Africa and the Information Superhighway: Silent Majorities in Search of a Footpath

By Dr Francis B. Nyamnjoh

Abstract

This paper emphasises the role that communication technology plays in the present day world. It embraces Marshall McLuhan's idea of "the global village" as a result of the communication technological strides. The paper states that the term information superhighway incorporates all the existing networks into one system, but at the same time it is multi dimensional, unlike the traffic highway which projects two directions of movement. It moves to underscore pluralism that exists as a result of advanced information technology. This rush towards information technology, is largely interlinked to economic factors. The paper advocates for research in indigenous communication to augment modern communication. It argues that Africa's potential in indigenous knowledge and practices remains largely untapped, adding that information and knowledge can be effectively transmitted using indigenous forms of communication, which are characterised by simplicity of technology and directness of interaction. The paper ends with an assertion that indigenous forms of communication should be integrated with modern communication systems for sustainable development.

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L'Afrique et la Super Voie de Communication: La Majorité à la Recherche d'un Chemin

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Résumé

On souligne, dans cette communication, le rôle de la Technologie de la Communication dans le monde contemporain. Nyamnjoh discute même la théorie de Michael McLuhan, qui postule que les diverses régions du monde pourraient un jour se réunir, grâce au développement avancé de la Technologie Communicationnelle, pour constituer le fameux Village Mondial. Selon cet auteur, le terme Super Voie de Communication englobe les réseaux actuels pour en faire un système incorporé, tout en restant multi-dimensionnel.

Autrement dit, il s'agit d'un pluralisme ouvert, tenant compte des multiples aspects du domaine de la Communication. Nyamnjoh va jusqu'à montrer le lien étroit entre cette Super Voie et les divers éléments socio-économiques. Toutefois, il soutient l'intensification de recherche dans le domaine de la Communication Indigène, qui devrait, à son avis, être complémentaire aux moyens modernes. L'auteur signale que la potentialité de la Communication Indigène, qui demeure inexploitée, est énorme.

Si les moyens tradiotionnels sont simples, ceux-ci pourraient s'avérer également efficaces, à condition qu'ils soient adaptés aux actualités. L'auteur termine sa communication avec l'affirmation que ce mode devrait être tenu en comptre, dans la promotion du développement soutenable.

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Africa and the Information Superhighway

The newly coined phrase "information superhighway", inspired by US Vice-President Al Gore's description of new communications technologies as an "information highway" (Biagi, 1996:27), has been projected to the limelight of communication studies. It presupposes the existence of a "highway" which has been widened and improved upon to become "super". This simply reflects a metaphorical usage wherein, it tries to explain the possibility that all and sundry in the electronic age can interact with each other through computers which serve as a superhighway for the transmission of messages. This term furthermore incorporates all the existing networks into one system but at the same time it is multi-dimensional, unlike the traffic highway which projects two directions of movements (Okigbo, 1995).

Tools of this superhighway include cable television, high definition television, satellite master antenna systems, the videocassette recorder (VCR), teletext, facsimile, lasers, digital recording, and electronic mail. The list cannot be exhaustive, given the pace of developments in the industry. The Internet - a public network which was originally a project of the Pentagon and the National Science Foundation in the US, has come to epitomize the information superhighway. Its main objective was "to deliver computer data back and forth between defence research centres spread throughout the country" (Grossman, 1994:32). Today, it has become a huge electronic superhighway incessantly travelled by millions of enthusiasts around the world. The Internet is available, at a fee, to anyone with a computer, a modem and an efficient telephone line. The use of computer technology to transmit information has extended so vastly that it now functions as an intricate combination of many communication systems. These interconnected systems use broadcast, cables, telephone and computer technology to link people in various parts of the globe (Biagi, 1995; Uche, 1988:5-6).

There is abundant literature stressing the advantages of the

Internet, which has been presented as a complex but easy-going mechanism, that reveals a lot on how the information highway has revolutionised life and future prospects for individuals and states. It has far-reaching tentacles, touching prominent realms such as politics, the information economy, and the social network. Proponents and enthusiasts of the information superhighway maintain that, owing to the constant improvement and widening of the communication highway, one can now talk of electronic democracy - using electronic machines to actively participate in the goings-on of their community, state, and world. In the West, it is argued, that such an advancement has affected politics in a way that the electorate are having more and more say in decision-making, posing as an active arm of government. This places the legislative power directly in the hands of the people, for laws on taxes, education, immigration, abortion, crime and other major issues cannot be made without seeking the electorate's concerns. In America for example, Grossman argues, thanks to such interactive telecommunications technologies, citizens no longer "have to wait until Election Day to let their representatives in Congress and in the White House know what they think and what they want" (Grossman, 1994:34).

An economic outlook equally presents the information superhighway as a force to reckon with in the business world (Jussawalla, 1988; Melody, 1987). Wriston (1994:23) asserts, inter alia, that "information technology has created an entirely new economy, an information economy, as different from the industrial economy as the industrial was from the agricultural." In today's world economy, information serves as a weighty form of capital, thus this shakes the very fabric of business structures. Telecommunication growth affects structural change in ownership and management. Furthermore, the international market today can be seen as thousands of computers linking together such trading capitals as Hong Kong, New York, London, Tokyo and Singapore. It can be deduced from this that due to the emergence of the information superhighway, the way wealth is created has been changed remarkably (Jussawalla, 1988). It

should be noted that the rush to create an interactive electronic superhighway is to a large extent driven by the irresistible drive to accumulate. The debate is, however, open. But Africa is yet to experience such technology, thus its business transactions are still wavy. Could the lack of this technology explain, in part, the continent's current record of less than 10 % of the volume of international trade?

From a social perspective, one quickly notices how the information highway has linked major parts of the world. It has enhanced interpersonal, intergroup and international communication. This has furthermore brought the world so close as one community "within which individuals and groups could exchange information and ideas directly" (Okigbo, 1995:107), in "a global conversation" (Wriston, 1994:20) like in a village. The growth of information superhighway has revitalised debate on international news flow. While mass communicators in the West view it as rapidly forwarding the globalisation process, their counterparts in the developing world who are financially and psychologically incapable of achieving these sophisticated technologies, see their development as fostering media imperialism. To Melody, it is apparent that "Third World nations will bear the brunt of the risk and instability associated with the exploitation of information industry technologies and markets" (Melody, 1987:26). Uche argues that the new telecommunication technologies have made dependency a *fait accompli* in the Third World (Uche, 1988:3). Nevertheless, many are those who argue that these revolutionary media technologies are rapidly shrinking the world into Marshall McLuhan's prophesied "global village". Jussawalla observes that "the proliferation of global information systems and the rapid transmission of data flows across national boundaries", have rendered the nation-state meaningless and raised the prospects of the eventual creation of a global "republic of technology" (Jussawalla, 1988:11-12). Wriston argues that with the advent of an information superhighway, human rights or democratic freedoms will not be denied people of remote places. For "A global village will have

global customs" (Wriston, 1994:20). And this will be made possible by the "Mcdonaldization" of societies the world over through emphasis on efficiency, calculability, predictability, and control (Ritzer, 1996).

The tendency is to claim that these interactive technologies offer more control over the media by consumers, and to present media audiences as having a greater opportunity to choose and consume what they want when they want.[1] Grossman argues that George Orwell's "nightmare vision" of the information society presented in his novel *1984*, "has been turned upside down". For, "Instead of "Big Brother" keeping millions of citizens under continuous electronic surveillance, millions of citizens are keeping 'Big Bubba' in the White House under continuous electronic surveillance" (Grossman, 1994:34). Mind control of the Mussolini type has been rendered impossible by the fact that "there are just too many pathways for news and data to find their way to us" (Wriston, 1994:18). But this is a claim refuted by others (Arriaga, 1985; Elliott, 1986; Gandy, Jr, 1989), who, like Schiller (1983), argue that the new technologies are conceived, designed, built, and installed with the primary objective of maintaining economic, political and cultural privileges and advantage, while thwarting any social change that would abolish or overturn such privileges. Thus the call by Lyon for social scientists to treat the notion of "information society" as problematic, by investigating "*alternative* options in the adoption of new technologies" and discussing various strategies for the "*social shaping* of new technologies" (Lyon, 1986:585-6).

Unequal access notwithstanding, the information superhighway is making the Western World interact easily. That is why politics and economic matters tend to involve almost everyone. Just as electronic democracy has surfaced, the information highway has permitted people to shop and bank from their homes. A greater step forward for Western citizens, some have argued; yet its draw-backs still loom. National boundaries, national privacy and even the political concept of sovereignty are threatened. (Jussawalla, 1988:11-12). The growth of interactive telecom-

munications technologies also poses a threat to interpersonal relationships. It is speculated that by offering opportunities for distant people to exchange ideas, the emerging computer network will, in the near future, enable people obtain degrees using their PCs. Newspaper readers can now get an on-line edition of the newspapers instead of buying from news-stands. Again, computer technology has advanced so much so that computers can now provide a database of research service as well as travel, stock trading, banking, shopping, music and weather information services. People no longer need to go to shops to buy but can use their Personal Computer (PCs) to order products. Bank robbers do not need to physically go to banks with guns to steal millions; they can do this from their PCs in their bedrooms.

However, the profound technological changes taking place in the field of communication are likely to benefit mainly the people in the West. This is because most already have the tools or equipment that enable them to acquire and use these technologies. In the US for example, "nearly all of the households ... have televisions and telephones, more than three-fourths have VCRs, more than half are connected to cable, and about a third have personal computers" (Biagi, 1996:27). Moreover, the ideals of Western societies rooted in freedom and democracy allow for a free flow of information, at least, as far as is possible within the framework of dominant military and corporate interests. But in Africa where the basic equipment is lacking and where information is the preserve of the government, the information highway is still to become a reality, let alone a superhighway. As Jussawalla observes in general, "new technologies appear on the market at a rate faster than LDCs can afford or absorb" (Jussawalla, 1988:30). But, on the other hand, should "nations with a 50% literacy rate, a 5% telephone penetration rate, and an average annual income less than the cost of a computer terminal", give priority to new information technologies when all "instant access to data banks in New York and London" does, is facilitate TNC control in their regions? (Melody, 1987:26).

Africa still resides in a world of shadows as concerns the new

communication technologies. Some have argued has observed that the information superhighway has served disparaging ends to African states. Far from changing the situation in favour of Africa, the new communications technologies have made "it easier and faster to collect, process and distribute information that is injurious to the image of African nations" (Okigbo, 1995:112). Most international media project Africa as a land of doom and most often than not, comment on "apocalyptic prophesies" based on selected negative developments. Africa's international standing has been so repeatedly assaulted, that African states find it hard to project the glories of their lands. This has brought about talks of afro-pessimism - the idea that Africa has a hopeless future. Satellite facilities make it possible for international news agencies to report on the "dark" happenings in Africa which thus qualifies it as an "uncivilised" and a "dark" continent. If the new information technologies have strengthened Western societies, they have made Africa weaker. However, the struggle among African states continues as they try to project a better image of themselves through diplomacy, national news management and public relations (Okigbo, 1995).

The concept of an information superhighway can hardly be understood in Africa, "because the highway is yet to be travelled by enough Africans and/or Africa-based users" (Okigbo, 1995:120). Africa finds itself left behind, being more of an observer than an active participant. Africa, Uche argues, is "yet to undergo the political, economic, social and technological transformations needed to become a member of the much-talked-about information society" (Uche, 1988:5). Computers and telephonic technologies are yet to be common in the continent, but this does not cancel out the idea that where there is life, there is hope. As long as African dreams evolve into vision, a new light will cross the threshold of hope. Though advanced technology does not produce wisdom, nor change human nature, nor make problems go away (Wriston, 1994:25), at least it does widen the highway for more humans to drive on and to reflect on the prospects of an ever better way to live. There is the

possibility, distant and remote though it might be, that some day "the disillusioned African" (Nyamnjoh, 1995), shall be an active and equal participant in the "global conversations" of the "global village" or the global "republic of technology". As scholars, we can therefore join Nkwi (1995:160) in hoping for a future with e-mail "bringing world libraries and documentation centers to the remote offices of African social scientists." But until then, we, as communication researchers, must turn our attention to the footpaths offered by alternative channels of communication as the only way out for the silent majorities of Africa.

Research issues in indigenous communication

During an ACCE conference on "Traditional Communication/ Oramedia and Development" held in Nairobi in November 1995, I was asked to present a research Agenda for Africa in the area of Indigenous Communication (IC) or what the late Frank Ugboajah referred to as Oramedia. At first it sounded somehow contradictory that in the age of the information superhighway African scholars should be setting research agenda in IC. But a careful reflection shows that this is exactly where African communication scholars should increasingly turn their attention to. These scholars who know better than their friends and colleagues in the West, that millions in Africa, elites and academics included, are yet to *know* a computer, let alone pay to hook one onto a modem and a telephone, cannot afford to ignore research aimed at informing decision-making better on how best to harness the indigenous communication channels that continue to serve the bulk of their societies.

Thus my basic argument for coming up with this research agenda on indigenous communication is that, Africa's attempt at development for over nearly forty years along the lines of western experience and with the help of the mass media has met with little success. Today there is the growing awareness that imported western methods, science and technology and other western-inspired development efforts have failed mainly because

the development experts or agents have approached the exercise with a know-best attitude, hardly patient enough to observe, record and understand the people they have sought to help, nor modest enough to realise the importance of local knowledge and attitudes towards the attainment of development objectives. Since this overbearing we-know-best attitude has been predominant for over four decades, Africa's potential in indigenous knowledge and practices remains largely untapped. This attitude has tended to ignore systems of knowledge which the indigenous communities have produced, reproduced and shared for several decades through indigenous channels of communication, and which have enabled them to live more harmoniously with their environment. One could safely argue that the last forty years could have been more rewarding and less dramatic in negative outcome had steps been taken to integrate indigenous knowledge with western science and technology.

Indigenous forms of communication or Oramedia denote media that "are grounded on indigenous culture [sic] produced and consumed by members of a group. They reinforce the values of the group. They are visible cultural features, often strictly conventioned, by which social relationships and a world view are maintained and defined. They take on many forms and are rich in symbolism" (Ugboajah, 1985a:167). Oramedia may be seen to be interpersonal, and as "great legitimisers", if only because "they are highly distinctive and credible, unlike the electronic media which can be elitist, mighty, vicarious and urban" (Ugboajah, 1985b:32).

The distinctive feature of Oramedia is their capacity to speak to the common man in his language and idioms, and in dealing with problems that are directly relevant to his situation (Ugboajah, 1985a:167). Though Oramedia are the prime disseminators of culture in Africa, Ugboajah argues, many African countries tend to pay less interest to cultural development in their plans - which is probably why their media have largely represented cultural imperialism. He writes:

> The non-emphasis on cultural orientation is visibly manifested in the broadcast stations of various African countries where traditional music is transmitted in non-peak hours or presented without regard to a multilingual and multi-cultural audience or classified as a specialist subject - non-newsworthy ethic derived from Western concepts of what is relevant. Without enlisting culture and its artifacts, village people, the very soul of the African nation, may not be involved in the process of decision making. They should be enabled to see and experience changes as bringing benefits to them within their own world view (Ugboajah, 1985a:174).

Ideas, information and knowledge can be effectively transmitted using indigenous forms of communication, which are characterised by simplicity of technology and directness of interaction. In this case communication takes place in a very non-artificial milieu. Gestures, body language, facial expression, symbols and folklore are predominant in IC. Extensive experience shows that indigenous forms of communication can be effective in dispelling the superstitions, archaic perceptions and unscientific attitudes that people have inherited as part of tradition, and which are difficult to modify if the benefits of change are hard to demonstrate. Practitioners of the traditional media use a subtle form of persuasion by presenting the required message in locally popular artistic forms. This cannot be rivalled by any other means of communication. Examples abound where song, drama, dance groups and the like are used to promote campaigns against social evils (such as alcoholism, excessive dowries, discrimination against women, outmoded taboos) or for advances in farming, health, nutrition and family welfare, agricultural reforms, national unity and integration, and other goals. In other parts of the world, experiments have been conducted on how indigenous channels could be combined with the mass media for better effect. But in Africa, the tendency is still for professional journalists, politicians and even researchers, to overlook the indigenous channels of communication, and to focus predominantly on the mass media, as vehicles of news, facts, ideas, and information in general.

With the coming of the mass media as 'magic multipliers' and

their sophisticated technologies, it was widely prophesied that this would completely wipe off indigenous forms of communication. Can we argue that these forms have lost their relevance and validity? Perhaps in the West, but certainly not in Africa where the modern mass media are limited to a privileged few. The indigenous forms of communication have lost little of their validity and importance today, despite their obvious limitations. Growth in communication networks, like changes in other areas of society, are usually cumulative, with each new form enhancing but not completely replacing the older forms. This necessarily implies that we can only appreciate the potential of the new communication technologies by using them in conjunction with indigenous forms. IC is even more relevant today not only because of the depersonalising effects of the modern technology, but also because of its nonavailability or non-affordability to most Africans. This, coupled with isolation, smallness of scale, or persistent illiteracy of most of our communities, has encouraged the survival of IC as the most common if not the only, means of transmitting information. The majority of people in Africa, particularly the rural inhabitants, comprising as much as 60 to 70 per cent of the continent's population, continues to impart, receive and accept messages through indigenous channels of communication.

In broadcasting for example, attempts at domestication of new communication technologies in Africa so far, have hardly meant more than the mere addition of a few 'traditional' programmes to a plethora of others, conceived and produced according to the same 'universal media culture' known to originate from the exclusive experiences of Western media institutions and practitioners. Popular communication, as White has argued, does not consist merely of an incorporation of "many elements of the folk culture", but must be seen above all, as "an attempt to set up communication channels independent of the hierarchy of intermediaries" (White, 1980:3). As an alternative system of communication, IC has the advantage that it is managed by the marginalised people, is horizontal, decentralised

at every level, participatory, and free from the shackles of domination by either external or internal forces.

The need to revalorise indigenous forms of communication is greater today than ever before. Forty years of 'independence' have meant forty years of exclusion or marginalisation for everyone but the westernised few in Africa. If indigenous forms of communication have survived and even flourished, it has been thanks mainly to government's or the westernised few's monopoly over the conventional, official or legitimate channels of mass communication, and the clampdown on alternative sources of information (e.g. private press, research and publications) critical of the powerful. This means that since independence, the majority of Africans, who are mainly rural have not had any meaningful access to the mass media; radio, television and the print media have been free and accessible only in principle. Governments have seen and continue to see in information a weapon too powerful to be made accessible to the powerless masses. The reasoning being that, should the people know more than is necessary to keep them generally ignorant of government action and double standard, they might grow too critical and perilous for the latter. Those in power see their stay in office as contingent on public ignorance of their misdeeds. The idea has always been to feed the people not with the facts but with official options only, so that they cannot and should never think for themselves.

It is hard to convince a certain opinion that Radio and Television in Africa are not accessible, despite their availability. This opinion mistakes the mass communication potential of these electronic media for affordability. What most African countries have as broadcast media means *absolutely* nothing in language and content to the bulk of the population that is rural or illiterate and that understands non of the western languages that dominate broadcasts. The same argument applies to the press. The term 'mass media' is therefore a misnomer; for these media, limited in language and content, have as criteria of accessibility and participation literacy in Western languages, a

privilege too remote for both the rural and urban illiterate.

Thus illiteracy and the hegemonic languages of the literate few, have for forty years and more made the mass media in the continent extremely inaccessible to the majority, rural in the main. Theirs has been a chronic case of information malnourishment. So remote from McLuhan's 'global village' and so peripheral to the centralised activities of their own government, are the rural masses of Africa. This makes them very open to manipulation, both by the reactionary and revolutionary forces among the power elite. All sorts of statements get made in their name, by literate elites with contending pretensions to know them best. Seldom are they invited to defend their interests or present their points of view on national issues. They are permanently eclipsed by the conventional mass media, leaving only rumour and indigenous forms of communication as their sole source of information. Their "primary channel of exchanges" on local and national affairs are, as Wete notes of the Cameroonian villagers, "gatherings of families and larger kinship groups, people engaged in cultivation and herding, religious bodies, and the numerous traditional and voluntary associations" to which most of them belong. These gatherings are supplemented by exchanges during "encounters at market places, with itinerant merchants, at cultural clubs, water wells and other watering places, and with children returning home from school" (Wete, 1986:90).

The illiterate and semi-literate majority thus excluded, only the very literate few have ever stood to benefit from radio, TV and the press in most parts of Africa. It has been an information highway (never mind the super), too exclusive to be meaningful to the majority of Africans.

The reason why we as communication researchers must intensify research on indigenous channels of communication, is therefore simple: if the urban-based government and westernised few deny mass media access to the illiterate and the rural majority, they must make an effort to educate themselves in the ways, techniques, understanding and world view of this silent

majority, in order even, to impose themselves and their agenda more effectively. On the other hand, those interested in working at the grassroots, need a thorough understanding of local cultures and symbolisms, in order best to interact with the people.

We can hardly talk with any seriousness about oramedia when they have not been researched into. And by research, I mean the critical questioning of certain basic assumptions that tend to reinforce particular values and positions, much to the detriment of others. In our quest for an alternative system of communication that would serve the interests of the oppressed sectors of society through "dialogue and widespread creativity" (Reyes Matta, 1986:190-1), we need to study the current extent and impact of indigenous communication systems that predate the coming of the mass media to African countries. Through a multidisciplinary approach, research should be able to guide us on which medium to use for what purposes. Thus the following agenda:

There is need to prepare inventories of known indigenous communication (IC) practices, stating their impact in the past and present development projects or what could be done to make their impact felt in future development programmes. What role has IC played in past development programmes? With what effect? In what way could it better be integrated or serve in future development efforts? How can IC be employed in solving current development difficulties in Africa? What role could indigenous communication channels play in sustainable development? In other words, we need to document the virtues of IC in Africa.

We equally need to research into alternative forms of communication that are not necessarily indigenous, but developed or invented to cope with the inaccessibility of new communication technologies for the masses or certain sections thereof (e.g rumour, beer drinking halls, markets, hair dressers, festivals, soccer, rotatory saving associations (indigenous banking), churches, clinics, schools, etc.). Also worthy of study are levels of communication closer to African indigenous communities, with the aim of theory building.

We need to identify researchers in the area of IC, especially from other disciplines such as African literature and theatre - oral and written. The importance of folklore and oral literature cannot be overemphasised. The need to research and document more of our oral tales, rituals, myths, legends, proverbs and songs is rather acute, for popular beliefs, stereotypes and verbal performances and other forms of oral art remain the root of African literature. Although there is no controversy concerning the origin of African literature in indigenous folk performances, the distinction between indigenous festival drama and drama as it is known elsewhere should be stressed. Such research should be encouraged in the objectives of indigenous oral performances.

The growing world interest in vernacular or indigenous languages also necessitates an upsurge in research on how modern media could use local languages and oral literature. The idea being to study how best to promote alternative value systems to counteract the western value system that is presented as universal. Indigenous cultures in general should be studied, and research conducted to establish whether using IC can limit threats of cultural axphysiation of African communities through the process of cultural synchronisation with the giant compressor of the West.

We need to collect relevant literature on indigenous communication in various regions of each country,with a view to contributing towards the creation of national databases, on communication as a sharing of experiences. In addition, we should seek to know the most appropriate techniques for observing, recording and retrieving IC techniques. Knowing of what economic, cultural and social value (benefit) are indigenous forms of communication, is important; and studies that demonstrate these benefits should be compiled. We should establish the criteria for evaluating IC, determine how the transmission of IC can be best guaranteed, and explore various approaches to IC. We also need to research into how guidelines could be developed on how best to sell IC to policy makers, development practitioners,

donor agencies, and university institutions. If we research into precise forms of IC, we may be able to push governments to develop communication policies that recognise and encourage the use of IC. Research on national educational policy may provide guidelines for the judicious introduction of IC into the various educational curricula in Africa. And we should be able to design programmes and courses, and prepare training manuals for researchers and practitioners, specifically for training in IC.

We should investigate women, gender and indigenous communication, and establish how more positive images of women could be presented through IC. What is the role of IC in terms of women's empowerment and emancipation, and the attainment of gender-balanced development? Have women developed any special skills in communication that could be tapped from by society as a whole? We may need to study communication in women's associations and movements in order to answer these questions.

Research into media awareness and appreciation would be very instructive. How do indigenous people differentiate between and/or prioritize modern systems of communication and IC? What are prevalent attitudes toward both? What could these attitudes be due to? What channels of communication are preferred by rural or urban audiences? Or different segments of rural and urban audiences? We need to know as well the various mechanisms by which the rural and urban inhabitants could have access to our research findings concerning them and their media uses, without necessarily having to visit a library.

It is necessary to research the preconditions and particularities of each environment to ensure effective combination of indigenous communication and modern media, for socio-cultural development. In other words, we should investigate the links between the conventional mass media and indigenous forms of communication in terms of their mutual influence or reciprocal and complementary support. How, for example, have policy makers and communication practitioners, negotiated the co-existence of the two forms of communication in different

countries? What uses have been or are currently being made of indigenous modes in modern mass media productions? With what effects? What is the impact of new constraining circumstances on IC, and how elastic and adaptable is IC under pressure? What possibilities are there for adaptation of IC, the modern and post-modern technologies? We must understand the mechanisms of sustaining, adapting or perfecting indigenous modes of communication, and determine the role of IC in the context of current trends in world communication technological advancements. How does Africa get into the information superhighway?

Finally, we must understand and account for the cultural determinants and variations in nonverbal communication as an aspect of IC. How, for example, are encounters negotiated between people in different cultures? How do people generally seek to present themselves? What rules govern interpersonal relationships and how are these rules arrived at? What do we know about rules binding conversation or discourse in different cultures? What are the ethical considerations or normative aspects in IC? Understanding this would enhance our understanding of the factors that work towards the erosion of African traditions.

Conclusion

Africa is currently on the sidelines of the information superhighway, and will for many years to come, rely on indigenous channels of communication to reach the majority of its people. While this research agenda recognises the importance of oramedia in the continent, the idea is definitely not to encourage isolationism nor to idealise a cultural heritage, but to see how best new information technologies could be integrated into African indigenous communication systems for more sustainable development, the benefits of which would be felt by the side-stepped and silent majorities.

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[1]Shirley Biagi gives us an idea of how much "choice" the consumer will have on the information superhighway in the following passage:

"By clicking your remote mouse, you could glance through the offerings of each service and then make your choices. Your television/computer could show several screens at once, so that you might choose to use several services at the same time, each on a different screen. For example, you might check your bank balance while you watch a basketball game or check your video phone messages while you watch the news headlines.

The software in the set-top box also would track your usage, detailing the charges for the services you chose. As there is for today's cable users, there would probably be a basic service fee, and then additional charges would be added as you used premium services" (Biagi, 1996:31-32).