

Communication Technology in Africa: Dependency or Self-Reliance?

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Abstract

The present relations of dependency of Third World countries on the industrialized countries are sustained by the well-known inequalities in technological resources between the North and the South. This article presents two levels for analysing the role of media technology in perpetuating this dependency syndrome: (1) the role of technology in the information and communications sectors; and (2) the impact of multinational corporations in news coverage, and, hence, on local culture, through their news agencies and other cultural products. It posits three questions to guide technology choice in Africa: (1) Why choose a particular technology? (2) To what end? (3) Which social group(s) will benefit from the technology economically, politically, and culturally?

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Technologies de Communication en Afrique: Dépendance ou Auto-Suffisance?

Résumé

Les relations actuelles de dépendance des pays du Tiers-Monde envers les pays industrialisés sont soutenues par les inégalités bien connues des ressources technologiques entre le Nord et le Sud.

Cet article présente à deux niveaux différents une analyse du rôle des technologies des médias dans la perpétuation de ce syndrome de dépendance: (1) le rôle de la technologie dans les secteurs de la communication et de l'information et (2) l'impact des compagnies multinationales dans leurs couvertures des nouvelles, et partant, sur la culture locale à travers leurs agences d'information et autres produits culturels.

L'article pose trois questions pour guider le choix des technologies en Afrique:

1. Pourquoi choisir une technologie particulière?
2. Technologie à quelle fin?
3. Quel groupe(s) bénéficieront de ces technologies économiquement, politiquement et culturellement?

Introduction

Although the second half of the 20th Century has witnessed the independence of 80 Third World countries and the attainment of freedom by millions of people from colonial domination, the present world political, economic, cultural, technical and military conditions are oriented towards asserting the control of developed countries and the dependence of the majority of Third World countries. In the 1960s, at the attainment of political independence, it became increasingly obvious that elimination of political colonialism should be complemented by elimination of economic and cultural colonialism, if there were to be meaningful changes in the dependent relationship of Third World countries. Moreover, the subjection of Third World countries during the colonial era to social, cultural, political, and economic domination led to a change in values and behavioural patterns in most parts of the Third World to reflect those of colonial powers. In the aftermath of independence, no radical change occurred. In fact, transferred patterns were strengthened through diverse mechanisms. Therefore, as long as there was a realization of the impossibility of achieving political independence without economic independence, there should also have been a realization that a comprehensive independence is not attainable except by social and cultural liberation.

It is impossible to envisage the continuation of political and economic domination of Third World countries without considerable support provided by efficient communication systems. There is a marked degree of inequality in the distribution of international communication apparatuses. There are a few countries (specifically, developed capitalist countries) which are literally monitoring international communication facilities. As for the majority of Third World countries, they are recipients of what is being communicated. Consequently, there are marked imbalances in the exchange of information and news between underdeveloped and developed countries, inspite of the significance of this role at the international level. Alongside this role is the necessity of keeping world public opinion abreast of the problems threatening humanity, especially those that cannot be resolved, except by cooperation among countries such as issues of armament, unemployment, poverty, illiteracy, hunger, inadequate health services, environmental pollution, racism, population explosion and discrimination against women.

The seeds of the dependency paradigm were sown in Africa, Asia and Latin America. According to theory, the global economic system is composed of two active agents: core and periphery. The industrialized countries (core) export finished goods to the Southern world (periphery) which, in most cases, supplies raw materials for world consumption. The general effect of the process (seen through the dependency prism) is the relentless creation of wealth in the core (North) and poverty in the periphery (South).

Accordingly, the media have a key role within the cultural and economic dependency process. The mass media occupy a dual position at any level of analysis of the issues of underdevelopment and dependency. In analysing this phenomenon,

we should take into account two levels: the first level is concerned with communication technology and its influences on information and communication sectors; and the second level represents the informational dimension (news coverage) through international news agencies and the foreign cultural products and their negative impact on traditional cultures.

Both levels are closely connected and interact. The information and communication sector comprises the most dynamic and effective cultural industries. This sector includes the audio-visual industrial complex (cinema, TV and video), the sound complex (radio, records) and the printed media (newspapers, journals, books). Each of these media groups tends to grow towards international conglomeration and to integrate with the other two. It is worth noting that through communication systems, the main flows of cultural goods circulate both at the national and international level. It is here that the three crucial technological impulses are concentrated: informatics, telecommunication systems, TV and video systems. These three impulses have radically transformed the production, circulation and consumption of cultural goods.

Communication Technology within Media Dependency

Although there is unanimous agreement on the determinant role of technology in the world, until a few decades ago technology was seen basically as associated with the system of material production. So it was connected almost exclusively with the material aspects of culture. Actually, technology can be defined as the set of material tools, knowledge and skills used to satisfy all needs of the community and to ensure its control over its physical environment. It conditions the "what to do" and "how to do it" of the society (Herera, 1978). In this sense, technology is an inevitable tool of development which was earlier defined as the process of improvement in the capacity of a people for dealing with their environment. Technology in communication manifests itself in diverse forms like electronic and print media. But communication technology goes far beyond this. Some researchers provide a list of at least 12 advances in communication technology, most of them quite recent. These are transistor printed circuits, integrated circuits, the computer, ultra microfiche, microwave technology, videophone, long-range facsimile, digitalization and switching, communication satellites, cable TV (CATV), and direct broadcasting satellites (DBS). While some of these are complete systems, others are sophisticated supplementary devices (Sonaike, 1987:160).

The central role of technology in culture is not new and the transfer of technology is a phenomenon that has been present all through history. However, never in the past has its effects been so pervasive and its impact on every activity of the receiving societies so disruptive. The creation of technology has become more and more the privilege of a small group of industrialized countries, and inside these countries, of organizations and enterprises that can finance its ever increasing cost. But for a great proportion of humanity, and particularly for the developing countries, technology has become an exogenous factor. The Third World countries which indiscriminately

import technology from the western world also import culture, attitudes and values. The conception of technology as a central element of culture — not only of its material manifestations — means that transfer of technology implies transfer of cultural forms. In other words, transfer of technology is a form of communication as it conveys social information. What makes this form of communication especially effective is its subtlety, the fact that the information it carries is not explicit and acts on the receiving society by modifying its productive, organizational, social and consumption patterns, even before its cultural implications are fully realized. The technology transfer across nations on a continuous basis is now an accepted facet of life even in the industrially developed countries. The main characteristic of the transfer of cultural information through technology is that it is a one-way channel of communication from the western countries to the rest of the world with practically no reciprocal action in the opposite direction. As a result, technology becomes undoubtedly a basic factor in the process of westernization of the world — a process which seems to condemn to obliteration all other cultural forms, including those that embody some of the highest achievements in the history of human development. What is crucial in such transfer of technology is the ability of the receiving country to adapt and not merely assimilate the incoming knowledge and skills. It does mean that the presence of accumulation of scientific knowledge is a prerequisite for a meaningful transfer of technology to that country. If this factor is lacking, the technology so transferred becomes more of a curse than a blessing (Sonaike, 1987:156).

The Role of Transnational Corporations

We cannot delve into the issue of technology within media dependence without referring to the role played by transnational corporations in this field. This is not confined to a mere transfer of technology and capital, but expands to encompass sale of various consumer goods that are of socio-cultural character and which are designed mostly to disseminate ideas and beliefs which create profound cultural and social alienation of Third World peoples. We shall attempt to determine the dimensions of impact exercised by transnational corporations through the transfer of packages for propagating social and cultural preferences (even political and economic preferences). This results in the loss of distinguishing national characteristics of the people in the receiving countries. We shall identify the features of the role played by transnational corporations in their capacities as international communication systems. This requires analysis of the major components of the communication processes carried out by these corporations and their various activities in order to identify the extent of influence they exert.

The components of the communication process are determined in the light of five well-known factors: (1) Who (producers of communication materials) (2) Said what (content of communication material) (3) To whom (recipients) (4) How (means of communication), and (5) What is the impact.

The first factor refers to the source of communication material or its major producer.

We note that the major producers of communication products are transnational corporations whose main headquarters are in the U.S.A., Japan, Federal Republic of Germany, Switzerland, U.K. and France. The vast majority of subsidiaries of these corporations are in Third World countries. What is more significant is that three of these countries, U.K., France and U.S.A., are the homelands of the four major world news agencies, the American Associated Press and United Press International, the British Reuters, and the French Agence France Presse. In fact, the overall market economies (except for Japan), depend on these agencies, to a large extent, for provision of foreign news. Also, a high rate of TV programmes for most Third World countries is imported from U.S.A., France, and U.K. Besides, amongst the 25 largest agencies in international advertising media, which is a major industry with respect to social and cultural impact, 20 are American.

The second factor (what) is concerned with the content of information communicated from countries which are the main headquarters of transnational corporations, particularly with regard to the commercial culture of these corporations. In fact, commercial culture involves a group of factors which have two basic dimensions. The first is related to the trends, values and behavioural patterns and the second is concerned with the organization, production and consumption patterns. The first dimension includes a wide range of commercial culture, for example, general ideological preferences or trends, life styles, and general patterns of codes of conduct. The second dimension includes mechanisms for promoting production and consumption patterns and processes which do not meet the requirements of dependent countries but, rather, promote consumption expansion. This could be achieved particularly through public relations, marketing and expensive advertising.

The third factor (to whom) is concerned with the recipients of media information. Personnel of foreign subsidiaries play an important role in transferring values and codes of conduct. They constitute the upper and middle classes of Third World communities. As for the destitute, illiterate, low classes who constitute the majority in the Third World, they are isolated from direct impact but this does not preclude their being affected by advertisements through audio-visual media (radio and television broadcasting).

The fourth factor (how) is concerned with channels via which public information is transmitted and which contributes to the formation of consumption patterns. In this respect, radio and television play a major role, followed by newspapers, magazines, professional bulletins, books, records, video tapes and news agencies. Other channels relevant here are educational institutes, directors and personnel of foreign subsidiaries, and even language. In addition to advertisement especially within the context of commercial culture, the networks of subsidiaries of transnational corporations provide major channels for social and cultural investments. These collective factors contribute to making these networks of subsidiaries a dynamic world machinery for communication.

The fifth and final factor concerns the impact produced by social and cultural products on the recipient people of the Third World via advertisement and public

information or communication materials, whether published in newspapers or broadcast through radio or television.

It is possible to assess the volume of impact and its extent by providing certain necessary conditions such as the content of the information and its difference from the social and cultural environment of recipients. Based on this condition, it is most likely that the impact should be extremely potent in Third World communities. There are other conditions concerned with the content. These represent the clarity of the information, its recurrence and its capabilities for conviction. Also, the number of public information channels and their diversity play important roles in producing impact. When the matter is related to the recipient people, it is well known that the greater the number of individuals and organization exposed to public information, the greater and more profound is its impact.

On the whole, it appears that the group of major conditions required to produce an impact are available generally in most Third World countries, especially in African countries. We note that the French-speaking countries are vital fields for cultural activities of France-based multinational corporations just as the English-speaking areas in Africa which are vital fields for the cultural activities exercised by American and British transnational corporations through various communication facilities.

An Alternative Approach

One cannot talk about the media, the cultural industries and communication technology and avoid the more general, even abstract, problematics. The transformation of communication systems must be related to the changes occurring in the relations among African states, the links between Africa and the other Southern continents (Asia and Latin America) and, finally, the dependent relations between the South and the North. The media are not, and should no longer be, instruments for the representation of a reality which is elaborated from outside Third World countries or, worse still, on their behalf. They must be direct instruments for the production of the cultural identity of a country's population.

The creation of another communication model and, in the long run, another way of life, must take place only after thorough questioning of the dependency of the news media on multinational news agencies or on data banks which may lead to the subjugation of a country's cultural heritage and economic future. It must also take place only if it promises the production of new relations between people. We can no longer simply reflect on a new kind of radio broadcasting, or a progressive conception of the audio-visual industries. One can only have a new idea of communication, if it is conceived of as combining traditional forms of image and knowledge production, changes in education and the work place, new technological contributions, and new forms of production and reception of messages and information. The production of a communication alternative is linked to the production of new social relations (Mattelart, 1983). Contrary to many expectations, the volume and structure of technology transfer

from centre to periphery countries in recent decades have not contributed to the independence of the latter but, instead, have increased their dependence. With the transfer of technology it is necessary for African countries to pose the following questions: (1) Why do we choose a technology? (2) To what end do we choose it? (3) Which social group benefits economically, politically, and culturally from it?

Various experiences show that answers to these questions reflect arguments based on elitism and dependence. A technology is said to be chosen because it is new, because one must have it so as not to be left behind in the march of progress. But there is very little consideration as to the impact which such technology might have on social participation. The communication technology introduced is often very inappropriate for less developed, largely rural, countries. The technology introduced from centre to periphery countries is more often oriented towards a sophisticated level of consumption rather than towards solving pressing basic social problems. This aggravates the gap between the rich and the poor and enhances national disintegration.

It is observed that little consideration is given to recording the uses of such technologies. A fundamental task, especially in the periphery countries, is the planning of this recording. The idea is to take devices like the video cassette recording equipment, documentation systems, radio, e.t.c. and reconceptualize their use, abstract them from the development process they were conceived for and change them into devices for what has been defined (alternative development). Concerning the last question about who benefits and which groups can communicate more effectively by adopting this technology, past experience shows that the benefits accrue principally to three groups: transnational corporations which deliver the products, transnational banks which finance the purchase of the products, and a new class of officials — managers and military personnel connected with the ruling government who will be among the few able to use the products (Hamelink, 1986).

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