

**FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION: AN EXPLORATION OF THE NETWORKED
COMMUNICATIONS ENVIRONMENT IN AFRICA.**

A keynote address presented by

**Kwame Karikari,
Media Foundation for West Africa, Accra, Ghana**

At a workshop on:

**NEW COMMUNICATIONS TECHNOLOGY AND FREEDOM OF
EXPRESSION**

**Organized by the Global Partners and Associates, Taweza Communications, and
Africa Woman and Child Feature Service,
Nairobi, July 16-19, 2007**

Media Foundation for West Africa, Accra, Ghana

Introduction

Considering Africa's general socio-economic, or even more generally cultural, circumstances in the world today, we may be provoked to ask: is Africa in, or can Africa enter, the mainstream, or as in so many other realms remain on the margins, of the so-called "Information Society"? It is redundant to repeat the enormous opportunities that the new communications technology offers in advancing social, economic, cultural and political progress. But can Africa make the new technology its own such as to use it to address appropriately and effectively the fundamental questions of social development and human progress that appear to elude the peoples of the continent with such unyielding obstinacy?

The new technologies are here, in Africa as elsewhere. And as we will soon be informed, there is dramatic growth in the adoption and use of several elements of the new technology in Africa. There is no doubt also that they are making important contributions to the overall progress in several aspects of life and existence in Africa. We may also at this meeting gain some insight into some of the areas in which these contributions are being made, and what the essence and significance of these contributions may be.

Obviously the expansion of the communications spaces in Africa is an everyday experience, most especially for people in urban communities. It is not, however, cynicism or pessimism about the fact or possibilities of progress in Africa that provokes the questions raised earlier. They are motivated by concern for Africa's exploitation of this new knowledge and technology by itself and for itself, and in becoming part, and not just

observers or simple admirers, of the innovations and advancements in the knowledge and production of the technology.

Our concern is also borne out of the lessons from the history of the introduction of communications technologies into Africa and the kinds of relationships that these have engendered: first between African societies on one hand and external powers and forces on the other; and then in post-colonial times between African popular social forces on one hand and the states and their ruling elites on the other. And this forum and project, perhaps, offers an opportunity to address some of the critical issues involved so as to make contributions toward moving forward in fundamental ways.

In raising the question whether Africa will be part of or marginal to the full participation in the communications revolution, and whether such participation will enhance freedom of expression, we would like to make brief remarks or observations around the following few issues :

- (a) the development of technology;
- (b) economics of the industry and services;
- (c) literacy or the technical capacity of people to make effective and creative uses of the technology and its processes; and
- (d) the cultural implications and demands necessitated by the introduction and use of the technology.

Some general observations

Historically, modern (that is in the industrial era) communications technology were introduced into Africa by external forces for purposes of enhancing interests and objectives other than those of the African peoples. The coming of the telegraph and the laying of submarine cables around the continent from the late 1880s had the explicit objects of imperial military and political dominance and colonial commercial exploitation. (The role of the telegraph in subduing African resistance, such as the Ashanti, the Zulu and others in the late 19th century is well documented.) Symbolically this is why the early telegraph and telephone connections ran along railway networks and into mining and other raw material resource areas.

Radio broadcasting was also introduced with declared intentions of ideological and political purposes of colonial control.

This pattern of telecommunications infrastructural development and state monopoly and control of broadcasting hardly changed after independence. The current changes or expansion in telecommunications infrastructural networking and access on the continent, and the liberalization of the airwaves especially across sub-Saharan Africa, have occurred since the late 1980s and 1990s. They are products of two critical historical developments among others: both result from the rapid technological advances of the post-world war 2 era; and the growth and expansion in telecommunications development is a response primarily to the demands of the new economic paradigm of so-called globalization.

One important characteristic of these developments is that access and reach of communications today is global, as against the situation in the past when it was structured along the geopolitical divisions of the imperial order. This means that, for example in Africa, up until the middle 1980s, if a person in Ghana wanted to make a telephone call to Togo next door, the link would first have to go through London, then Paris, and finally to Lome. Another important development is that the neo-liberal economic order has broken down state monopolies of the telecommunications business making it open to the intervention of global capital with several implications for African development.

Some recent opportunities

Communications technologies enhance, or embody the potential of enhancing, the expansion of freedom of expression. What makes the new generation of technology even more enhancing of free expression, as we all know, is the potential for interactivity and enhanced access for personal participation and use in creating, producing and sharing information by citizens or groups of them.

It is not at all speculative to propose that for millions of Africans – especially women among them – mobile telephony alone must constitute an instrument promoting easy and unfettered communication as was never before possible. At the social and personal level, this may be gleaned for example from the fears raised by some male callers on radio programmes (in Ghana, at least) complaining that the mobile telephone encourages adultery among women (never men). One of the socio-economic implications is that the new technology facilitates, for example, closer interaction between families divided by labour migration, and financial remittances from the diaspora.

The combination of the radio, the mobile phone and the internet in promoting important democratic projects is well-known. Their use in promoting electoral transparency in Benin, the Congo, Ghana, Kenya, South Africa, and elsewhere is evidence of this. Where elections have been fraudulent as in Nigeria, for example, or threatened with fraud as in Senegal, the exposure of fraud or the threat of it has been made possible by reason of the application of the new technology in monitoring and reporting the malpractices for mass communication. In other words, nowadays the new technology makes it extremely difficult to hide critical information from the public for too long.

From country to country and to varying degrees of freedom and access, the telephone and radio have enhanced popular participation in public affairs discussions on a daily basis as never before. This sometimes includes instantaneous responses from ministers of government and other people in public offices of responsibility and decision-making. It is obvious too that these developments are not the norm around the continent and serious social, political and legal restrictions on communications hinder the uses of the technology from enhancing free expression.

It can also be submitted that the new communications environment contributes tremendously to the development of the social movements for advancing democratic change, human rights and other progressive ideals in Africa. The technology enhances the

growth and dissemination of the ideas promoting these ideals and their concomitant cultures. They also facilitate the mobilization and organisation of the social forces committed to these goals. We can observe that the rapid growth of the social movements in Africa roughly in the past two decades owes much to the facilities of the new communications environment. Through it one can even observe a growing cross-continental solidarity movement for rights and other progressive ends. The women's rights and gender equality movement is one important example.

Some key issues for consideration

As Andrew Puddephatt has lucidly explained elsewhere, besides the fundamental questions of the political environment and legal framework and institutions, other conditions are critical in contributing to the enhancement and expansion of freedom of expression in society. Technology, obviously, is one and has always been a critical one throughout history. In our African context it is useful for us to consider the following areas, with a view to discussing how they influence or affect the new communications environment in promoting freedom of expression in Africa.

In this brief discussion we are bound to raise old questions. This is not because there is nothing new to ask. It is because we do not appear to have found answers to these vexing fundamental questions that impinge on our very existence as cultures.

The development of technology

Let us take the question of the development of the communications technologies. Africa's dependency as mere consumers is absolute. Knowledge and application of science, and experiments and innovations in technology do not only enhance economic growth. I will submit that it is an integral part of cultural development, and constitutes a critical element of the expression of human creativity and ingenuity.

In the short and long term, prolonged technological dependency culminates in underdevelopment. The economic costs are enormous. We have seen in Africa how most of our state-owned media institutions collapsed from the late 1970s on as a result of several factors including the inability of the states to chase after the rapid technical innovations at the time, including the switch from black and white to colour television transmission. It becomes quite obvious how the lack of technological advancement limits a community's information and knowledge base and thereby encumbers the members' facilities of fulfilling their potential for expression.

The challenge of technological dependency assumes greater weight considering the dizzying rate of innovations and growth in the new technologies and the ever-expanding functions they offer for social, economic and other goals. Africa is not part of the innovations expanding the technology's potential. Very negligible research in the field goes on in African institutions and industry.

Inability to catch up means further and further backwardness and the underdevelopment of our communities. If freedom of expression involves also the assertion and manifestation of dignity, inability to produce and use technology amounts to undermining investment in building dignity.

Economics of the industry and service

Closely related to the mastery of the technology is the important, indeed critical question concerning ownership, control and participation in the production of the “hard ware” and in the provision of the services of the technology. Ownership ensures reproduction and control of the means of communication, which in turn determines the input and outputs of the technology.

As it is with major sectors of the economies in Africa, Africans’ share of the business of the new communications technologies is visibly insignificant. Though there is a growing African investment in service provision at individual country levels, their cumulative presence in the industry provide little hope for rapid future growth.

In the traditional mass media, governments still own the predominant broadcasting systems in most countries. Their refusal, or at best hesitation, to transform them into transparently independent public service systems has enormous implications for popular participation in public affairs through the mass media. Already it is a fact that even now the privately owned independent stations provide more access to popular participation through phone-in than do the state-owned stations.

The mass media’s central and critical place in promoting and protecting free expression in all its manifestations, ramifications and implications cannot be overemphasized. A number of issues are of concern regarding the African-owned mass media in playing this role. Economic constraints limit their capacity to produce and disseminate African-generated content, knowledge and imagery. Basic news is one. And television programming is perhaps the worst affected example. Local content, from news to entertainment, recedes in quantity and quality by the day on state or private television.

An important outcome of the liberalization of the airwaves and the advances in technology is the wider expansion of international or global mass media into African spaces. While this provides enhanced access to international information, the absence of African owned and operated transnational services compounds the impact of low African content on offer to the peoples.

The right to information, which is an intrinsic pillar in the exercise of the freedom of expression, is severely handicapped if citizens have little access to information concerning their primary environments. Knowledge of one’s immediate environment provides the most critical foundations for a community’s capacity to master and improve the conditions of life of its members, including the promotion and protection of their rights and interests. If the mass media and other communications facilities and processes

cannot fully contribute to this their role in development of any sort is completely compromised.

Literacy and technical capacity

An important facility for enhancing and expanding free expression and the capacity to enjoy the freedom is literacy. Illiteracy presents a serious limitation on a citizen's capacity to appreciate this freedom and to contribute to its expansion in society. With regard to new communications technology their effective use is further enhanced by literacy. For technologies that require more than oral or audio application and access, illiteracy becomes an impediment. In African countries most of which conduct the affairs of governance in foreign languages, illiteracy hampers a citizen's right to full participation in public affairs and the processes of democratic involvement.

Literacy as formal education is a necessary condition for expanding creativity and the realization of one's capacity for fuller expression and exchange of ideas. Literacy as a necessary basis for scientific enquiry and advancements in technology also enhances growth and development in the technologies for communication.

All this is to say that the masses of illiterate populations in Africa are therefore marginalized in the full use of the new communications technologies in enhancing their freedom of expression, even assuming conditions in which the political and legal conditions enable this fundamental human right.

Cultural implications

Yesterday, Nana Oye Lithur raised an issue regarding the place of traditional forms and symbols of communication in the modern communication environment with regard to freedom of expression. I will say that the issue provokes a fundamental question regarding the cultural content and significance of communication in the present environment. It may also be related to the other factors I have raised above.

We may raise the broader question of culture in a number of ways and for a number of reasons. Technologies of communication are vessels of recording, reproducing, conveying, and passing on cultural realities and phenomena. Language, symbols, images, and other forms of representation are the material and forms of the processes of the communication.

Freedom of expression is the most important condition for the realization of cultural existence. The communications technology facilitates the process. So we may ask: in what ways is Africa using the technology to promote this cultural self-assertion?

Let's take some practical examples. How many African languages are used on the internet in whichever way? There are a few, but our contention is that unlike Asia that is an incomparable development. Then again, how many of pictorial or other symbols used in traditional society are reproduced on the internet for purposes of communication or even for aesthetic effect?

One is likely to find in East Africa, for example, some newspapers published in the local languages. If you find them in West Africa and Central Africa at all they will be so rare that it will be a surprise. Television broadcasting in local languages is more the exception than the rule in West, Central, East and Southern Africa. While use of local languages on radio has increased with the entry of private radio broadcasting, it raises serious concerns of quality and respect for the languages in several cases.

The cultural content of communication technologies in Africa and their implications for enhancing freedom of expression as a manifestation of self-realization and human dignity is a critical issue. As Andrew reminded us yesterday, most of the data and information and knowledge material about our societies are not in our possession, but in the North. If an inventory is made of the personal library of any educated African it will be observed that the overwhelming majority of the material will be on subjects regarding cultures other than that individual's own society.

There are many more issues of cultural relevance of the content of our communications technology and processes. The present communication environment provides enormous possibilities of improving the situation in very fundamental and radical ways. But these require interventions at policy and other levels that go beyond the individual's capacity.

Issues to ponder over

May I conclude with the following issues:

1. How can we influence legislation regarding the new communications technologies with the object of :
 - (a) expanding the space for expression;
 - (b) strengthening African capacity in:
 - i.) increasing participation in research;
 - ii.) the production of African content;
 - iii.) enhancing the creative capacity to increase production of local content;
2. How can we promote the expansion and establishment of communications technology centers for public service information and communication facilities, especially in poor and rural communities for expanded access?
3. How can we promote the use of such public facilities for literacy and other educational purposes?
4. How can we undertake more research and studies into:
 - (a) how people are using the new communications technologies;

- (b) the content of the communications vehicles and their cultural characteristics and relevance;
 - (c) how to use the technology to encourage alternative voices;
 - (d) how to use the technology to record and preserve indigenous and traditional knowledge that are threatened with oblivion and extinction?
5. What can be done to encourage increasing African participation in the ownership and control of the economics of communication?

Thank you.

Kwame Karikari

Nairobi

July 16, 2007