

Re-thinking Global Communication: Navigating the Loop of Pessimism and Optimism in the Age of Social Media and Planetary Citizenship



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Abstract

Although communication has been a part of human existence and a means of solving many of mankind's problems, its misuse has created as many challenges as it has resolved, leaving the same man it serves in perpetual search for solutions to his communication-related challenges. Advancement in media technology as evident in the Internet-enabled social media, without taking away the benefits of improved global communication, has equally thrown up challenges that are quite worrisome and irksome. The admixture of hope and despair associated with how communication technologies are deployed as well as the implication of the outcomes of communication across national frontiers have evoked both optimism and pessimism about contemporary practices in international communication. This library-based study aimed to examine the basis of the fears expressed about the implications of contemporary global communication amid its benefits and find out the possibility of deploying the technology of the media to better serve communication objectives. Based on the postulations of global social responsibility and cultural development hypotheses as well as the technological determinism theory, the study examines arguments and experiences that inform pessimistic and optimistic dispositions towards international communication in the age of social media and observes pervasive negative use of the media which yield atrocious outcomes that negate the essence of international communication but notes that this can be reversed through deliberate policies and actions. The paper therefore recommends the adoption of macroethics partly through awareness creation and emphasis on global social responsibility and partly through technological determinism by adopting hi-tech solutions to the negative use of media technologies. It further recommends deliberate promotion of the cultures of societies whose pessimistic dispositions towards international communication are based on perceived dominance by the developed world.

Keywords: *Communication, technology, globalization, citizenship, pessimism*

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Introduction

International communication has become both an interesting area of communication and scholarship and a subject of academic controversies. Not only has the reason arisen to redefine the subject, but the implication of the practice of international communication on nations and families has become even more far-reaching than it was before now, raising questions about the droves of conceptualization and the variety of approaches that professionals and even mere citizens engage in its practice. Communication as the process of sharing meaning between two or more entities, implies that when the sharing takes place between two nations, the communication takes the international dimension. A difficulty however arises with defining what makes the entities international especially when citizens, not acting on behalf of their countries engage in information-sharing at a time when the act of information-sharing itself is viewed as a right.

What is generally described as international communication has sufficed in an unresolved controversy when it is said to be a communication across international borders (Alao, Uwom & Alao, 2013). What is 'international' is likely to agitate our minds. Similarly, Omenkuku (2011) defines the subject "as a process of disseminating information, messages, values and attitudes for the promotion of new behavioural patterns between two or more countries with a view of influencing attitudinal changes that are germane for creating a conducive environment in the area of politics, culture and socio-economy" and, as Ekeanyanwu (2015) looks at it as "strategic communication between nations and across national boundaries" (p.1), they fail to address the fact that communication is not always only a deliberate act. Involuntary acts sometimes make serious impacts or create and sustain opinions about those involved in communication. These issues have made international communication a subject of academic controversies.

What is not arguable, however, is that technological developments continue to shape and reshape international communication. This is to the extent that Asadu and Usua (2011) suggest that without the mass media, international communication would not be easy and that it is the mass media that has created the psychological proximity between one country and the other. Therefore, international communication is more of "the use of mass communication media to reach heterogeneous, anonymous and scattered audiences across the globe or national borders, immediately, spontaneously and simultaneously (p.5). It is in the context of the emphasis on the use of the mass media and by implication media technology, the heterogeneity as well as anonymous and scattered nature of the communicators, the spread of the message over the globe and across national borders as well as the immediacy due to the technology used that the need to re-think international communication has thrown up itself. Equally important is the spontaneity of the message itself and ultimately, the implications of the advantages that come with today's communication that call for scrutiny of the subject of international communication. With the remonstrations that continue to trail technological advancement, defined mostly by the new technology of communication – the ICTs and social media, the diverse ways in which these are deployed and put to use vis-a-vis the increasing need for integration, cooperation and world peace and the extent they have remained elusive despite needs, efforts and the technologies of communication themselves, the need to re-think international communication has thrown up itself.

Curiously, at the time media technology was fingered as the greatest impetus for global communication and pointed up as the biggest enabler of the skewed process of

globalization with the resultant dominance of less developed parts of the world, a lot was possible in terms of benefits and equity. But in contemporary times, the gap between the strong and weak nations has expanded, implying dissatisfaction if not a sense of enragement among the latter. Equally, negative global communication, rather than diminish, has increased to further put man in a greater state of confusion. International communication, having ceased for instance, to be restricted to official interaction between nation-states through their representatives and messages on radio, television, newspaper and in movies supplied by trained media experts, now includes the exchange or dissemination of data by mere citizens and other non-state actors with intentions and objectives that range from the good to the bizarre and the unimaginable.

With the tools of communication now both commonplace and with global reach and impact, along with the liberalization of information in an age in which the act of communication is widely acknowledged as a right of citizens; with citizens themselves conscious and willing to demand the right, restrictions have become unfashionable and nearly impossible. Given that globalization has reduced the planet to a small village and continues to shrink it further without a chance of reversal, the gains that are derivable from globalization courtesy of media technology and social media in particular, unfortunately, are enfeebled or nearly so, by problems that the same technology and citizens' right to freely communicate often occasion. Information sharing by planetary citizens, with both its promise and challenges then leaves us with a responsibility of rethinking present communication to ensure that it serves a better global objective than it is doing at present.

Theoretical foundation of the discourse

Three postulations—the theory of technological determinism, the global social responsibility hypothesis, and the cultural development hypothesis—provide the theoretical foundation for the discourse.

Marshal McLuhan's technological determinism theory which links people's thinking and behaviour to available technology, to a large extent, explains what is going on in contemporary global media space. If technology is the prime determinant of cultural change as the theory stipulates, media technology then is the force behind the direction of international communication in contemporary times. According to Griffin (2000), the world is in the middle of a revolution and it is not going to be the same again. As Ochonogor (2014) has seen it, when man designs tools and specifies what roles and uses to put the tools, the tools determine some of the things individuals will do and how they will do them. "The influence of technology is felt in the type of lifestyle, mode of work, leisure, business and relationship we engage in" (p. 104). Therefore, the way communication across national boundaries is executed is a result of the technology of communication that is available. If global communication has become less structured and uncontrolled, it has to be that media technology has put in the hands of network citizens, the power to communicate and unfortunately with little control over what and how they communicate.

The cultural development hypothesis is based on the conviction that even though ICTs and indeed social media which are the backbone of modern communication are developed in the civilized North, nothing takes away the fact that they "can be equated to any other tool in the hands of men, which is given significance by those who use them and can apply them to shape economic and cultural change" (Usua, 2019, p.244). Further,

while Obukodata (2012), argues that the agenda-setting function of the media can be localized to uphold and entrench the values of the African race by promoting those values, Okorie and Oyedepo (2010) insist that members of indigenous societies especially in Third World countries can use ICTs to propagate, popularize and preserve African cultural elements. On the strength of these arguments, Ekeanyanwu (2010), proposing the cultural development theory opines that those who have been complaining about the domination of their cultures should rather make deliberate efforts towards the development of their beliefs, values and practices using the available technologies (in this case ICTs and the Internet) to achieve cultural promotion. The import of this is that there will be no basis for pessimistic feelings on the part of members of developing nations, about what international communication is doing to the third world countries because fears about dominance by the advantaged half of the globe will be resolved when the cultural imprints of the developing world are made part of the global culture, using media technologies.

Historical and technological evolution of international communication

Since the core objectives of international communication include the need to maintain international friendship and relations as well as to understand and be knowledgeable and informed about happenings around the world (Ekeanyanwu, 2015), it is obvious that international communication commenced with the consciousness of different sets of people or groups, of the existence of other people or kingdoms. The knowledge of the existence of human settlements outside one's place of birth and the realization that in other parts of the world, some useful articles, tangible or otherwise, could be sourced, explains why people become adventurous. Besides, the desire to conquer other territories (as in the case of colonialism), would in some ways, increase and expand the scope of international communication. News value of psychological proximity warranted covering countries where the white man had his presence just as the development of means of transportation and communication helped in transmitting information across national frontiers hence, the increase in news flow between nations (Ukonu, 2008; Asadu and Usua, 2011). While the idea of using international communication to enhance international relations, conflict prevention and management, humanitarian efforts, streamlining scientific development, business pursuit, fighting for human rights, and the communication of global health challenges as Alao *et al* (2013) have noted, cannot be disputed, the contributions of technology especially in recent history stand out. The [association of international communication with the] global village metaphor was based on the invention of the technology of broadcasting. The call or agitation for a reversal of one-way news and information flow from the developed world to the third world, also believed to be a major phase in international communication was one of the outcomes of international broadcasting (United Nations, 1980). The notion of broadcasting enhancing the transmission (or exportation) of information across national boundaries succinctly captured in Marshall McLuhan's global village concept was simply to reiterate the role of media technology in international communication. In all, from the quest for global governance that the developed half of the globe is often accused of, to suggestions around the initiation of actions to ensure globalization as a tool for economic dominance, it is impossible to divorce media technology from any of these processes. The conscious effort of the industrialized world to rule over other parts of the world economically using multilateral agencies like the World Trade Organization, the World Economic Forum, the

International Monetary Fund, the World Bank and other agencies (Asobie, 2007), can be seen in the context of the fact that the world is easily brought together with the tools of technology, especially media technology.

If technological breakthroughs starting with the invention of the printing press, the Morse Code, the building of ship and the rail system, the discovery of electromagnetic waves etc. were responsible not only for reshaping communication across national boundaries but indeed revolutionized the process of communication, then it should be understood why the Internet-driven social media are having tremendous implications on contemporary global communication.

Social media have come to reshape the processes of communication not only in the head of individuals but also between people, communities and nations, and have taken human communication ahead of earlier technologies to the extent that they are seen as the creatures that in turn create their creators (Kaplan and Haenlein, in Sheedy, 2011). While transport and broadcast technologies were in their wake put under control by government and relevant agencies both globally and within nations, social media continues to be malleable in use beyond much control. In their strengths and weaknesses, social media have through their ubiquitous nature, impacted the entire globe such that their grip and influence can never be denied, nor can they be ignored by anyone, anywhere in the world.

The Internet, being the foundation of social media communication, is in itself described as the open sky, has been used to break the protocol of time that limited transport technology, overcome the limitation from scarcity of spectrum which enfeebles broadcast technology and prevail over the drawback that were associated with the requirement of point to point connection that was necessary for telephone service to take place. By breaking the barriers that set nations of the world apart and doing so within split seconds; and by disseminating information to millions, if not billions of people at the same time, doubts exist about the alteration of communication protocols, principles and approaches in international communication.

One of the major characteristics of social media communication is that rather than the so-called professional journalists whose operational routines are highly guided by law and work ethics, have lost ground to ordinary citizens who once depended on the professionals for daily news and entertainment. With social media returning at least some level of power to the citizens to influence contents of communication in some cases or even total control of the content in others; and with the removal of geographical barriers through the Internet, thus providing global access to any citizen, international communication can no longer be said to be the type of communication that exists between nations or representatives of nations. The fact that, unlike conventional media which are mostly characterized by one-way information flow from the all-known professional journalists to the audience, the increase in the inter-activity that exists between the sender and the receiver and the constant reversal of roles between them makes social media communication more effective because of the benefits of quick response and feedback effect.

As citizens communicate among themselves and communication effects widely and quickly achieved with their attendant implications on the image, influence and security situations of the countries involved; and with little that can be achieved in terms of control by governments and control agencies which would be in the position to control the content that are disseminated from one country to the other, the deliberate use of

international communication by nations for conflict prevention, to streamline scientific developments, for diplomacy, for the pursuit of human rights and to achieve world peace and prevent conflicts and global terrorism stand undermined.

Broadcasting at its birth was touted to hint at the potential of the mass media to cause the domination of the cultures of developing nations. If as Schiller (in Asadu & Usua, 2011) had observed, it was going to facilitate the demise of African culture based on the strength of that technology to control human thought, the argument may be continued to the effect that the technology of the social media as we see it today is largely the determinant of the dimension and direction of international communication. Technology is indeed the reason why there is no longer an isolated process of civilization and why humanity now exists in a virtual planetary society that is largely an argumentative community (Silva, 2011).

Pessimism and optimism over global communication

Cyberspace has been of immense benefit to international journalism. While social media and indeed cyberspace have been of immense direct benefits to journalism and communication generally in the global space as media workers leverage them in specific information-sharing processes, the convergence that brings the technologies of the print and electronic media; the use of colours and general graphic elements, traditionally the mainstay of magazine and television, along with the immediacy and reach of broadcast technology all combine to make communication and information sharing very effective. With satellite technology, hardly can any event or occurrence go unnoticed. With social media, virtually every citizen of the world who is connected to the Internet can report from their corners of the globe. The interactivity and quick feedback that characterize social media communication are all evidence that social media have delivered a great promise to the world.

Referring to social media as a coin (Nsereka, 2019), reiterates the fact that all the benefits listed are but features on one side of the coin and that social media does have a reverse side. On the reverse side are those consequences of the nature and direction of international communication that evoke a feeling of pessimism. One of the things social media have brought about is the need to re-examine the definition and our understanding of international communication. Having succeeded in re-distributing the power to communicate among state leaders, policymakers, professional communicators and the general citizens; and having brought down whatever was left of the barriers between nations after the invention of broadcasting, social media have equally succeeded in opening the space and delivering into the hands of global citizens, the power to communicate not only among themselves but often and inadvertently, 'on behalf' of their nations. That open access, unfortunately, has created loopholes for negative communication which is the basis for pessimism.

The use of social media has unfortunately given rise to the spread of falsehood across nations. Rumour-mongering, disinformation and misinformation have become common features of contemporary living, mostly because social media provide the platforms and avenues for their quick and widespread (Ohiagu, 2014; Omego, 2014; Ghonim, 2016; Nsereka, 2019). Besides the transmission of falsehood, use of social media for international fraud, dissemination of pornographic materials as well as their use in terrorism, the contributions of social media in the process of globalization, which to some, quickens the process that brings the weak and the strong halves of the globe

together for easy domination of one by the other, is even a greater reason for apprehension. Social media then become fingered as tools for imperialism in cultural, political and even economic senses. Since globalization is the process that eliminates the dividing lines and boundaries between nations and is interpreted in terms of how communication between and among citizens of different nations spans out based on available media technology, global communication then becomes something that people in technologically weak nations are circumspect about.

Navigating the loop of pessimism and optimism

With the dynamic nature of man in the ways he puts communication to use as well as the tendency for further advancement in technology, one does not anticipate a reverse trend in the knitting up of the global community; not as that inquisitive and adventurous man continues to stretch his imagination, seek new solutions to problems and experiment with whatever tool he stumbles on. If anything, the closing of the gap between communities and the interdependence of nations through the process of globalization are not some of the things that humanity should expect to slow down. Contrary, it is clear that what has been set in motion for the shrinking of the world appears capable of further reducing the globe into something quite smaller than McLuhan's village metaphor. The defining element and implication of what results is increased communication between the citizens. The challenge then becomes what the new definition of communication should be and how to get global citizens to engage in that type of communication that guarantees the advancement of the human community. Seeking ways of deriving greater benefits from global communication and dealing with the challenges associated with tools and approaches to contemporary communication, for now, remains the reasonable option for humanity.

Incidentally, all the fears expressed about international communication have solutions that are both practicable and theoretically supported. For instance, whatever negative use to which media technology is put is enabled by the technology itself and the solution to it therefore lies with the technology. Since technological determinism theory has succeeded in establishing the fact that technology defines how communication will flow, sending and receiving negative communication in the global society requires deliberate design and manufacture of communication media technologies with features that make it difficult or impossible to use media technology to perpetrate negative communication. It is however not to be imagined that total reliance on technology can be the sure-fire solution to negative global communication. One of the reasons people communicate is because they are first, humans and their right to do so is derived from their membership of the human community. All human communities are organized social systems. Based on the global social responsibility hypothesis, media ethics made to fit into the larger global perspective, supported by all social media platforms and made part of the terms and conditions for using the social media platforms will in the end condition social media users to adopt such principles or risk disconnection and forfeiture of the right to enjoy the services of the networks. The fact that there is no freedom without responsibility suffices as a good ground to deny planetary citizens the right to freely communicate if such freedom constantly stays abused through irresponsible manufacture and dissemination of information and entertainment.

The process that has reduced the world into a small village and the technologies that have made the process possible have become so real in contemporary society that it is

impossible to imagine that we can survive in a different world than that global village. The global village itself has engendered many changes in our lives in social, economic and cultural realms. Globalization has not only changed the way we think and act, it has equally dislocated indigenous cultures and values of some societies. This has been the basis for the feeling of frustration expressed by weak developing countries as they watch their cultures festering away under the weight of foreign ones. But that development need not be blamed entirely on the developed world. Doing so over the decades has not indicated that the narrative will change communication to push for the announcement, promotion and preservation of their cultural elements and values based on the understanding that people are motivated to use the media, including the Internet and social media services, in specific ways and for specific objectives. When the motivation for social media use by those whose cultures are feared-dominated is geared towards making their values relevant, there will be no reason for a pessimistic disposition towards globalization and international communication.

Conclusion

While acknowledging that new media technologies, specifically social media, have increased and improved communication and the integration of global communities in business, social, political or diplomatic circles among others, they have also been exploited for the destruction in some ways, of those communities. The benefits derived from the use of international communication as a tool for the pursuit of improved relations, international trade, global peace, for cultural propagation among others (Alao et al, 2014), appear to have been inhibited or made unimpressive in some remarkable ways as a result of the negative use to which especially, young people put the same social media and related technologies and by extension international communication.

This situation which in part, is due to the nature of the technologies that enhance international communication, presents itself as one that generates mixed feelings and therefore necessitates a re-appraisal of the communication situation and the tools that enhance it. Incidentally, with the same social media and related technologies that have been instrumental to negative global communication, some scholars have seen the need and have made the argument that some of the theories associated with global or international communication deserve to be given a second look either to properly adopt them for better media service or to have them challenged where necessary. For example, technological determinism theory, having indicated the relationship between the nature of available technology and the way communication is executed, implies that negative communication occurs because the technology allows it, and equally hints at the fact that technology can be made to better satisfy the communication needs of the society.

Cultural imperialism theory, a theory that supports the notion that international broadcasting is a key factor in the destruction of African culture, has been challenged by scholars (Ekeanyanwu, 2010; Obukoadata, 2012; Usua, 2014; Usua, 2019). In particular, Ekeanyanwu, (2010) insists that in place of cultural imperialism theory and with the use of the new/social media to develop and promote the African culture, emphasis will have to shift to cultural development theory. Even though social media have been used in many negative ways by global citizens, and their capacities in enhancing the improvement in communication globally have equally not been in any controversy, media technology and indeed global communication, though holding both promise and misfortune, can be harnessed for better communication services to be derived. The

burden of this study therefore was to propose the way out of the crossroads by suggesting ways of circumventing the practices that negate the essence and objectives of international communication.

It is based on the above that it is recommended that technology, having been the verve for negative communication be made to proffer a solution to the problem it has generated. The idea is to get technology, in line with the precept of technological determinism theory, to define the direction of global communication because really, what is made available for communication has been made too open to accommodate destructive use. This proposal sees the solution to destructive communication as also lying partly with technology. In that case, scientists and inventors should come up with solutions to the problem of negative communication through the design, manufacture and development of media technologies, including social media platforms, that take into account, IT-based solutions to negative use of the media. International organizations and agencies in charge of communication should be mandated to come up with proposals to ensure that media technologies are made to conform to certain accepted levels of control to be able to filter data. The organization in control of international telecommunication satellite (INTELSAT), The International Telecommunication Union (ITU) and other relevant organizations and agencies should be mandated to ensure that social media platforms introduce mechanisms to make it impossible to transmit destructive information.

Creators and inventors of media technology must take into account, the fact that having a safe and organized society is partly their responsibility and that technologies need not be left too open to yield such destructive tendencies that can destroy society. It is in this sense that algorithms developed by Twitter and Instagram for example, to identify and handle malicious content on their platforms and with the privacy policies that empower other users to report posts with the tendency to incite violence, hold out some promise. Similarly, Facebook is increasingly relying on AI to monitor its services and identify content that violates its policies and guidelines. It is reported that Facebook is having varying levels of success as a result of the use of AI. Offensive posts, posts that promote nudity, and terrorism-related posts from the likes of ISIS and Al Qaeda can easily be policed with AI. Recently, AI has been found useful in tackling hate speech (Wolverton, 2018). With the submission by Terdiman (2018), that Facebook is using AI to proactively detect eight categories of content: Nudity, graphic violence, terrorism, hate speech, spam, fake accounts, and suicide prevention, fears about the use of social media in negative global communication can be addressed. All that national governments need to do is to intensify work on policies, based on these possibilities of check, to curb the indiscriminate use of social media to incite violence and perpetrate other crimes.

Additionally, since, as Silva (2011) has argued, given a situation of implantation of macro ethics, a universal ethos that can challenge the existing global ethos which is accidental and marked by North-American and dominant ethos, there are chances that global communication can take the form which addresses the fears of those who express pessimism as a result of the negative communication that has been perpetuated since the invention of the social media. Emphasizing the macro-ethics by the relevant agencies, particularly in the context of the tenets of global social responsibility theory, becomes an effective means of eliminating negative communication and its attendant fears in the global communication space.

Ultimately, pessimism expressed by developing nations as a result of the domination of their cultural practices and values by the developed slice of the globe will be taken care of when leaders in the developing world make deliberate efforts to be culturally relevant in the global space. A few actions that need to be taken to actualize this include improved media funding to cover the acquisition of equipment and training of indigenous content creators as well as researchers among others.

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