Globalisation, information revolution and cultural imperialism in Africa

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Abstract

Globalisation has brought a lot of changes which are impacting dramatically on the entire world. Political, cultural and socio-economic integrations are becoming much easier and faster than before. This paper argues that the digital divide existing between developing and developed countries places Africa in disadvantaged position in the globalisation process leading to cultural imperialism. It challenges library and information professionals to try and bridge this digital divide through sustained professional development, national and institutional framework, curriculum redesign and regional and international co-operation.

Keywords

Globalisation, information revolution, cultural imperialism, librarians, information professionals

Introduction

The end of cold war and the collapse of Berlin wall in 1989 paved way for aggressive global integration in the recent years. This integration driven by information and communication technology has brought about changes that cannot be ignored (Omekwu, 2003; Emeagwali, 2004; Ya'u, 2004). Omekwu has rightly observed that history has always replicated changes. Man has transited from agrarian through industrial to the present information revolution. The present information revolution has gradually reduced the entire world into a global

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electronic village conquering the barriers of space and time. Movements of people, goods and services have been made easy and faster than ever before. Globalisation of economy, politics, culture and social activities has come to stay with its inherent merits and demerits. What is globalisation? What is the status of Africa in the present information revolution – the propeller of globalisation? How has globalisation contributed in cultural imperialism in Africa? Finally how would Nigeria library and information professionals re-strategize to place Africa properly in the globalisation process? These are critical issues which this paper seeks to address.

Conceptualising Globalisation

Globalisation is a phenomenon that is multi-dimensional and multi-faceted. It has economic, political, social and cultural implications. Scholars have variously referred it to as modernization, internationalization, universalisation, liberalization among others nomenclatures. Economic Commission for Africa (2000) has however remarked that globalisation refers to changes occurring at global level, which in several ways have not been in the control of individual nation states and their government. In line with this, Ya'u (2004) points out that it is all about greater interaction among countries and people. He however fears that this integration is dangerous because of inequalities existing between developed and developing countries. Tomilnson (1996) therefore, noted that globalisation is:

> a rapidly developing process of complex interconnection between societies, cultures, institutions and individuals world wide. It is a social process which involves a compression of time and space, shrinking distances through dramatic reduction in time taken – either physically or representationally – to cross them, so making the world seem smaller and in a certain sense bringing human beings closer to one another.

Generally, two contrasting paradigms ignite the debate on globalisation: as a form of integration and as form imperialism. Scholars who see globalisation as a healthy development that intends to improve the lives of people in every society look at it as global integration of people goods and services where all barriers are collapsed. This group believes that what is regarded as a model should not remain in a particular location. The proponents of this view are western scholars. On the other side of the divide are those who see globalisation as a metaphor for imperialism. They argue that globalisation is a mere brand name for economic and cultural imperialism, (Chang 2008). Their contention is that globalisation is a sugar – coated bitter pill which has reduced developing countries as appendages of Western super powers. Thus Navarro (1998) argues that 'what now passes as globalisation is a specific type of internalization of capital, labour and knowledge characterized by unrestrained and regulated search for profits and greatly enhanced by the public policy initiated by the governments of President Reagan and Prime Minister Thatcher''

According to Wikipedia free encycopaedia "globalization in its literal sense is the process of transformation of local or regional phenomena into global ones. It can be described as a process by which the people of the world are unified into a single society and function

together." This process is a combination of economic, technological, socio-cultural and political forces. Globalization is often used to refer to economic globalization, that is, integration of national economies into the international economy through trade, foreign direct investment, capital flows, ,migration and the spread of technology and other cultural values.

Globalization is not a new development; it has a long history dating as far back as 16th century following the first great expansion of European capitalism, which resulted in slave trade, colonialism and neo-colonialism (Emeagwali, 1997; Institute of Ethics and Development studies, 2002). Undoubtedly, globalisation has deep economic dimension: conquest, domination and trade. The underlying principles of globalisation are breaking trade liberalization and privatization of public enterprise. It has been the philosophy of WTO, IMF and World Bank who African scholars have always referred to as agents of imperialism.

Africa and the new "Information Revolution"

Globalisation has opened the door for information economy – information and knowledge have become very critical factors of production. Therefore, the era of industrial revolution where land and capital are the overriding factors of production has given way to information revolution. This development posses a lot of challenge to Africa (see Cogburn and Adeya 1999). These challenges include the development of information and communication infrastructures, human resource development and employment creation; a reversal of African's current position in the world economy; and sufficient legal and regulatory framework and government strategy. Confronting these challenges frontally will go a long way in bridging the digital divide between the developed and developing countries.

Emeagwali (2004) and Ya'u (2004) in separate works have cautioned that for any society to benefit from this borderless information environment, the critical infrastructures for information and communication technology must be in place – computer and internet connectivity, sustainable power supply, human capacity development, and the political will by the government to sustain these infrastructures. Consequently, Emeagwali (1997) has argued that for Africa to catch up with Europe and America in the new information age, Africa has to take two steps for every one step of Europe and America. He is however worried that Africa may have been taken a backward step for every step of the Asian Tigers, how much more American and Europe.

Several studies have shown that Africa has the lowest internet and telecommunication connections in the world, (Emeagwali, 1997, Mutala, 2002, Taylor 2002; Omekwu 2006a; Ya'u 2004; and World Bank 2008). Mutala's study reveals that African's global web contribution is about 1.08 percent. In an earlier study (United Nations Division for Public Economics and Public Administration 2002), African's web content was about 0.04%. This poor global web presence is a serious threat to Africa development economically, culturally and socio-politically.

These studies also reveal that very few African governments have websites while all European parliaments are on the web, (Mutala, 2002, Ya'u 2004). Ya'u has attributed this poor web presence to Africa's low band width – (the lowest in the world). Owing to this, in

the recent global ranking of 62 countries, which contributes about 85% of the world population, Africa did not even come up to the first 30. African's closest in the ranking in technological connection is South Africa, which was ranked 39. Nigeria was ranked 60 just two position above Uganda and Bangladesh respectively, (Kearacy, 2006). The 2007 World Development indicator reproduced partly here (see tables) equally reveals African's status in the new information revolution. In the ranking, Africa has the lowest telephone line, television per family, personal corrupter and internet connectively but pays higher for these goods and services.Table 1

Table 1: Regional Access to Telephone lines 2005

S/no	Regions	Fixed lines per 1000 users	Mobile line per 1000 users	Population connected by mobile telephone
1	East Asia & Pacific	214	282	NA
2	Europe & Central Asia	273	624	NA
3	Latin America & Carob	177	439	90
4.	Middle East & N/Africa	160	229	90
5	South Asia	39	79	NA
6	Sub-Saharan Africa	17	125	NA
7.	European Union	531	980	99

Source: World Development Indicator 2008, pp. 304 - 306.

Table 2: Regional Access to Telephone lines 2005

S/n	Regions	Daily Newspaper per 1000 people	House hold with T.V. percent	Personal computer per 1000 people	Internet users per 1000 people	Application secure internet services per million people	Price basket for mobile and per months in $
1	East Asia & Pacific	60	36	38	89	1	10.7
2.	Europe & Central Asia	NA	92	98	190	13	12.2
3	Latin America & Carob	61	87	88	156	12	25.8
4.	Middle East & N/Africa	Na	84	48	89	1	11.8
5.	South Asia	59	32	16	49	1	8.1
6	Sub. Saharan Africa	12	14	15	29	2	45.3
7	European Union	188	96	421	439	184	20.4

Source: World Development Indicator 2008, pp. 304 - 306.

Globalisation and cultural imperialism in Africa

Several studies have revealed how globalisation came into Africa through slavery and colonialism which resulted in heavy loss in terms of human and material resources to Africa, (Rodney, 1981; Emeagwali, 2004). The modern day globalization is powered by information which Omekwu (2003) has rightly described as the vehicle through which culture is transmitted from one generation to another. This means that with the new information environment (information without boarders) the pace at which culture is exported from one place to another has increased dramatically. The implication is that countries with superior digital power are favoured by the new information environment. Thus the exchange of cultural information does not occur in a level playing ground. Africa remains at the receiving end. Wikipedia free encyclopedia described cultural imperialism as "the practice of promoting, distinguishing, separating or artificially injecting the culture or language of one nation into another. It is usually the case that the former is a large economically and militarily powerful nation while the later is a smaller, less important one." Cultural imperialism may take a form of forceful imposition of a particular culture on a people or voluntary and

gradual embracing of foreign culture by individual. African has accused America and Europe of using the gospel of globalisation to impose their culture on weaker countries. However, the West argues that globalisation is set to remove not only cultural barriers but many of the negative dimensions of culture. What is negative is left for only the western powers to define.

In order to understand globalization as a tool for cultural imperialism, the economic root and the underlining cultural implications have to be reviewed. Armed with international treaties, the World Trade Organization (WTO) propagated the gospel of liberalization and privatization – the twin working tools of globalization. Liberalization and privatization created opportunities for multi-national companies with their vast political and economic resources to install themselves as key players in the critical sectors of the economy. With privatization, these companies took over investment in social services such as health care, education, power supply, telecommunication among others. The control of access to education means that education became costly beyond the reach of so many Africans children – thereby laying the foundation of cultural imperialism (Ya'u 2004).

In addition to this, Trade-Related Aspects of Intellectual Property Rights (TRIPS) expanded both the scope and period of patents and industrial copy right protection. Issues like patents, industrial design, soft wares, among others were included and over 90 years were given for this protection. Unfortunately for Africa, barely all patent rights are enjoyed by the West and this denies African intellectuals access to these knowledge. The second implication is that it places the cost of access to the technology beyond the reach of Africans. As a result of this, Nderitu (2005) is worried that the expected promise of globalisation in Africa has not been achieved. Rather, what Africa has seen is the sustenance of impoverishment and enthronement of dictators who dance to the tune of Western imperialist lords.

Poverty and ignorance, a twin product of economic imperialism dehumanize the mind and lead to social exclusion which subjects one to the dictates of the imperialist socially, economically, politically and culturally. Gimode (2004) contends that globalisation connotes much more than the triumph of liberal democracy and, neo-liberal policies. It includes in addition the spread of universalism of artifacts, issues, ideas, life styles and movement. With the media and the Internet, Europe and America are spreading their life styles and values, most of them pervasive to African cultural values. Nudity, homo-sexuality, and other crimes are celebrated in Western televisions and the Internet and Africans youths are swallowing them hook line and sinker.

This cultural invasion nicknamed modernization has been packaged and repackaged for the consumption of developing countries of Africa, Asia and Latin America. As Wallerstein, cited in Chang (2008) proudly remarked,

> The West has emerged into modernity; the others had not. Inevitably, therefore, if one wanted to be "modern" one has in some way to be "Western" culturally. If not Western religions, one has to adopt Western languages, and if not Western languages, one has to at the very minimum accept Western technology, which was said to be based on the universal principles of science"

It seem that no matter how raw the West puts it, Africa may not have any option since almost all our cultural values have been sacrificed on the alter of Western pervasive life style. But the West has forgotten that paradoxically, they have always conveyed only the culture of economics (profit) rather than the culture of values (morals) which is dangerous to the future generation and African values.

Omekwu (2006b) captured how information revolution has undermined African cultural values in these words:

> The more dangerous dimensions of the digital revolution include pornography, money laundering, cultism, international terrorism and child abuse, which all constitute a threat to African cultural heritage. It is extremely difficult for African countries with strong Islamic and Christian cultures to tolerate the level of pornographic activities that go on the Internet. In traditional African culture, nudity is still not a virtue. In many African universities and urban centres, nudity has become and Africa's rich and elegant dress style are becoming outdated.

The cultural values and orientations which an African child receive through moon light plays, folk tales from parents and traditional drama with peers and siblings have been supplanted by watching Western-styled movies where violence, hatred, drugs abuse and youths gangstarism are celebrated. The consequence is that these vices are on the increase in most Africa cities.

This development does not promote scientific and technological culture in Nigeria. A similar cultural and technological imperialism is the problem of brain drain in Africa which is increasingly harvesting Africans best brains in the name of globalization. Brain drain has been regarded as the bane of African's socio-cultural and technological development. African indigenous knowledge which have be very useful in solving our problem in medicine, housing, education, science and technology become highly underdeveloped as African is robbed of their intellectuals through brain drain. Studies have shown that African lost about 60,000 professionals between 1985 and 1999 to brain drain and is currently losing an average of 20,000 annually since then (Emeagwali, 1997, Darko 2002; Limb 2002). Continuing Emeagwali regretted that an estimated 50,000 Nigerian professionals are contributing nine billion United States dollars to American economy annually while Nigeria is bereft of core professionals in so many fields.

Indigenous languages which are the most effective method of transmitting culture are increasingly becoming endangered. Agreeing with this Gilbert (2008), has remarked that every language in a unique way defines how things are talked about and which concepts for making sense of the world are fundamentally assumed. He argued that language is a very important tool in the exercise of power. The owner of a domineering language automatically becomes more powerful than those whose language is spoken by the minority. Observations have shown that more than eighty percent of global information is in the language of the Western countries, English language. Apparently, the languages of the West are imposed on the developing countries particularly African countries. The imposition of a particular language on a people is a way of imposing the culture on the people. The domination of a people through languages is the essence of cultural imperialism. Owing to this language

domination so many indigenous African languages are already dead and the process of globalization is creating more problems to existing African languages.

True globalization should be inclusive rather than exclusive, evolving policies that would resolve extreme polarization on the global village, tolerate divergent view and interests, strengthen cultural inter-change the rather than stifling cultural values of disadvantaged societies and balance the huge gap between the haves and have nots which has facilitated the extreme poverty of great majority and uncontrollable affluence of little minority.

Globalisation: Challenges to libraries and information professionals

Globalization is a sweet-bitter reality. For Africa, the truth is that the continent cannot afford to be isolated from the global community. The question is how Africa could compete favourably in the global arena. This is where library and information professionals have crucial roles to play. The dynamic roles of library and information professionals have been underscored in several studies (Omekwu 2006a, 2003; Limb 2002, Mutala, 2002; Matare, 1997; Ya'u 2004). Omekwu remarked that library and information professionals should be prepared for these changes in the new information environment. Gregorian, cited in Martin (2000) had earlier remarked that

> Libraries contain the heritage of humanity; the record of its triumphs and failures its intellectual, scientific and artistic achievements and its collective memory. It would be a true tragedy if that record did not serve and include African countries at the highest level possible.

Since the library has been the custodian of recorded knowledge in any society, library and information professionals should play a leading role in organizing and management of cultural information so that African would not be excluded in the global information platform. In doing this, the library and information professionals should take a centre stage in issues related to globalization. This can only be achieved through the following strategies.

Professional development:

The global information environment is continuously changing and therefore, the need for professional repositioning of Nigerian library and information professionals to effectively provide the African cultural information to the global community is very crucial now than ever before. The information professionals must acquire relevant skills and competencies that would support global information exchange which would facilitate the globalization of our local contents and African's rich cultural heritage. The reliance on the usual traditional methods of information handling, management and service orientation must be replaced with skills and competencies required in the present information age. Therefore, library and information professionals in Nigeria must improve on their computer and information technology skills, internet literacy profile, and digitization skills – all these as repositioning strategies in the dynamic information environment. These professional developments will assist Africa in improving its web presence in the global community.

National and institutional policy framework:

The information professionals may not be in a position to address the challenges of globalization all alone. A sustainable policy frame work on how to manage cultural information in the present information society is a critical factor in the globalized community. These policy issues should address such things as the provision of information and communication technology infrastructures like power supply, provision of ICT hard wares and soft wares, capacity building, among other ICT-related issues. This is because the present information structure requires that libraries and information centres must have internet facilities, regular power supply, trained man power and other information and telecommunication infrastructures which would assist the professionals operate at optimum capacity in the globalization context. These policy frame work should be addressed at the national and institutional levels for effective implementation.

Curriculum redesign:

The process of globalization has resulted in several changes in the method of information generation, processing and communication. These changes require a redesign of the educational programmes of library and information professionals in Nigeria. The obvious fact is that if the curriculum remains the way it has been, the country will continue to produce information professionals who are living in the past and therefore, cannot adequately operate optimally in the global information environment. The country at present needs information professionals who can generate and process social, cultural scientific and technological information; who posses the required internet search skills and competencies. The country must produce information professionals who can handle digitization of local information resources and communicate them to the global community. The course contents of library and information science schools must be, as a matter of necessity, redesigned to incorporate these ICT skills. Library and Information Science educators must take up this challenge so as to reposition the country in the globalization process.

Regional and international co-operation:

Globalization has international dimensions where the global community is shrinking to an electronic village. The implication is that no country or regional group can afford to remain isolated. The Nigerian library and information professionals must not remain local champions other wise they will find it difficult to operate in the globalization process. Regional and international co-operation is a critical factor in the global networking and communication. Regional co-operation among African countries would encourage the sharing and networking of the cultural heritage of the continent. The task of the information professionals is to organize the cultural information in Africa, repackage them and showcase them to the global community using their professional expertise. In doing this, the professionals should live up their professional responsibilities by attending regional and international professional meetings where they are likely going to be exposed to better approaches required in repositioning Africa culturally to the global community.

Conclusion:

Globalization is an international phenomenon which is gradually bringing the world together through socio-economic and cultural integrations. Unfortunately, however, it is doubtful whether African countries are ready for the challenges these integrations posse. This is because globalization is driven by information and communication technology which is relatively new to Africa and consequently the population of Africans who are familiar to the ICT technology is very low compared with other developed parts of the world. The result of which is that the continent is at the mercy of the developed countries of Europe and America for whatever information they would require. This has resulted into cultural imperialism since greater percent of cultural information on the internet and other electronic media are from these developed countries. This is an ugly development which library and information professionals must seek to address. This paper has provided several approaches which will reposition the information professionals to be able to properly place African cultural values in the global information map.

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