African Research Review

Mediamorphosis: Analyzing the Convergence of Digital Media Forms alongside African Traditional Media

(Pp. 115-125)

Nwammuo, Angela Nkiru - Department of Mass Communication, Anambra State University, Igbariam Campus
E-mail address: angelanwammuo@yahoo.com.
Phone Number: +2348036769099

Abstract
The history of the evolution of media shows that the introduction of a new medium does not mean the end or death of an existing old medium. The continuing overall growth and expansion of the media industries during the last century supports this assertion. Will the emergence and development of digital media forms mean the death of the traditional media forms? Are the traditional media forms losing credibility and relevance? The answer is not in the affirmative. This is because when newer forms of communication media emerge, the older forms usually do not die, rather they continue to evolve and adapt. Digital media forms do not arise spontaneously and independently from old media. They are related and connected to old media. "Mediamorphosis" is the term used to describe how media forms evolve and adapt with each other. This is the bedrock of this paper. It is aimed at using analytical method to examine the contexts of mediamorphosis, digital media forms and how African traditional media forms have evolved, adapted and coexisted with the digital media forms. The study also establishes whether the traditional media forms have disappeared or not and whether they are still

relevant in this era of digital media convergence. The study recommends among others, that the traditional media be used alongside these digital media forms to achieve the Millennium Developmental Goals (MDGs) of most governments in developing nations.

Key Words: Mediamorphosis, Convergence, Digital Media, African Traditional Media, Media Coexistence and Media Evolution

Introduction

Mass Communication and media technologies started when Gutenberg invented the printing machine. Now, communication has gone through a tremendous transformation. The growth and development of the new media has led to their wide diffusion and application, thus increasing their economic and social impact. This prevalent trend is particularly characterized by the hybridization of various media forms, as implied in the term "mediamorphosis". This term was coined in 1990 by Roger Fiddler to refer to the transformation of communication media. Mediamorphosis, according to Fiddler, (1997, P.5) is "a unified way of thinking about the technological evolution of communication media". By studying the communication system as a whole, he observed that new media do not arise spontaneously and independently, they emerge gradually from the "metamorphosis" of the already existing ones. All forms of communication are tightly woven into the fabric of the human communication system and cannot exist independently from one another in our culture. As each new form emerges and develops, it influences over time, and to varying degrees, the development of every existing form. Co-evolution and coexistence, rather than sequential evolution and replacement, have been the norm, (Wikipedia, 2010).

Mediamorphosis was coined from two words: media and morphosis; (a scientific term used to describe the way an organism or any of its parts undergoes change) to create a new word to describe the simultaneous changes taking place in the media world today, (Biagi, 2003).

Existing forms of media evolve when a new one enters, and each form is operating in an ecosystem where its evolution is dependent on the evolution around it. History indicates that old and new media forms coexist, rather than the old ones dying. For example, Am Radio coevolved with television in the post world war II era, and another co- evolution also surfaced when Fm Radio came into the scene to take most of the music audiences. This, according to Fiddler, is the bedrock of mediamorphosis.

African traditional media forms, in contrast to what many western media scholars think, are alive and kicking strongly, even in the face of the digital media forms. There is no doubt about the inherent changes in the way we share, produce and receive information. But these traditional media forms have continued to coexist with the new media forms because no type of media exists in isolation, rather, each incorporates features of new technology and adapts to the new landscape. Thus, media convergence is the key concept in the discourse of these modern media technologies, (Fiddler, Bender, Davenport & Dager, 2005).

Mediamorphosis: A Conceptual Overview

Mediamorphosis refers to the "transformation of communication media, as a result of the complex interplay of social and technological innovations, perceived needs and competitive and political pressures," (Tankuakio, 2002.p.5). The changing global media environment is signified by the coexistence and co-evolution of media forms, gradual metamorphosis of new media forms from old ones and the challenges brought about by the adoption of new media. Digital media are related and connected to old media. "Mediamorphosis", encourages us to "examine all forms of communication media as members of an interdependent system, and to note the similarities and relationships that exist among past, present and emerging forms" (Biagi, 2003. p.42). The digital media that are emerging will be similar to the old media, yet different in ways that will make them distinct from their predecessors.

Understanding Digital Media Phenomenon

Digital media is a term that refers to all forms of emerging communication media, otherwise known as New Communication Technologies. The old media forms are the seven traditional media forms – radio, television, newspaper, magazine, books, films and audio recordings. Digital media combine text, graphics, sound and video, using computer technology to create a product that is similar, to but clearly different from the traditional media.

Digitalization principally refers to the "computer whereby information is broken down into a code of zeros and ones", (Uwakwe, 2010. p.146). It could be observed that today, all forms of electronic communication are converging through digital formats and "computer mediated communication now applies to newspaper, telephone system, broadcasting, film as well as the internet", (Watson & Hill, 2006) in Uwakwe, (2010, p.147). Through digital

technology, "sound has gone from being preserved as waves whether physically on a disc or tape or through the air, to conversion into ones and zeros, logged in millisecond intervals in a computerized translation process. When replayed at a proper speed, the resulting sound was not only continuous but pristine – no hum, no hiss" (Baran, 2002. p.259). The digital media forms according to Biagi (2003. p.40-43), include the following:

- - Larger, clearer TV screens

- - Digital paper

- - Digital subscriber line (DSL)

- - Holographic Theaters

- - Personal channels

- - Intelligent Video agents

- - Flat panel video display screens

- - Portable tablets

- - Mobile phones

Larger, Clearer Television Screens
The normal TV screens range from 15 inches to 36 inches, but some of today's new home theatre systems include 125- inch TV screens. These digital screens are also called High-Definition Television (HDTV). They are very expensive and usually have line doublers or quadruples that act as their names thus making the screens sharper. The doubler technology receives 550-line broadcast image, changes it into a digital signal and doubles or quadruples the number of lines to as high as 2, 200. The result is a much clearer picture referred to as resolution.

Digital Paper
This is simply the process of using computer technology to print digital images on a digital paper. These digital images could be viewed and then be erased, to be replaced by a brand new material.

Digital Subscriber Line (DSL)
DSL provides internet access that is 50 times faster than a dial-up modern. It is always on and also provides much better delivery of audio and video signals than a standard telephone line

Holographic Theaters
Holographic theater allows one to attend live shows performed at another location far off from ones location. This happens when holographic images are projected into the theater, transmitted from the original location and then projected simultaneously to different locations throughout the world.

Personal Channels
Personal channels are just like today's practice of recording a programme for viewing later. The only difference is that there is an on screen guide from which viewers could select the programme they regularly watch and the movies they may want to see, then have their VCR or digital successor, automatically record the programmes as they are broadcast and then, sequence then to match their schedule.

Intelligent Video Agents
Once you decide on the programmes to watch on your personal channel, an intelligent video agent would be able to track the history of the choices you've made and then be able to learn your interest, hunt for programmes and keep them waiting for you to watch at your leisure.

Flat Panel Video Display Screens
They are the same or larger them today's TV screens but only about 4 inches deep. Flat panel display screens hang on the wall like a picture, instead of requiring the large cabinet that house today's TV and computer screens. They make all video technologies much more convenient to use.

Portable Tablets
These palm sized devices provide readouts of information delivered by cellular or other technologies. Portable tablets receive and send information that is written with an electronic pen or typed on the tablet, using a small keypad about the size of today's TV remote control.

Mobile Phones
Today's phones can accommodate a dictionary, a bible, videos and pictures. The digital mobile phone is now a medium of convergence itself. It has interactive facilities and can perform multiple tasks. In addition, it provides opportunity   for parents to monitor their children through the process of "mobile parenting". And through "time softening", it affords people the flexibility of adjusting to time schedules and appointments, (Dominick, 2009. p.74).

Overview of African Traditional Media Forms

There are so many misconceptions concerning African Traditional Communication and the media used in the process. The most common of them is that it merely involves the "traditional practice of handling down opinions, doctrines, practices, rites and customs from ancestors to posterity"… (Wilson, 2005. p.121). This misconception tends to limit the scope of African traditional communication system. It goes beyond the mere use of oral communication. Although it involves oral communication, it employs separate media forms of its own. The African traditional media forms serve as a continuous process of transmitting information, entertainment and education even in societies that have been seriously affected by western cultures and other external influences, (Wilson, 1991). They are simple in form and are most times always available to the grassroots at no material cost.

African media forms are classified into two major categories, namely; verbal and non-verbal systems.

The verbal system forms include Town crier, village square, market place, visits and traditional leaders. The non-verbal forms on the other hand are idiophones, membranophones, music and dance and colour schemes, (Ngwu, 2006 p.171).

Verbal forms of African Traditional Media

1. **Town Crier:** The town crier is the village announcer who disseminates public messages in the evenings or early mornings. He, according to Wilson and Itek (2006 p.57) "is symbolically an organizational media worker because he is the megaphone of the community who does not speak or narrowcast information on his own. He is like radio or television newscaster or the newspaper reporter. The only difference is that he is seen flesh and blood by those who care".

2. **Village Square:** This is a forum for meetings and discussions and other communal activities.

3. **Market Place:** Market place is used for both verbal and non-verbal communication forms. Idiophones or other non-verbal forms can be used to disseminate information like marriages, births, deaths, stealing, robbery, village council meetings, political campaigns, and

village working days like clearing of roads, streams and other developmental projects.

4. **Visits:** To Africans, life is not an individual thing. They visit each other. It is during visits that important issues are discussed over kegs of palmwine, kolanuts and food. In this way, relationships are cemented, information shared and decisions taken.

5. **Traditional Leaders**: They are power brokers that are still active and effective in most African communities. They play enormous roles in developmental issues, crimes and in settling land or marital disputes.

Non-Verbal Forms of African Traditional Media Forms

1. **Idiophones:** These are self sounding instruments that can be in metal or wooden forms. They are used as signals to call people for meetings or work for the community.

2. **Membranophones:** These are drums made of hollow wooden cylinders, covered with leader parchments on one or both ends. The sounds made when these drums are beaten convey messages from a verbal basis, through signal, speeches, dances at ceremonies, funerals etc. When beaten at odd times, they announce deaths, or danger or emergency assembling at the village square.

3. **Music and Dance**: These are the oldest forms of traditional comuication. They can be used to convey important messages, to satirize or mock a wrong doing or even to mourn the dead as in the singing of a dirge.

4. **Colour Schemes and Visual Symbols:** These forms of communication are used for conveying warnings, deaths, peace, moral and artistic messages. Colour like white, red, and black have different meanings to different cultures of Africa. Likewise visual symbols, for instance the palm frond are used to convey different messages. Among the Igbos, palm fronds in front of a house symbolizes the death of a member of that household but when placed on a land, means that the land is in dispute.

Digital Media and African Traditional Media Forms: Signs of Convergence

There are clear indications that inspite of modern developments, the evolution of the digital media forms has not taken over the traditional forms of communication in African communities. Nwabueze (2005 p.66) emphasized that "as extensions of the culture of a people, traditional media cannot be dimmed or made invalid by modernization, for as long as the people involved exist." Similarly, Ekwelie and Okonkwo, (1983) predicted long time ago that since traditional media have survived from the earliest of times, that they will equally adjust transition into the digital age.

Starting with the Digital Mobile Phones, there is a clear sign of convergence. Digital phones have interactive facilities and can perform multiple tasks. These features have encouraged the use of mobile phones alongside the traditional media forms. For instance, in the past, people developed friendship based on local geography through visits alone. Through the use of phones, interactive sessions could be held before or after visits.

Similarly, town criers now employ megaphones, loud speakers, and other digital media forms in their services.

Through the Digital Subscriber Line (DSL), most local communities now have on-line or website addresses where information concerning the communities could be retrieved.

Photographs of some environmental problems in most communities are now shown using HDTV, High Definition Television. This helps to achieve a higher pictorial resolution.

Flat panel display screens are also used during town meetings in village squares to clarify some issues to the rural folks.

Projectors are also used alongside the nonverbal forms like idiophones or membranophones. For instance, the metal gong or wooden goon can be used in bringing people together to the village square, while the projector or even the digital paper could be used in addressing some issues that will enhance rapid development of the rural communities.

Music and dance steps are still in vogue in local communities. They are used not only for entertainment purposes but also for educating, mobilizing and for strengthening the bond between rural community members. Modern gadgets like digital cameras, digital phones and even portable tablets are used

to record, send out and retrieve these events, hours or days after they have taken place. No wonder, some of these local events, ceremonies, activities and even traditional African songs, music and dance steps now flood the internet. African cultural carnivals have also turned out to be global tourist events.

African communities with affluent individuals equally combine the verbal and non-verbal African communication forms with the holographic theaters. With the use of personal channels, wealthy individuals in Africa now record traditional ceremonies like new yam festival, masquerade festivals and cultural carnivals.

The traditional leaders in most African communities make use of digital media forms like digital mobile phones, digital cameras, projectors, DSL, personal channels, portable tablets and flats screen display screens in the day-to-day administration of their various local communities. They combine thee digital media forms alongside the use of town criers, market places, village squares, visits, idiophones, membraneophones and some colour schemes and visual symbols.

There is really a convergence of the digital media forms alongside the African traditional media forms. The African media forms have adapted to suit and coexist with the digital media forms.

Conclusion
As digital media forms flood both local and international markets, some will succeed and many will not. Some will later become popular while others will exist almost unnoticed. But one thing is certain; the African traditional Media Forms will be there alongside the popular or the unpopular Digital Media Forms. This is because, according to mediamorphosis, all forms of communication media are members of an independent system. And the history of evolution of media shows that the introduction of a new medium does not mean the end of an old medium. Rather, when newer forms of communication media emerge, the older forms usually do not die-they continue to evolve and adapt. There is no doubt that together, all media that now exist will contribute to the media that are yet to be invented. The African traditional media forms have been there before they came; they will also be there when newer forms will also be invented. As long as Africans exist, these media forms will never die because they are synonymous with the

culture and the people of Africa. And just as history has rightly shown, the old and new media forms must exist together.

There is a limit to what the digital media can do. The African traditional media forms will always be relied upon for grassroot mobilization in politics and even for active participation in developmental projects, (Nwodu & Nwammuo, 2006). The very nature of traditional media as media of the people makes them more popular and credible means of reaching the people with developmental messages that can transform lives. And in line with Nwodu & Fab-Ukozor (2003), they are therefore very crucial in facilitating healthy and long-lasting development in the grassroots. The newer media forms can at most play complimentary roles.

Recommendations

Based on the discussions in this paper, it is hereby recommended that African communication scholars organize a forum whereby problems that hinder the successful use of the African traditional media forms will be discussed. This is in a bid to proffer solutions that will strengthen these media forms and make them adapt more in this era of digital revolution.

It is also pertinent to recommend that African media forms be used by both government and non-governmental organizations. They are necessary for the millennium development goals (MDGs) to be achieved in the developing nations.

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