

# THE IMPERATIVE OF MEDIA, INFORMATION AND DIGITAL LITERACY IN THE ERA OF INTERNET-DRIVEN GLOBAL COMMUNICATION

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## **Abstract**

*Dissemination of information across international borders has been intensified since the emergence of digital technology. The internet which drives the digital platforms has drastically changed global media and communication landscape, enabling anyone, anywhere, to have access to the same information, to contribute and share contents with each other. Communication through such uncontrolled channel where ordinary citizens assume the role of journalists can be both useful and harmful to information consumers. This is because the internet is used for promotion of terrorism, pornography, fraud and spreading hate messages, misinformation and disinformation. Hence the need for media, information and digital literacy for everyone to be able to use these digital platforms safely and responsibly while accessing and disseminating information. This paper examines the internet as a medium of international communication which brings out the nature of global information flow on the internet, its roles in globalisation and its dark side too, as well as the imperative of media, information and digital literacy in this era of internet-driven global communication. The paper suggests collaborations among stakeholders and policy makers in media and information communication technology globally, to achieve a universal media, information and digital literacy that will minimize the negative effects of internet-driven global communication.*

**Keywords:** media and information literacy, digital literacy, internet, global communication

## **Introduction**

The channels used in disseminating information across international borders include the traditional mass media of radio, television, newspapers, magazines and the new media which is driven by the internet. Since its emergence from the US military research in 1960, the internet has exploded with a lot of platforms, from Web 1.0 and its linearity of communication in 1989 to the interactive web 2.0 in 2004, which came with it a multiple platforms for communication such

as social networking sites, blogospheres, social media and online news media. The enormous potentials that the internet offers and the realization that it can be put to plethora of uses, resulted in its application to various spheres of communication.

The internet technology has shaped and continues to shape the way news and information are processed and disseminated across the globe. Alegu, Abugu & Shadrach, (2018) note that growth of technology and in particular the emergence of social media sites like facebook and twitter is tampering with the original concept or characteristic of mass communication which entails an organization sending message to large audience. Before now news outlets, corporations, governments and other leading organizations simply had to give out information, and people would consume them by reading or looking at them, but simply making information available is not enough for today's public. People want to be able to choose what they read, and most believe they should be able to contribute content and opinions, too (Harper, 2010).

That is why Friedman (2005) opines that the internet has played a crucial role in leveling the playing field across the globe, enabling anyone, anywhere, to have access to the same information, to connect to and do business direct with each other. The internet, he points out enables an ever more efficient international division of labour to take account of the comparative advantage of different markets which also makes the world, in his term, increasingly flat. It creates tremendous economic opportunities but also has a dark side, illustrated by its use for fraud, pornography and terrorism. The Internet he further describes as a vehicle in which eBay and Al Qaeda are fellow travelers (Friedman, 2005), hence the need for media, information and digital literacy education and awareness globally.

This paper therefore examines the internet as a medium of international communication, the nature of global information flow on the internet, its roles in globalisation and its dark side too. The paper also discusses the importance of media, information and digital literacy in this era of digitised globalisation and suggests ways of minimizing the negative effects of internet driven global communication.

### **Internet - A Medium of International Communication**

International communication as defined by Fortner (1993) is a branch of communication studies, concerned with the scope of government-to-government, business-to-business, and people-to-

people interactions at a global level. International communication is also referred to as global communication or transnational communication - being a communication that occurs across international borders. The Internet which is a means of communication that enables the publication, exchange and storage of information, also enables simultaneous person to person or group communication, and universal publication (Westcot, 2008). The internet transmits information generated through social media platforms such as Twitter, Blogs, Facebook, YouTube, online news media and web pages through computers and internet enabled mobile devices to millions of online information consumers globally.

Since international communication is concerned with the transfer of information from one country to another, the internet which hosts various digital media platforms has become the easiest, fastest and the most convenient medium of international communication, going by its unique features. This is because the internet is built on networks and has connectivity that brings together citizens of different countries in a virtual community, thereby making global sharing and exchange of information easier and faster. Social media sites like twitter and facebook have users that cut across borders and boundaries of the world, who come together to interact and exchange ideas and information. Also nations, government officials, big corporations, embassies, UN agencies and NGOs maintain online presence on these social media platforms from where they monitor activities and happenings, receive and share messages with millions of users all over the world.

On the other hand, the traditional mass media which before now operated through the prints and electronic channels have now converged on the internet. What this means is that television, radio, newspapers and even news agencies now operate on the internet and can all be accessed with a single digital device. Almost all the television stations in the world today have a website, a YouTube channel where they stream and share their news clips and live videos. They equally operate blogs where they share online versions of their news stories while also maintaining twitter accounts and facebook pages. The same is applicable to radio, newspapers and magazines. Most newspapers and magazines in the world are being read online from different parts of the world while some are exclusively published online for consumption of all who have internet access irrespective of location.

The internet has also given the audience choice to select any medium, at any time, from any part of the world. People surf the net for news and information from different media sources all over the world. For instance, Nigerian readers of the New York Times do not need to wait for the hard copy of the paper to be delivered to their doorsteps. Rather, they have the privileges of accessing the paper from the comforts of their homes and with a click on their mobile phones they are inundated with news around the world, not only from the Times but from all the other popular newspapers across the globe. It is important to note that most of the clues, scoops and breaking news in the world today are received through the internet.

### **Nature of Global Information Flow on the Internet**

The major issues surrounding the practice and study of international communication have always revolved around the direction and nature of world information flow. There have been debates, agitations and clamours over the unequal and unbalanced nature of information that flow between and amongst nations of the world. Thussu (2015) concurs that the one-way vertical flow of international media, mainly from the United States to other parts of the world as highlighted by the MacBride Report and also documented by two UNESCO-sponsored studies (Nordenstreng and Varis 1974; Varis 1985), has intensified in the era of digitised globalisation. He explained that across the board, the US domination of global media continues: from entertainment and sport (Hollywood, MTV, Disney, ESPN), news and current affairs (CNN, Discovery, Time), to financial news (Bloomberg, Fortune, Wall Street Journal), to online news portals (Huffington Post, BuzzFeed, The Vice) as well as the networks and platforms from which these are distributed via and to social media (Google, YouTube, Facebook, Twitter) (Thussu, 2015).

The major owners and operators of the most powerful media outfits in the world today are from the technologically advanced western countries such as the US, Britain, France etc. They invent the equipment used in production and dissemination of news and information and also provide the needed skills for their utilisation. The internet is one of such inventions and just like in the other media of international communication, there is a digital divide between nations of the world as well as inequalities in terms of contents that are generated, exchanged or accessed over it, through the World Wide Web, or the networks set up by individuals or organisations that use it for transmission (Westcott, 2008). Westcott also notes that the speed of development and

spread of the Internet has been a market driven phenomenon as supply has been delivered primarily by the private sector to meet ever-increasing public demand.

In the same line of thought, Nipp (2015) explains that the one-way vertical flow of global information is caused by the existence of a powerful, dominant culture and media, and secondly the existence of less powerful, media-poor societies that submit, or are subjected to, the views and influence of the former. What is therefore required of these media-poor countries is to transform to media, information and digital literate societies where citizens can participate actively in internet driven global communication without being negatively swayed by the contents. This is because the third world countries lack the capacities to match the technological and ideological prowess of the advanced nations of the world to become equal receivers and contributors in the global media arena.

Nevertheless, Dutton and Helsper, (2007) allay that the rapid spread of mobile telephony in even the poorest countries, and the convergence of Internet and mobile technology, is closing that gap. The perceived preponderance of western ideologies and one-way vertical flow of information on the internet, according to Thussu (2007); UNESCO (2009) are being supplemented by multiple and horizontal traffic, as subaltern media content providers have emerged to service an ever-growing market. Furthermore, the free and open communication prevalent on the internet has altered the nature of world information flow. This is because in social media, users have the choice of selecting the kind of individuals or sources they receive news and information from, unlike in the traditional mass media where preconfigured news and information are uniformly disseminated to a large and dispersed audience simultaneously.

In facebook and twitter algorithms for instance, news feeds and updates that flood users' timelines usually come from friends, groups and organizations they joined or follow actively online. Similarly, information they share on these platforms can only be visible to their online friends and followers unless when rebroadcasted to others by these their online friends and followers. On the other hand, users also have the choice to decide which news site, blog, and forum or search engine to visit when they want to satisfy their information needs.

As a result of this liberalized nature of internet communication, the one-way vertical flow in which the US and other technologically advanced countries of the world are accused of

domination is seriously being challenged. In fact, with the internet, the issue of US domination or unequal and unbalanced flow of information no longer arise since users are at will to choose who to receive information from, who to share contents with and what contents or websites to be exposed to. Today's digital technology has also made it possible for horizontal and multi-directional flow of information ranging from personal information, news updates about local, national and global issues, individual to group interactions to take place freely across the globe. Also, with the increasing number of users and the ever increasing audience, social media has also been efficiently used in marketing, social activism, advocacy, political campaigning and propaganda that can reach the entire global online community.

### **The Internet, Globalisation and International Communication**

Since international communication is technology driven, the use of the internet first and foremost has aided globalisation by ensuring that individuals, governments, agencies, organizations and corporations in different parts of the world own and develop contents, meet, interact, exchange and access contents in a virtual community. The internet as a channel of international communication seems to have contributed more than any other media technology in making the world become what the famous Canadian scholar, Marshal McLuhan heralded as 'global village' in the 60s. Today, happenings in different countries of the world are felt in every nook and cranny of the earth in a matter of seconds or nanoseconds. Newman (2003) agrees that the internet has altered the meaning of geographic distance and has also allowed for a huge increase in volume of communication. This was clearly exemplified in the 2016 US presidential Election campaign which enjoyed large followership in Nigeria and other countries of the world despite taking place in far away United States. The internet and other technology of globalization such as cables and satellite television made it possible for the wide reach and attention the election received across the globe.

Globalisation which has been defined differently by different scholars is described by Tejada (2007) as the strengthening of global social relations by connecting distant localities in such a manner that indigenous happenings are shaped by incidents occurring thousands of miles away and the other way around. Globalization is also termed as the unification of economic, cultural and social relations across borders (Jarvis, 2007). To Anthony Giddens, "globalization is the strengthening of international social relations which links remote localities in such a way that

home happenings are formed by events occurring several miles away and vice versa” (Giddens, 2003).

Globalization is always represented as a constructive force which is uniting generally wide spread societies, assimilating all into global village, and elevating all in the development (Kheeshadeh, 2012) and this also portrays the whole essence of international communication, which is, to foster cordial relationship, understanding, bringing about development, unity, peace, stability and commonness among nations and citizens of the world. The internet as a medium of international communication plays a greater role in this regard due to its large networks, speed and ease of communication.

### **The Dark Side of Internet-driven Global Communication**

Despite its numerous contributions to global peace, health, politics, economy, learning, security and international development due to its ability in making communication easier and faster, and making the modes of communication more diverse, the global communication via the internet has some negative effects on global information consumers. This is because the internet is used for promotion of terrorism, pornography, fraud and spread of hate messages, misinformation and disinformation as well as other purposes that are inimical to human existence.

In recent time, the internet has become a breeding spot for terrorism; serving as recruitment link and channels for propagating terrorists’ ideologies. Westcot (2008) captured the situation when he states that Islamic terrorists have been assiduous users of the Internet and that terrorist websites have become a vital resource, both for supporters and the targets of the jihad. He further notes that terrorists now use the Internet to raise money, preach their cause and publish propaganda, including of bombings and executions. Repeated exposure to such horrific terrorists’ contents can instill fears and make users become traumatized, desensitized and encourage violent acts. Terrorists’ preaching and propaganda have also led to conscription of the gullible into terrorist groups like ISIS, Boko Haram, and Al queda to mention a few. Since the war in Syria begun in 2013 for instance, there has been an influx of jihadists from different parts of the world into the country, paying allegiance to ISIS and joining them in the fight to establish a caliphate around Iraq and Syria. Others who could not make it to Syria and Iraq have supported the cause through cash donations and propaganda.

Given its uncontrolled nature, social media particularly can be potentially harmful in the event of misleading information from ignorant or merely malevolent users going viral through them (Akindehin & Akindehin, 2011; Adaja & Ayodele, 2013). There are a lot of disinformation and misinformation going on in the social media circle globally and these have led to panics, disorientation, misconceptions and sometimes crisis. This is even truer when what is involved is something as urgent and frightening as an epidemic, given that people tend to rely on the media for direction in such situations of uncertainty, as postulated by the media system dependency theory (Baran, 2010). For instance, in 2014 when Patrick Sawyer brought the deadly ebola virus to Nigeria, information circulated through social media, urging Nigerians to urgently drink water mixed with salt and bath with it to fortify their immune systems against ebola. This piece of misinformation went viral as people were asked to share the message with family and friends. At the end of it all, four persons were reported to have died as a result of too much salt finding its way into the body through the pores of the skin and jacking up the blood pressure (Obukoadata, & Abuah, 2014).

Also, due to its gateless nature, messages and information that threaten global peace and human existence have freely found their ways on the internet unhindered. This is because the internet has been turned to a place where hate messages that incite citizens of the world against one another are propagated. These hate speeches which can be on ethnic, religious and racial basis or even against a nation as the case may be are capable of stirring ethnic cleansing, genocide, war, protests and long time enmity between the affected nations, religious or ethnic groups. In recent times, use of stereotypes such as ‘Muslims are terrorists’, ‘lands of epidemics’ ‘shithole country’, ‘fantastically corrupt people’ and similar derogatory comments are becoming rampant on social media. Social media is also fast becoming an arena for unleashing verbal attacks against individuals, groups or nationalities in order to demonize and diminish their worth in the eyes of the global publics. Such activities like internet trolling and cyber bullying which have become the order of the day among online internet users also have negative effects on the psyche and emotions of affected users. This can lead to suicide, depression and low self esteem.

This pathetic state of information dissemination through the internet is aptly captured in Brenen (cited in Hermida, 2012) description of how social media has changed the process of determining which piece of information is reliable and which is not. He suggests that facts are messy and



cleaning them relies on interpretation. This process, which according to him, “traditionally took place in newsrooms, away from the public eye, as journalists considered conflicting reports, weighed up incoming information and made decisions on what to publish is absent in the social media.” Similarly, Lewandowsky et al., (2012) point out that the old “gate-keeping” mechanisms are not in place anymore; in the social media, there are no professional editors who follow the professional norms and traditions of journalism to double check the content before it gets published.

Such continuous, unabated spread of fake, often unfounded news, information and hateful messages on social media are of dire consequences to humanity as their spiral effects usually escalate offline. The World Economic Forum (2013) ranked the spread of misinformation as one of the top risks facing the world today. This is because, the viral spread of misinformation on issues such as climate change and vaccines can undermine public risk judgments about not only the state of scientific agreement but also the perceived seriousness of these issues (Lewandowsky et al., 2017; van der Linden et al., 2017).

Another dark side of global communication through the internet is on its use by criminal elements for fraud and other illicit activities. Cybercrime has been on the increase since the explosion of social media, websites, online dating sites and forums. Unscrupulous individuals have resorted to using the internet to identify and hoodwink their victims. The internet has also made users susceptible to cyber scams and thefts as useful information and data are mined by hackers and scammers through the internet. The internet allows for multiple accounts, use of monikers and anonymous which have led to impersonation of prominent celebrities and personalities as well as theft of identity. Through these illicit activities, money, sensitive information and vital data have been stolen through online sharing of information on the internet. Cybercrime Report 2017 indicates that cybercriminal activity is one of the biggest challenges that humanity will face in the next two decades. The report predicted that cybercrime will cost the world \$6 trillion annually by 2021, up from \$3 trillion in 2015 (Cyber Security Ventures, 2017).

## **The Imperative of Media, Information and Digital Literacy**

Knowing that information communicated to large number of people scattered all over the world through the internet can have negative effects on online information consumers, media, information and digital literacy education and awareness have become inevitable. The importance of such education in this digital era which has drastically changed the global information and media landscape cannot be overemphasized. This is because media consumption is changing through user generated communication and the availability of digital products (European Commission, 2007). As a result of this, the ability to read and write or traditional literacy is no longer sufficient in this day and age. People need a greater awareness of how to express themselves effectively, and how to interpret what others are saying, especially on blogs, via search engines or in advertising. In fact, everyone (old and young) needs to get to grips with the new digital world in which we live and for this, continuous information and education is more important than regulation (Communication of the European Communities, 2007).

The four step media literacy inquiry process of awareness, analysis, reflection and action postulated by Centre for Media Literacy (n.d) also makes media and information literacy an alternative to censoring, boycotting the media or blaming the media all the time. It is further contended that it is better to concentrate on the media consumers rather than the source of the message (the media) because affecting or changing media contents is a difficult proposition given the commercially-driven and liberalised media landscape that operates across the world (Brown, 2006). Besides, media literacy is deeply committed to freedom of expression, and its strength lies in its ability to inspire independent thinking and foster critical analysis among media audiences in order to make wise choices (Centre for Media Literacy, n.d).

The dire need for global media, information and digital literacy education and awareness in this digital era can be understood in Lewandowsky et al., (2012) words when they pointed out that in social media, “Misleading information rarely comes with a warning label” and users have to come up with good heuristics to identify misinformation. They further stated that misinformation can be detected either by judging the credibility of the source or by looking at the content itself. They however lamented that most users have problems with identifying misinformation unless there is a clear retraction on behalf of the source, or they have access to contradicting information which is more convincing. This situation becomes a big challenge to global efforts

to combat the spread of misinformation, malicious messages, hate speeches and inciting messages especially on the internet.

Therefore, to ensure that internet users are able to identify such inciting, misleading or malicious information on their own, respond logically to the messages without necessarily waiting for others to help them do so, people should be equipped with the right competencies and skills globally. It is consequently not an accident that there is a growing academic interest in questions of literacy, with emphasis on exploring them under the circumstances of the electronic (digital) era, displaying a multidisciplinary mix of specialists in literacy, culture, media education, human-computer interaction, and social studies of technology (Livingstone, 2004).

In the same vein, there have been several bodies of literature examining how media literacy (critical-thinking) skills have been used for preventing unhealthy behaviours, reduction of health risks among adolescents and wise use of media contents (see Austin & Johnson, 1997; Bergsma, 2004; Bergsma & Ingram, 2001; Wade, Davidson, & O’Dea, 2003). This is because media literacy training has been identified as an effective catalyst for self-efficacy and agency among digital natives and the general population (Jackson & Barnes, 2013). It has also been found to have significant potential to promote healthy knowledge, attitudes, and behaviours (Bergsma, 2011, p. 27).

Media and information literacy are terms closely tied to each other. They are defined by UNESCO, as set of competencies that empowers citizens to access, retrieve, understand, evaluate and use, create as well as share information and media content in all formats, using various tools, in a critical, ethical, and effective way, in order to participate and engage in personal, professional, and societal activities” (UNESCO, 2013, p. 29). Closely related to this, is digital literacy which is behind the use and production of digital media, information processing and retrieval, participation in social networks for creation and sharing of knowledge, and a wide range of professional computing skills. In an age of convergence between media and digital technology, and where that technology is increasingly central to communication and a participatory culture, digital literacy has come to be defined as much more than just technical competence. Digital competence today includes the broader social, legal, ethical and economic aspects of digital use (Canada’s Centre for Digital and Media Literacy n.d).

While digital literacy enables use of digital technology for active participation in computer mediated internet communication, media and information literacy empowers citizens and transforms their passive relationship with the media into an active, critical engagement capable of challenging the traditions and structures of a privatised, commercial media culture, and finding new avenues of citizen speech and discourse (Bowen, 1996, cited in Bello, Adejola & Adebimpe, 2013). Where media and digital literacy intersect is about using literacy skills (the ability to understand, contextualize and critically evaluate) coupled with the ability to create content and communicate across a range of digital media platforms, and factoring in the consideration of ethics and social practices that are embedded in work, leisure and daily life (Media Literacy Council, 2018).

When adequately equipped with the relevant competencies and skills that media, information and digital literacy education and awareness bring, global online information consumers should be able to sift through, analyse and reflect on the messages that seek to inform, educate and entertain them through the internet on a daily basis. Also, through a continuous media, information and digital literacy education and awareness, they will be able to question the motives, values, money, etc that are behind all the messages and contents circulating online through the internet globally in order to make informed decisions.

### **Suggestions**

Achieving a universal media, information and digital literacy for all requires the collaborations of key stakeholders and policy makers in global media and information communication technology industry such as government, Education institutions, the media, ICT service providers, media and ICT professionals, faith based organizations, civil society groups, the UN and its agencies. To minimize the negative effects of malicious, misleading and inciting information communicated through the internet on global online information consumers, the following suggestions are therefore put forward;

- Media, information and digital literacy should form part of ICT education taught at primary, secondary and tertiary levels

- Civil society, government agencies, the UN and faith based organizations should make media, information and digital literacy part of their projects in order to educate online information users on safe and responsible ways of using digital technology.
- Initiatives such as the US Government's led #YaliCheck campaign aimed at combating the spread of misinformation in Africa should be encouraged and adopted by other key players in media and Information literacy globally.
- As part of their corporate social responsibility, social networking sites and blogs such as facebook, twitter, blogger and wordpress should occasionally educate users on how to detect, evaluate, verify and report fraudulent and malicious information by sharing tips, messages and using illustrations.
- They should equally device means of detecting, tracking and taking down malicious, misleading, false and inciting information from their sites in real time before they go viral.
- Upon detecting such messages, the online community should be made to be aware in order to stop their further spread.
- The mass media should maintain active presence on social media to provide accurate news and information to the teeming global online information consumers at all times and to counteract any false information in real time.
- Media organization should also be at the forefront of combating the spread of fake news, disinformation, hate speech, cybercrime, radicalization and violent extremism through jingles, public service announcements and corporate social responsibility services.
- Journalists, experts and news sources should assume the roles of influencers on social media by participating in online discussions to help make the truth louder and diminish the possibility of false, malicious and inaccurate information going viral.
- Through media, information and digital literacy campaigns, internet users should be encouraged to always report malicious, misleading, fake or inciting information they come across online
- Through media, information and digital literacy campaigns, internet users should also be taught to imbibe the culture of verifying information they receive online before sharing with others.

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