makes sense of different media texts. While these theories attempt to analyze internet use, several critics have pointed out their incapacitation to explain internet phenomena.

In this paper, significance is given to the *uses and gratifications* theoretical model which has been largely employed in explaining internet phenomena. This is because this paradigm identifies the three key features of the internet as its interactivity, demassified nature and breaking the barrier of space and time. The gratification model looks at how people use the media to fulfill their needs. In essence, Mc Quail (2000) notes that the gratifications theory is founded on four principles of internet use. These are information, personal identity, integration & social interaction and entertainment. While this paper draws a lot of significance from this theory, several criticisms have similarly been advanced with further modifications to this theory being developed.

Internet Utility

The nature of media consumption is changing with the advent of the digital age (Rayner et al 2004, p.217). With the accelerated growth of the internet, has been a concomitant upsurge in the consumption patterns. There has been a significant increase in the percentage of adults who spent at least an hour a day on the internet compared to the percentage of adults who spent an hour a day with the print edition of a daily newspaper. This heavy use has been growing faster among internet users than among users of other media (Ferguson 2006, p.325). As the online population increases, trends are significantly changing. While previous use of the internet was restricted to a relatively small and elite group, the internet is beginning to reach a broader cross-section of the public. New online users increasingly come from lower and middle socio-economic groups and are also disproportionately drawn from younger generations (PEW 1999). As Giddens observes "inevitably, our personal lives have been altered as globalizing forces enter into our local contexts, our homes and our communities through impersonal sources such as the media, the internet and popular culture" (Giddens, 2006, p.67). As such globalization is altering the way we socialize in the world by redefining gender, culture, identity and other social norms.

The internet is increasingly gaining popularity as the preferred point of accessing information mainly because of accessibility, convenience and breadth of online searches (PEW 1999). An overwhelming majority of the online public use email, mostly to communicate with their family and friends, while others use email for work related communication. People increasingly turn to the internet to do research for work, get entertainment and travel information, update on current affairs, shop, and catch up with friends and family. This wide range of activities reflects the expanding internet population. Entertainment is an especially big draw for younger users. Many people access the internet to download music, videos and other entertainment interests (PEW 1999). The dramatic growth of the internet in recent years and the proliferation of all-news cable television outlets, network news magazine shows and other information sources, presents the public with broad choices to choose from (PEW 1999). Through the internet, online journalism has expanded the communication space and the access to news. It has further propelled television reporting to digital broadcasting as well as the use of cable television. These features which have been widely used by media houses such as *CNN* and *BBC* has improved timeliness, reach and access to information. It has also improved audience participation in media reporting for instance through using video

streaming technology via *you tube* and *I-reports* in CNN where audiences who are not necessarily trained journalists, report on issues from their own perspective.

The internet is rapidly growing both in terms of its use as well as the audience because many users acknowledge its ability to save on time while providing choice and convenience. The internet has enabled many products to criss cross global boundaries and led to the emergence of a global unified economy. The presence of global brands like *Coca Cola* and the emergence of agencies like the *World Trade Organization* to manage global trade attests to this. Among the internet possibilities, it enables virtual shopping, online banking, mobile money transfer like *M-PESA* and *ZAP* freeing one from the physical hassles and costs attached in performing these tasks. The internet has made possible an electronic economy opening up global trade. As such "the emergence of the knowledge society has been linked to the development of a broad base of consumers who are technologically literate and eagerly integrate new advances in computing, entertainment and telecommunications in their everyday lives" (Giddens, 2006, p.54). And while many people access the net for online shopping, many are reluctant because they are worried about the security of their credit card numbers due to cyber crime (PEW 1999). The internet has also redefined the academia with advances in online libraries and bookstores like *SAGE, Routledge, Questia*, Amazon e.t.c. almost declaring hardcopy books redundant. Further academic advances have been through the formation of communities of practice through online journals such as *Lancet*. The internet has decentralized the search for any kind of information through search engines like *Yahoo*, *Google*, *Bing* e.t.c. Compared to other media's, the internet stands out because it is networked, interactive, enables two way communication, and allows its users to be both producers as well as consumers of content (Flew, 2004, p.1).

The internet has been at the center of the development of global culture. This is because the internet has reoriented people's thinking from the level of the nation state to the global stage. This has brought more awareness of the interconnectedness among people from different localities and therefore they are more likely to identify with global issues and processes (Giddens, 2006, p.53). Through music and the arts, the internet influences the global cultural fabric. The music and the film industry has subjected a lot of young people to different exposures on popular culture e.g. fashion and music which they mostly end up adopting. A case in point is in the music industry in Kenya which has witnessed the development of *Genge* and *Kapuka* which are hip hop genres, out of influence from American hip hop artistes.

The internet has offered variety to its audience which affords them choices. As a result the audience becomes active participants in the communication process since they are both producers and consumers of information. This is because the internet platform allows people to create their own content and distribute it widely. The change in consumption patterns are such that online audiencesgoto the internet news sites to get more information about subjects that specifically interest them rather than to seek out general enlightenment. (Rao, 2003, p.80). According to Rao, audiences have clearly demonstrated that when it comestoaccessing information online, there is no such thing as a singular news source.They browse multiple sources for specific information for reasons of choice and cost. The larger the number of sources consumers has, the more knowledgeable they are, thus reducing human dependence and loyaltytowardsa singular news source (Rao, 2003, p.80).

The internet forges social connections between people. With the internet revolution taking root virtually worldwide, social networking has gained increasing ground worldwide. The internet provides a new social structure called the 'network society' whereby people remain connected electronically to society (Castells, 2000, p.14). The internet has perpetuated social networking by eliminating the physical space and instead introducing the cyber space. Diverse networking sites and spots have been borne that present forums for socialization without necessarily having to weather the constraints of meeting physically. Chat rooms have gained increasing prominence worldwide giving room for people to make friends while on the other hand offering a social forum

to vent their emotions within cyber space. The introduction of social networking sites like *Face book* and *Twitter* have further scaled up socialization to a much higher level. Internet dating is also gaining prominence through dating sites like *Tagged* and *Jhoos*. As Ashley Donaldson observes "the Internet is making the path of finding true love a little smoother" (Donaldson, 2003, p. 9). These and other similar sites have made communication and socialization a door step nearer.

The new media similarly presents society with a tool for social change. Social activists find an opportunity to engage the new media audiences in campaigns for a particular social cause. Using websites, blogs, and online videos, activists can reach out to huge number of people and gain public attention. An example is the *Mars group* in Kenya which uses the new media to blow the whistle on suspected corruption in the government. Similarly opposition to the Kenya communications amendment bill 2008 was waged through all forms of media including the new media.

The political sphere is also being influenced largely by globalization. The development of global bodies like the United Nations, European Union and regional bodies like the African Union and the East African Community all by

products of globalization. The growth of social, economic and political systems is largely dependent on efficient communication systems. Through advances in technology, the media calls international attention to pertinent issues and necessitates the international community to obligate itself in intervening (Giddens, 2006, p.53). Examples of these include the Haiti earthquake, the recent Pakistan floods and the post election violence in Kenya. This has been made possible through the quick flow of information on the internet and through the mass media outlets.

Interactivity
Most of the traditional mass media approaches lacked interactivity which was a preserve of individual face to face conversational dynamics. Interactivity has nonetheless become a key feature in the dynamics of new media. Flew points out that when compared to other media the Internet stands out because it is networked, interactive, enables two way communication, and allows its users to be both producers as well as consumers of content. (Flew, 2004, p.1). Nonetheless different media forms possess different degree of interactivity. Interactivity is not an inherent characteristic of all new media technologies although it is a key ingredient. Interactivity is present in some of the new media's such as video games. Flew (2004) argues that new media allows users to establish relationships and experience a sense of belonging, despite temporal and spatial boundaries. New media changes continuously due to the fact that it is constantly modified and redefined by the interaction between the creative use of the masses, emerging technology, cultural changes e.t.c.

The key difference between the traditional and new media's is the interactivity between the user and the programmer (Ferguson, 2006, p.314). The new communication technologies enable interactivity among users and the information (Rice 1984). This radically shifts thinking that was initially moulded on the traditionally dominant interpersonal communication paradigm of "one to one" and mass communication paradigm of "one to many" to the new media

paradigm of "many to many". As such any individual with the appropriate technology possesses the ability to produce their own online media (Crosbie 2002).

Technological Convergence

With the growth of the internet, has been the emergence of many similar technologies that are interdependent. This has necessitated the convergence of these many digital technologies. The convergence arises out of growing linkages between media, information technology and telecommunications (Flew, 2004,

p.10). The internet has heralded globalization by overcoming geographical boundaries and creating a common cyber space. The internet has especially worked towards a convergence of different technologies mainly linkages between media, information technology and telecommunications (Flew, 2004, p.10). Technology continues to play an important role in communication, entertainment and improving productivity. Convergence is leading to the merging of computers, cell-phones, hi-fi, TV and other electronic devices, as well as the blending of cable, wireless and satellite communication. As a result of convergence, technological use is being simplified for its users making life more convenient and enjoyable. For instance the internet can now be accessed through mobile phones, while phone calls can be made through internet products such as *Skype*. This has of necessity improved access to technology for many users who probably couldn't afford computers.

Challenges of new media's

With the emergence of new media's, many audiences have continued to broaden their perceptions of what constitutes news. While direct access to information and increased control by audiences could be beneficial to communication, the caveat is that Internet use can erode the authority of other professionals. Haug notes that greater public access to knowledge through "computerization" and the techniques of obtaining this knowledge will mean a drop in status for many professions. In the eyes of clients, professions in such a situation become "just another commercial vendor" (cited in Lowrey and Anderson, 1999).

Much as there are many improvements, access to technological devices remains a major challenge for the new media. For people to use these new media's, access and knowledge of how to use these media's is essential. The convergence of technologies has worked towards improving this element although much more needs to be done. Especially in the third world, access to computers and mobile phones remains a major challenge. Similarly while there have been massive developments in internet technology, the speed of internet connection is often slow. As a result these frustrations are likely to limit use of the internet over the traditional media's.

While the advancements in technology such as cable television and the internet ensure that news is broadcast worldwide, the challenges of cultural erosion and loss of identity are a stark reality. "The search for Identity is shifting beyond the nation state and the nation state as a source of identity is waning in many areas, as political shifts at the regional and global level loosen people's orientations towards the states in which they live" (Giddens, 2006, p.54). The internet has the potential to instigate a cultural convergence of magnanimous proportions.

The effects of globalization are such that the world is slowly transforming into a universal cyber space. This transformation is likely to converge different cultures within cyber space. As a result, the dominant cultures are likely to take root in the internet and lead to a cultural homogenization in the form of a universal culture (Barnett, 2007, p.170). While the internet had led to the establishment of a global culture, most of the technological advances are mainly dominated by the west e.g. *Microsoft, Google, yahoo, face book* are all inventions of the west. The effects of this convergence are the erosion of idiosyncratic cultures and the loss of individual identities while falling for the vagaries of brainwashing and servitude to the dominant cultures. Africa and other continents risk being the doormats to western cultural invasions. On the extremes, this cultural colonization is a major challenge to our social and cultural fabric. That notwithstanding, the internet can be used to strengthen traditional cultures through cyber tourism.

Gate keeping as a media function is applicable to the new media but unfortunately far too much information in the internet does not undergo this sieve. As a result, a substantial amount of

information on the net dos not undergo the rigorous editing required and could potentially lead to complexities in terms of credibility and authenticity. The traditional media's are mainly driven by trained journalists who mostly abide by the ethics and rules of journalism. This code of journalism commonly protects the consumers from being fed with explicit material. The absence of strict gate keeping in the new media's makes it difficult to apply censorship and hence virtually anyone can disseminate any kind of information. This is what has led to the prospects of law to deal with cyber ethics. As Craig points out "in journalism there's etiquette, on the internet there netiquette. There are certain rules that all web users – not just journalists – are generally expected to follow online" (Craig, 2005, p. 222).

On a different note, lack of gatekeepers produces competing visions of cyberspace (Sternberg, 2004). While the internet continues to provide information to the masses, it continues to provide a counter threat to the political class and their rule which thrives on sieving information for public consumption. Censorship of the Internet is becoming a reality with countries such as China, Iran, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Tunisia, Burma, Zimbabwe and Uzbekistan among the governments restricting access to selected websites or content (Wikipedia).

In spite of the fact that the internet has broken geographic barriers, it has brought several misnomers' with itself. One of the key challenges is social isolationism. The new world of cyberspace portends a lonely, isolated and dehumanized society. The challenge with the internet is that while it is improving virtual communication, it is slowly replacing everyday human communication (PEW 1999). This fact is discerned by Turkle (1995) who points out the absurdity of the notion that community can arise from among people sitting alone, typing messages to virtual friends. The internet has led to a reduction in human contact, personal relationships are suffering, traditional forms of entertainment have been discarded and the fabric of social life is weakened (Giddens, 2006, p.597). Nonetheless research by Pew casts doubt on suggestions that online activities are associated with social isolationism (PEW 1999). An additional challenge is that the internet is encroaching on domestic life as the lines between work and home are blurred (Giddens, 2006, p.597)

Children particularly need to interact with other children to develop social skills. Increased exposure to new media such as video games has the potential to derail the proper development of social skills among children (Monoroe, 2001). The other challenge is the ease with which children can access pornographic and other explicit materials in the internet (PEW 1999). While there have been improvements through legislation and censorship to restrict the access of children to sexually explicit materials on the Internet, the system is not watertight.

Globalization has led to the creation of a global economy with many individual economies interdependent on each other. While this offers growth, it has also weakened the different individual economies. Testimony to this was during the recent economic crunch that was felt worldwide much as it was instituted by economic problems in a few countries. The internet is similarly faced with the threat of cyber crime. Online fraud and crime continues to be a problem as the internet stands to be abused in cyber crimes. The internet has the potential to be used as a conduit by prying subversive groups like pedophiles to target their potential victims.

Conclusion

The new media's offer limitless possibilities as they continue to develop and expand reach worldwide. While this paper does not provide an exhaustive interrogation of the prospects and challenges of the new media's, it does offer a lens into the effects of the new media's to society. The internet and its attendant media's have a critical role to play in communication and largely contribute to globalization. In this regard, the internet has aroused both hopes and fears opening up the world to many possibilities. Sociologist Manuel Castells argues that the internet will continue to grow because it allows networks to flourish. While the old order is being redefined, it is giving birthto new possibilities (cited in Giddens, 2006, p.598). In the light of these developments, there are many possibilities for further research on the new media's.

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