



Report

on International Symposium

Topic: Communication, New Media and
Human Development in Africa.

Date:
June 4-5, 2009

REPORT ON INTERNATIONAL SYMPOSIUM ON COMMUNICATIONS, NEW MEDIA AND HUMAN DEVELOPMENT.

A two-day international symposium was hosted by the African University College of Communications (AUCC) on June 4 and 5, 2009. The symposium was a collaboration between AUCC and the Ghana Telecom University College (GTUC). It was partnered by the United Nations Educational Science and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO), The International Institute for Information and Communication Technologies Journalism (PenPlusBytes), World Bank and Comsys.

The attendance was moderate; between 70-120 participants. This included academics, researchers, corporate society, media practitioners and security institutions.

The theme of the symposium was: "Assessing the Contribution of Communication and the new Media to Human Development in Africa." There were three plenary sessions during which three major papers were presented:

- The Communication for Development and Development of Communication Debate: What Relevance for Human Development in Africa? –Presented by Professor Alfred Opubor
- The Impact of the Information Society on Africa's Development – Presented by George White
- The new Media in Africa's Development – Presented by Dr. Kwabena Riverson

For each plenary session, there were some respondents to the presentation. These were Dr. Absalom Mutere, the Acting Dean of Journalism and Communication at AUCC; Ogochukwu Nweke, a lawyer and ICT trainer; Dr Osei Darkwa, President of GTUC; and Karen Attiah, a Fulbright Scholar.

The opening remarks by the President of AUCC, Kojo Yankah, set the tone for the discussion by saying that, "The symposium is the beginning of a series of engagements in the search for appropriate foundations on which the 21st Century education should be based. In so doing, we will be building a body of knowledge that will benefit not only students and professionals in the communication industry, but also policy makers and activists keen on seeing Africa benefit from fast growing new media and technologies."

Specifically, the objectives of the symposium were outlined as:

- To assess or evaluate the concepts, experiences and strategies linking communication processes and new media to issues of human development in Africa
- To contribute to the efforts of African governments and their development partners to initiate, reinforce and consolidate investments for the application of communication and new media in human development programmes.

- To place the issues of capacity building for communication, the new media and human development squarely on the agenda of Africa's tertiary institutions.

In his presentation, Prof. Opubor, gave a very broad perspective to development and communication by looking at the various approaches and perspectives. These are modernisation approach which saw communication and development as co-directional; the diffusion approach which emphasises the need for opinion leaders since they are more receptive to communication messages; the participatory approach; and strategic communication approach.

Prof. Opubor concluded that whatever the approach is, development for communication and communication for development, and media development are all relevant to human development in Africa. Communication for development, he indicated, can only be one of the many important resources for tackling the problems of underdevelopment in Africa. "The paths and methods to achieving human development may differ, but the goal is undisputable," he said.

Dr. George White who was the speaker for the second plenary session looked at how the information society can impact Africa's development by providing a global perspective. He defined the information society as a society where the creation, distribution, and manipulation of information is one of the most significant economic and cultural activities.

He underscored the importance of popular participation in the communication-development process. He indicated that the new media provides the world and Africa with a very fine opportunity to get better connections with the people who are affected by development problems. The new media, he said makes it possible for citizens to become part of the newsgathering process, thereby weakening the power of traditional gatekeepers (in mainstream media or journalism). The media must be interactive if it can make impact.

Dr. Kwabena Riverson, in his presentation in the plenary session, reiterated the importance of new media for development by stating that; "Many countries are realising that a modern communications infrastructure is an essential requirement for economic growth and social well-being ... the internet connects all human endeavours at the same time."

He concluded that the time to take control of the new media is now, or we lose out on it. "The information technologies and the Internet have made their presence and influence clear that they are here to rule our world, and that the African countries that accept this paradigm shift will see their standard of living improved, and consequently win themselves out of poverty."

Three main themes emerged out of the three sessions: “challenge”, “imperative” and “ways out”. Almost all speakers agreed that Africa will have to overcome some bottlenecks in order to harness the opportunities provided by the new media. The new media was also seen as an imperative for human development. And, there were some suggestions on what ways to go.

Dr. Mutere, in responding the first presentation, echoed the challenge posed by the lack of political will to implement development policies. He said the way forward is for the development discourse and action to be driven by people and civil society – it should not be left in the hands of politicians who are often fixated on their four-year terms.

Mr. Nweke, however, indicated that the way to go is to look within our own cultural context. The crux of his response was that there is an African perspective which has been ignored, and this is what we need to do if we seek to develop.

Dr. Darkwa’s response sought to provide ways Africa can become part of the information society. Since governments are not in the position to provide the infrastructure, he said the way to go will be to use religious organisations, what he called “the faith-tech approach”. Such organisations and other secular ones should be encouraged to set up community based ICT centres. He also emphasised how new media can be harnessed to solve the problem of the shortage of health professionals. According to him, medical doctors elsewhere (through the new media and technology) can diagnose and give treatments to patients in countries where doctors are scarce.

Karen Attia, in her response to the third presentation, talked about giving voice to the minority and the voiceless in society such as market women. She also spoke about the need to involve the African voices in the Diaspora.

On day two the Minister of Communications Mr. Haruna Iddrissu addressed the symposium and charged participants to use new media and communications generally as a tool to promote development. He emphasized the importance ICT has gained in helping other societies develop and implored journalist to explore ICT tools to stimulate national development. Journalists were also advised not only to hold public officials accountable but also to respect laws that protect individual rights in the performance of their duties. The minister concluded by reiterating the importance of specialised training for students in journalism.

After the minister’s presentation participants went into three groups to discuss the various themes emerging from the three presentations, and to recommend the way forward for Africa to embrace and utilise new media and communication to facilitate development.

The two-day symposium generally agreed on the following and recommended some lines of action as the way forward for Africa in the information age:

- It was agreed that the meaning of development differs for different group of people.
- That Communications and development are mutually reinforcing.
- The challenge is how Africa can use communications and new media effectively to stimulate a general acceptance and participation in human development.
- The recommendation is for Africa to employ strategic and participatory communications methods with a combination of both old and new media to effect positive change in the society.
- It was suggested that there should be a drift from the notion of “foreign culture” to a more accommodation notion of “global culture”. It is when this notion is reinforced that Africa can become more receptive to the new media.
- It was agreed that community-based interventions, with emphasis on sharing, should be put in place to ensure the benefit of new media as a development tool is full derived.
- People journalism or citizen journalism should be encouraged
- All communication tools such as tools mobile phones should be harnessed and used
- Africa should be part of the production of technology and not just remain consumers. This is because, as we liberalise the media and make it relatively free, the economic dimension of media lies in the production of technology. Thus, the one who produces gains from the rise in the use of new media and ICT.
- We should endeavour to check the e-waste canker

The Internet, mobile telephony and other ICT tools provide opportunities to create Knowledge Societies that can radically transform African communities because such technology can be used to effectively disseminate solutions to development challenges. For that reason, the following sectors of society should expand ICT capacity:

- African governments
- Regional African associations such as ECOWAS
- Universities
- Civil society organizations
- NGOs
- Development agencies

Institutions should use UNESCO'S Media Development Indicators for mapping media landscapes to determine where and how to enhance communications technology capacities

Development partners and donors should make the enhancement of the communications sector a priority in multilateral and bilateral negotiations with African governments

All entities interested in promoting development should include participatory mechanisms such as interactive portals for public input in new media to create knowledge sharing to accelerate development

Citizen journalism should be encouraged because it will help produce more knowledge sharing, which necessary to create a Knowledge Society

New models of community engagement through the use of digital platforms and participatory media should be explored and developed by AUCC and its partners in academic programming and outreach activities

The curricula of AUCC and other African communications training institutions should include: communications for development, communications policy planning and new applications for digital technology to trigger effective capacities for development

Communications students and scholars in African higher education should be encouraged to specialize in communication for development, the development of communications and new media development