# National Images in the Age of the Information Superhighway: African Perspectives

## by Charles Okigbo

### Abstract

The thesis of this paper is that the information superhighway, largely represented by the Internet is not the panacea for all communication problems today, it holds great promise for linking many parts of the world. Unfortunately for the South, and Africa in particular, the increased ease of global communication has not reduced the quantity and intensity of negative news about them. The paper cites instances where the Western media have capitalised on negative aspects of Africa. This state of affairs, has led to the fuellingof Afro-pessimism by non-Africans and Africans alike. Although the prospects for change exist, the absence of serious approaches by African states will reduce the pace of progress. Diplomacy, national news management, public relations, and non-governmental organisations are some of the approaches being adopted by individual states, each with varying degrees of success.

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# Les Images Nationales dans Cette Epoque de Grands Moyens dans le Domaine des Informations

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**Résumé**

Le thème principal de cette communication est que même pendant cette époque de grands moyens dans le domaine des informations (ceux-ci étant bien stigmatisés par l'INTERNET ,ͧ͡ moyens ne constituent pars une recette miracle, pour résoudre tous les problèmes communicationnels, ceux-ci du moins relient bon nombre de régions du monde. Malheureusement pour la Région du Sud, et tout particulièrement pour l'Afrique, cette bonne communication n'a diminué ni la quantité ni L'intensité de mauvaises images. Cet exposé illustre des cas où le média occidental décide de ne montrer que les aspects négatifs, au détriment de ceux qui sont bons. Cet état de choses, remarque l´auteur, ne fait qu'empirer et intensifier l'Afro-pessimisme, non seulement chez les non-Africans mais aussi chez les Africains eux-mêmes. Dans cette communication on signale également que si les possibilitiés de changement existent, celui-ci sera toutefois grandement retardé par le manque d´une approche unifiée entre les Etats africains. Actuellement on sert (entre autres) de a diplomatie, de la gestion des informations nationales, des relations publiques et, tout dernièrement, des organisations non-gouvernementales, comme moyens de réaliser les changements voulus. Ces moyens sont utilisés par des Etats différents, avec un dégré de succès qui varie selon les Etats.

## Introduction

The prognosis on the information superhighway has become the dominant preoccupation of some communication practitioners, policy makers and media critics. To some, it is just another fancy phrase for the communication industry to use as a peg to hang many of its arguments on technology imbalance, dependency, development, aid, education, imperialism ... ad infinitum.

To others, it is the most important development in human communication, as it is believed to be the make or break point for the integration of the entire world of developed and developing communities into one unit - the inexpensive, non-ideological, apolitical and colour-blind international network of modern communicators (INTERNET).

In reality, the information superhighway is much more than a fancy phrase. Though it is not exactly the panacea for all communication problems today, it holds great promise for linking many parts of the world, facilitating interpersonal, intergroup, and international communications, and consequently providing the opportunity for national image making and management.

Never before had the whole world been brought so close as one community, within which individuals and groups could exchange information and ideas directly, and at the same time share these with others, if they so wish. The potentials and actual power of the new information technologies have significant implications for the images of nations, especially African nations, many of which may again be by-passed by this latest communication development.

## National Images

Our knowledge of the world comes from various sources, of which the two most important are personal experience and the mass media. Though the mass media are neither necessary nor sufficient for the process of opinion formation or image making,

the centrality of communication and learning in this process is undeniable. As Hennessy (1985:229) has rightly argued:

> Opinion formation or change is neither necessarily nor always the result of communication. Instinct and unaided learning through individual experience can produce attitudes and views about some matters. But... there can be no opinions worthy of the name without learning, and none but the most limited of learning can take place without the social relationships that are established only through communication.

In the case of individual countries, we witness or experience directly only a very small part of the facts and opinions that make up our image of these countries. According to Kunczik (1990:44) "an image of a nation constitutes the totality of attributes that a person recognises (or imagines) when he contemplates that nation." He goes on to explain that such an image consists of three analytically distinguishable components - a *cognitive* component relating to what we know, an *effective* component relating to how we feel about the nation; and an *action* component that relates to actual behaviour towards the nation.

This reflects a hierarchical ranking of possible effects of communication or direct experience, whereby knowledge (cognition) is expected to lead to effective disposition of liking or not liking, (or feeling), which leads to the third stage of actual behaviour.

In the absence of useful information or personal experience necessary for the cognitive component of images, many people rely on associations, prejudices and even guesses. Not surprisingly, some people express definite views on certain nations or objects, without being able to substantiate them. This is often the case with foreign nations, especially if one has never had any significant contact with them - either directly or through the media.

In this age of modern communication, more than any other, the international media are playing an ever increasing role in the process of national image cultivation and management. In the United States of America, the earliest of the large-circulation newspapers especially the *New York Sun*, the *New York Herald*

and the *Baltimore Sun,* among others, were not notable for their foreign news content, nor could they be held responsible for creating negative images of Africa through undue emphasis on bad news. But today, there is more international news in most print media, and many international broadcasting stations are designed for international news interest.

The Cable News Network (CNN) and similar satellite news organizations have revolutionized international news operations, and in the process added new dimensions to national image cultivation and management. Their coverage of news developments in Africa always focuses on the bizarre and absurd. Thus the commonest images of Africa distillable from these and other international media would revolve around these, among others:

(i)    The internecine war in Angola, Liberia, Somalia;
(ii)   The pogrom in Rwanda;
(iii)  Rebel activities in Sierra Leone;
(iv)   The coups in Gambia and Nigeria;
(v)    Ethnic conflicts in Kenya, among others.

There are many positive developments in Africa, but unfortunately these are not covered by the international media. It is in the nature of journalism to focus on the unusual.

Advances in communication technology now make it possible for an extensive and intensive coverage of Africa by the international media. The new technologies have ambiguous consequences as they portend both dangers and promises. There is the ever-present danger of the technologies increasing the chances for the creation of more negative images of Africa, especially as they tend to exacerbate unidirectional flows of information which are detrimental to African countries, especially in this age of the information superhighway.

**Information Superhigway**

The notion of superhighway presupposes the existence of a highway, which has now been enhanced, widened, or improved upon, to become "super." In reality, there are no highways for

information flow, since much of the information exchange does not even require cables or wires. The information superhighway is only a metaphor to explain the possibility that every human being on the planet can electronically interact with each other. The vehicle for such interactive communication is the information superhighway, which is just another term for "the incorporation of all the existing networks into one system" (Gilbert et al., 1994:9).

The Internet has come to be the most outstanding representation of the superhighway for now, and its ever-increasing range of capabilities has become the grist for communication futurologists who are intent on proving that the world is now one global community of PC users. The electronic village does not recognize geographical boundaries, and its borders are established by the parameters of the individual networks that are its constituent parts.

The history of the information superhighway dates back to the 1960s when the US Advanced Research Projects Agency (ARPA) began research on computer networks. In December 1969, the first experimental network (AFRANET) was tested with only four computers. Within ten years of this, there were hundreds of interlinked computers that enlarged the scope and capabilities of the network. This is the origin of the much expanded international network, that is now appropriately called the Internet.

The system has been expanding at such a stupendous rate it is difficult to have an exact count of the number of current users. By some accounts, there are as many as 400 million users. Internet services are as varied as the potential needs of its users. Among the most popular are user-to-user communication; transfer of files, documents, graphics and even video clips; and net news or discussions among interested users.

The information superhighway is an attempt to provide a superlinkage through which many networked services embodying print and audio content are offered. This will theoretically offer Internet services to any home or office that has a personal computer and a live telephone line.

The final shape of the international web of communication networks is difficult to imagine. Different scenarios have been described of how the new technologies can change people's lives. Both the hypothetical scenarios and the reality of the situation today show that the needs of developing societies for information are not part of the serious considerations. As Gilbert et al. (1994:10) argued, "the creation and use of information to be carried on the highway has been defined to meet the needs of individuals in industrialised or newly industrialised societies...To be useful in the South, information must reflect the values of the South, rather than those of the North..."

In the present situation where communication in the North is overladen with negative views of the South, the enhancement of the highway leads to more production and dissemination of the negatively biased content.

The age of the superhighway has made it easier to communicate with different parts of the world, especially the industrialised region, but this increased communication has not reduced the quantity and intensity of negative views on the developing regions, especially Africa. It is not surprising that the age of the information superhighway is also the age of Afro-pessimism, which is the pervasive feeling in some quarters that Africa is doomed.

In spite of significant achievements in some African countries, the negative image of the continent persists in the minds of many people, especially those that use the international media more. There is hardly any major international media that has not at one point focused attention on what they like to call "intractable African problems". The Reader's Digest, for instance, once published an article with a doomsday title: " A Continent's Slow Suicide" in which it was argued that Africa is heading uncontrollably to a tragic calamity.

Commenting on such apocalyptic prophesies based on selected negative developments in Africa, Chege (1995:1) rightly noted that "it would not be difficult to invoke the prophecy

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of Cassandra for Eastern Europe, South Asia, urban America, Latin America, or any other region after running down a carefully biased list of interactable social and political problems."

The negative image of Africa is more graphically painted in the high-profile areas of political stability, democratic governance and economic development. But even in these areas, there are many significant achievements which the international media have deliberately overlooked. For instance, there is the wave of popular demand for democracy and multiparty rule in many African countries, though not all dictatorships have been routed.

Successful democratic elections have been held in Benin, Burundi, Cape Verde, Lesotho, Madagascar, Mozambique, Sao Tome and Principe, and Zambia. Francophone countries that have successfully held French style presidential elections include the Central African Republic, Congo, Mali and Niger. There are many beacons of light in the African political and economic landscape. Inspite of the poor showing of the continent as a whole, disaggregated analysis shows that some African countries have done as well as, if not better than the best in the rest of the world.

Summing up the present situation of political and economic development in Africa, Chege (1995:11) concluded that though "the prophecy of imminent doom in Africa cannot be dismissed, particularly considering the dreadful times the majority of the continent's people are now living through...it would also be unwise to ignore the signs of hope which could be amplified over time to allow the region to recover lost ground..."

It is worth noting that the main sources of the prophecies of doom are the international media which provide most of what the outside world knows about Africa. The latest advances in communication technology have not changed the situation in favour of Africa. Rather, they now make it easier and faster to collect, process and distribute information that is injurious to the image of African nations, and thus refuel the feelings of African undevelopment, not only among those outside Africa, but more significantly, among Africans themselves.

## Afro-pessimism

The belief that Africa is a "dark continent" and that Africans are "uncivilized" was common and widespread among the early Europeans who came to, or attempted to study the continent, as well as their audiences. Not too long ago, even some educated Europeans contested the incontrovertible fact that Africa had a history.

Now that abundant archaeological evidence has shown the dated origin of the human species in Africa, as well as the high points some African societies attained in technological developments much ahead of the industrial revolution in Europe, the "knocking game" of denigrating Africa and Africans has changed to the dubious prognostication about Africa's hopeless future. This has spawned a whole genre of critical approaches that find fertile grounds in economic, political, educational, and infrastructural development.

Every discipline breeds its own brood of Afro-pessimists who indulge themselves in spotlighting and exaggerating the weaknesses or signs of unachievement in hand-picked case studies, to formulate their theories on the intractability of the African condition. In 1984, one of the most enlightened observers of African politics was convinced that most African countries are unlikely to move in a democratic direction, on account of their "poverty or the violence of their politics" (Huntington 1984:217). Eleven years later, a democratic revolution that started by 1990 is still on course, and is not likely to run out of local support.

Afro-pessimist views from various disciplines are ready grist for journalists' mill because those views fit the standard expectations for newsmaking. The traditional culture of both Western news agencies and individual media in Africa accentuates the predominance of negative news. As Ziegler and Asante (1992:115) argued, the Western news "agency operates in an African country with little regard for the well-being of the African country; information is meant to be sold in the home market first. The by-product, that is, sale of a certain piece of informa-

tion, becomes secondary..."

Sussman (1979:105) was more direct in observing that "the news agencies are charged with reporting mainly the disasters, natural and man-made, in the developing countries; rarely the progress, or even a constructive analysis of development problems, in the Third World."

In the era of the cold war and East-West divide, the Third World found an ally in the Eastern block countries. In this new age of global ideological unity following the demise of socialism and communism, the old East is closing ranks with the West, and thus the Third World (especially Africa) feels more isolated and disadvantaged by the short shrift the international media give it.

The images of Africa as portrayed in both Eastern and Western media have suffered more damage following the end of the cold war. The revolution in international politics is interacting with a more momentous revolution in communication to give rise to drastic changes in the projection of the images of African nations through international information flow.

Referring to only the revolution in information (when the political revolution was not even anticipated, Sussman (1979:159) noted that "the impending changes will probably have far greater impact on both developed and developing worlds than the discovery of the telegraph and its application to news communication..."

He was right that "technological development again empowers the new revolution, but the primary catalyst this time is the *content* of the message." It is the content of communication that travels on the information superhighway that gives African countries much concern in the context of their national images, in this age of Afro-pessimism.

**African Perspectives**

African countries have not reacted unanimously to their persistent portrayal in the international media, because of the differences in their approaches to international issues. Reflecting the

national political climate in the states, the approaches have varied from Algerian and Nigerian militancy to the quiet and subdued diplomatic publicity of such countries as Ghana, Kenya and Namibia. The approaches also reflect the nature of the images of the individual nations.

For instance, Nigeria is portrayed as politically volatile, ethnically divisive but financially vibrant. There are additional images of a drug culture, official corruption and undeveloped infrastructure. Nigeria's approach to these various portrayals has often involved a variety of strategies that include denial, reverting the accusations, silence, and even admission of guilt.

With the euphoria about the demise of apartheid in South Africa now over, there are increasingly more negative stories coming from this historic country. If it is not alleged corruption in government or parastatals, it will be exaggerated fears of inter-party disharmony. The pictures from Kenya are not more comforting, especially when they are about ethnic clashes in the Rift Valley, inter-party rivalries and accounts of preparations for guerilla warfare.

Satellite facilities and other accompaniments of the information superhighway make it possible for the representatives of the international news agencies and media to report instantaneously, from any trouble spot in Africa. Characteristically, when the trouble is perceived by the international community to be over, these representatives move on to other hot spots on the continent.

Thanks to the availability of sophisticated military weapons which are often kindly "donated" by friendly allies, the likelihood of shortage of "action" is remote. In the face of persistent over-emphasis on negative African news, African nations have adopted four main approaches each of which has yielded limited results. These approaches are: diplomacy, national news management, public relations and NGOs.

## Diplomacy

The organized relations between African governments and their Western counterparts has been a major approach in trying to minimize the total effect of adverse media coverage of African affairs in the international media. Occasions for presentation of credentials, special missions and bilateral meetings provide opportunities to counter the negative images portrayed in the media. Experienced African politicians have not failed to capitalise on such opportunities to praise some international media and governments; or to castigate others, as the case may be, depending on how they are perceived.

The information superhighway is affecting the use of diplomacy as a tool in palliating the negative effects of media reporting. Whereas in the past, ambassadors were afforded considerable lee-way in managing the relations between their countries and host-states (including references to media activities), the new advances in communication technology, including the superhighway, have reduced the status of ambassadors, according to some analysts, to that of glorified clerks.

"Hot-line diplomacy - direct telephone or teletype links between heads of state - threatens to render ambassadors unnecessary, especially during times of crisis." (Couloumbis and Wolfe 1986:158). It is more likely that in this age of the information superhighway, ambassadors will not be redundant; rather they have to be ever ready to address all issues of relations between their own and host countries, and make instant analysis that can be transmitted globally. The new developments are providing new challenges for the use of diplomacy in image making.

## National News Management

The mass media in Africa are more developed and extensive than many Western critics are willing to accept. Both private and public broadcasting facilities are widespread, as are the print media which were even well established long before independence

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in the individual countries. In recent times, the development of national communication policies and the establishment of both national and regional news agencies have facilitated the speedy exchange of news and features between countries in the regions and the outside world.

Various African countries have used these developments to project a more correct picture of social developments among their people, in an effort to counter the pervasive negativity of the Western media.

The news management activities of individual African countries have been given a fillip by sympathetic international agencies. The materials provided by African news agencies are often thought to be propaganda for the various African governments. To provide an independent source, the Friedrich Ebert Foundation has supported the establishment of Afrovision which produces television news coverage with focus on significant newsworthy developments across the continent.

More importantly, the reports are packaged and transmitted to members of the European Broadcasting Union (EBU). In this age of the information superhighway, this kind of news management from independent news teams can contribute immensely in redirecting world media attention to the positive (but not necessarily propagandist) aspects of African development.

*Public Relations*

The use of public relations by African nations is not as widespread as their situations demand. Unfortunately, many governments tend to see the public relations approach as appropriate only in crisis situations. Even those countries like Nigeria, Namibia and South Africa that used it extensively during their political crises, seem not to realise that it can still work for them in peace, as it did in war.

The power of pubic relations in helping to consolidate international opinion is best exemplified by its use by some African countries, most notably Ghana during Nkrumah's regime, Ni-

geria during its 1967/70 civil war and South Africa during the protracted war against apartheid.

Public relations by African governments for image management works better when it is part of an integrated approach that incorporates elements of diplomacy, news management and organized special events. Analyzing the use of public relations in the Nigeria-Biafra war, Kunczik (1990:146) noted that "Biafra effectively combined two PR tactics: very discreet diplomacy at top political and church levels, and propaganda directed to the public at large, which also worked very strongly through interpersonal contacts..."

Not to be outdone, the Federal Government employed many PR agencies, among which were Andrew Nash, Burson-Masteller Associates, Robert S. Goldstein, and Galitzine & Partners. Their tasks were mainly to influence media and public opinion on the political and war situation. The superhighway now makes it easier and faster to produce and distribute press materials worldwide.

The net benefits are not always positive, as they can lead to the shifting of international public opinion to a side that is not necessarily the right party. It is believed that the better use of international public relations by Biafra led to the prolongation of the war, and consequently to more hardship, suffering and casualties. As in many communication campaigns, it is important to have a coalition of friendly and cooperating partners. Church organizations, student groups and sympathetic foreign journalists helped the Biafran PR effort.

*Non-governmental Organizations*

Among the partners that have facilitated the efforts of African nations to improve their showing in the international media are the various non-governmental organizations that are dedicated to African communication and development. Through special training programmes, researches and publications, many NGOs have been working with some African governments or parastatal

media organizations to project a better image of Africa in the international media.

In its very well-researched and practically-oriented book which is appropriately titled *Images of Nations and International Public Relations*, the Friedrich Ebert Foundation provides comprehensive description, analyses and recommendations on national image management. Many NGOs have provided equally helpful assistance through support for African media and news organizations.

It is worth noting that the Internet in Africa is being introduced mostly by NGOs and United Nations agencies. If the information superhighway is to become an African reality, NGOs will play an important role in not only introducing the technology, but more importantly in demystifying it.

When this is achieved and the Internet is popularized among African communities, it will be easier for significant achievements of African grassroots societies to be routinely reported and uploaded into the global net, instead of the present reliance on the representatives of the Western media and news agencies who are more concerned with big news and big events, most of which are negative.

Though the Internet is at its introductory phase in Africa, it has the potential for facilitating education on a variety of subjects, not the least of which is public affairs and communication aspects of national image making.

According to Githeko and Ochuodho, (1994:5) this new technology opens the doors of new skills acquisition, leading to "other technologies that have the capability to provide a wider scope of services...and global information resources."

## Prospects for Change

The negative images of Africa that have taken many decades to form in the minds of Western media audiences cannot be expected to change overnight. After two decades of demanding a new world information order, there is not much evidence that

Western media practices have responded positively to the needs of African countries for international information, nor have the foreign correspondents in Africa tried hard enough to report from African perspectives.

This is not to say that there is no hope for positive changes. While we may not all agree that the information revolution has occurred or that the new information technologies have radically changed our lives (Traber 1986), there are good prospects for the information superhighway to affect many aspects of our lives. Like most developments in new communication technology, the Third World, especially Africa, will be more of an observer than active participant. The superhighway is an extension of existing computer and telephonic technologies, which are yet to become common in Africa. Consequently, African traffic on the super-highway is definitely going to be limited to only a few travellers from the developed spots in South Africa, Egypt and Tunisia.

In developed economies, the information superhighway is rapidly changing the nature of such traditional communication activities as diplomatic image making, news management and government public relations, by making it easier for civil society to have ready access to information. Additionally, it can upload its own version on current affairs, not only to selected targets, but to almost an unlimited audience, thereby competing with the media, despite their (the media's) obvious advantages.

In the final analysis, the information superhighway provides a multiplicity of new channels for the collection, processing and dissemination of information to a wide variety of audiences all over the world. Theoretically, it provides NGOs, governments and action groups with the unique opportunity to package their materials on images and other aspects of their operations for an unlimited world audience.

In practice, however, the actual power of the information superhighway must be limited, as in all communication situations, to the effects of the messages. In Africa today, there are only minimal effects because the highway is yet to be traveled by enough African and/or Africa-based users.

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