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## ***African Media, Information Providers<sup>1</sup> and Emigrants as Collaborative Nodes in Virtual Social Networks***

### **Abstract**

*This paper proposes that the Internet offers African media and information providers the opportunity to elevate their current engagement to that of "content providers" to African emigrants in the diaspora. The paper finds evidence in the intercultural adjustment and social networks literature to support the feasibility of such an interaction. Further, a composite profile of African emigrants in the diaspora allows the discussion of ways in which they represent 'virtual' communities whose on- and off-line discourses can be enriched by African content providers' participation. The proposed engagement finds African content providers and emigrants interacting as active nodes in computer-mediated social networks. Among other possibilities, the paper views the evolvment as one that should enable African media organizations to widen their domestic **margin of political freedom**. The paper's propositions have both policy and research implications.*

**Key Words:** African media, African emigrants, Computer Supported Social Networks (CSSNs), Content providers, Diaspora, Information Technology, Intercultural Adjustment, Internet, Network of Networks, Post and Telecommunications Companies (PTCs).

*Only disfavored acquaintances tend to live too far away.* – Yoruba Proverb.

### **Introduction**

By comparison with the new technology, old media (Dizard, 2000) technologies are more accessible to millions of Africans who are more dependent on the radio (Olorunnisola, 1997) than on new communications media. At the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, many Africans are yet to personally initiate and complete a telephone call because access remains a remote reality. Burnheim (1999) noted that the lack of access to telecommunications 'means that three-quarters of Africa's people will never make a telephone call let alone use the Internet', (p.9).

On the average, most African countries offer one telephone line for every hundred people. In countries such as Chad, Mali and Congo-Kinshasa, the access ratio is even higher at one line per thousand users. The need to improve

national telecommunications infrastructure continues to drive up the cost of telephone usage so much so that many previous users have lost access. In addition, state-managed post and telecommunications companies (PTCs) continue to monopolise the provision of Internet services. In nearly all cases, the promise to liberalise both the telecommunications and energy industries remains unrealistic. In addition, investors in the status quo continue to create roadblocks to changes desired by the private sector in these crucial industries.

Given some of the foregoing socioeconomic problems, Africa is yet to fully capitalise on the Internet technology – an innovation that thrives on the convergence of older technologies and access to computers equipped with modems. Available statistics show that fifty-three of the fifty-four countries and territories in Africa now have Internet connectivity from the capital and major cities. In May 1996 only nine African countries had Internet connectivity of 64 Kbps and higher.<sup>2</sup> By March 1999 the number of African countries with 64 Kbps or higher level of Internet connectivity had increased to forty (Jensen, 1999). Progressively also, more content providers in Africa have established a web presence. Were Rogers (1962; 1983; 1995) to assess the current location of African countries on an Internet adoption curve, African countries, with the exception of South Africa, would be late adopters. In addition to the problems identified earlier, the likelihood that the Internet would undermine state control made its adoption especially undesirable in Africa's autocratic contexts.<sup>3</sup> The inability to control the flow of computer-mediated information relegated adoption to low priority in a continent where government participation in the construction of infrastructure is not yet negotiable.

South Africa's location ahead of the adoption curve appeared to have benefited from the combination of a weakening apartheid regime at a time when the popularised use of the Internet was taking off. Other African countries' late adoption may also have been induced by the wave of democratic reforms (e.g., Ghana, Zambia, Nigeria) that swept though the continent in the last decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Yet, digital divide lingers as only a million (0.14%) of Africa's 700 million people currently use the Internet. More than four-fifths of those users reside in South Africa (Burnheim, 1999). Overall, Internet users tend to be urban elites and predominantly male. Among the small segment of Internet users are foreign workers affiliated with multinational corporations. Essentially, the relative absence of a massive local audience may also have resulted in the tentative and lackluster presence of African media and information providers on the Internet.

By contrast, however, African emigrants<sup>4</sup> in the diaspora have access to personal computers with modems or office workstations connected to local area networks, (Bastian, 1999). Their adoption of the technology has been motivated by their location in host countries with advanced connectivity to the Internet. This segment of the African population has equally capitalised on easy access to increase the potency of the social networks to which they belong

and in which they participate. Many African social networks online were created in response to the dearth of 'news of home' (Bastian, 1999, p.2) in host media outlets. With the arrival of the Internet, individual emigrants took on the challenge of scanning news services such as Reuters for information about their respective countries and, in turn, posting them on the listservers to which interested nationals subscribe. Nonetheless, the basic need for specialised information with in-depth analysis persists. The latter creates a yawning gap that African media and information providers can fill with or without a vibrant local body of Internet users.

## Questions

This paper explores ways in which African 'content providers' can elevate their presence on the Internet by targeting emigrant communities in the diaspora as audiences deserving either segmented or exclusive focus. The following questions assisted our examination of the possibilities raised in this paper:

1. What body of knowledge do the intercultural adjustment and the social networks literature contribute to our understanding of emigrant communities?
2. What is the quality of African content providers' presence on the Internet?
3. Who are African emigrants and what is the nature of their Internet usage?
4. What problems account for the current stature of African media and information providers on the Internet?
5. In what ways may content providers in Africa enrich the Internet with information on and about the continent?
6. What are the implications of this prototypical presence of African content providers on the Internet for policy and research?

Given the growth of the infrastructure needed for Internet access in many African countries in the last one year, the foregoing questions should help locate ways in which African media and information providers can find increased relevance on the Internet.

## A look at the literature

What body of knowledge do the intercultural adjustment and the social networks literature contribute to our understanding of the character of emigrants living in host nations?

### *Intercultural Adjustment Studies*

Studies of immigrant adaptation have focused on the subjective experiences of individuals and their social interaction patterns using varied terms that include 'acculturation', 'assimilation', 'adjustment', and 'integration' to describe

these experiences. Notably, each term typifies a different level and/or rate of adaptation. Two contrasting threads of opinion about the nature of intercultural adaptation diverge, fundamentally, at the directionality of emigrants/immigrants' adaptation to a foreign culture.

The cumulative-progressive view considers adaptation as a natural, cumulative, progressive and inevitable phenomenon that minimally occurs in all immigrants without exception. Presumably, immigrants become increasingly adapted as they communicate, interact with, and are functionally dependent on the host culture and environment. Kim (1977, 1978a, 1978b, 1980; 1986; 1989), whose studies focused on immigrant groups in the US, reported a gradual and incremental adaptation trend in immigrants' intrapersonal and interpersonal communication. The author also observed changes in immigrants' pattern of media consumption in the host country. Kim, however, noted that the progressive trend of adaptation tended to slow down after ten years of immigrants' residency in the United States. The author's theoretical rationale anchored on immigrants' functional dependence on and communication with the host environment as they strive to surmount the socio-cultural 'incompetencies' that would impede their successful adaptation to the host culture. Presumably, the adaptation of immigrants would follow a process that includes initial difficulty with the new culture and, upon the acquisition of communication competencies, successful acceptance by the host culture. Notwithstanding the claim that communication competence<sup>5</sup> may facilitate immigrants' acculturation process, this view provides no evidence that proficiency equals complete assimilation (see, e.g., Hammer, 1989) into the host culture.

By contrast, the pluralistic-typological view of adaptation rejects the one-way directionality of the cumulative-progressive explanation. Fundamentally, this view espouses the possibility of several adaptation cycles that immigrants may go through. Proponents of the view recognise the possibilities of 'marginality' and immigrants' choice to maintain their original cultural identity in spite of their functional dependence on and communication with the host environment. The adaptation of individuals may, in effect, include one of three options: assimilation into the dominant group, assimilation into the subordinate group or identification with a middle ground. Berry (1980: 9-25) brought further refinement to the pluralistic-typological view when he raised two key questions: 'Are [ethnic] cultural identity and customs of value to be retained?' 'Are positive relations with the larger society of value, and to be sought?' Berry identified four adaptation types – integration, assimilation, rejection, and deculturation – after attaching 'yes' and 'no' responses to the two questions he raised.

Collectively, the pluralistic approach proposes that some immigrants become more ethnic than they had been prior to their exposure to the host culture. Though Berry's questions entrench plurality into the adaptation process, they do not clarify the directionality factor. However, the likelihood that immi-

grants may retain their cultural identity queries the view that they eventually melt into the new culture. The latter also introduces the notion that some immigrants may actually be resilient in their retention of cultural ties. However, Berry's questions underline the possibility that emigrants may find enough incentive in the new culture to motivate assimilation. The crucial question is whether emigrants' acceptance/rejection by the minority and/or mainstream cultures will provide the incentive or disincentive to abandon or retain the original cultural identity.

### *The Nature of Social Networks*

Weimann's (1983) suggestion that individuals tend to selectively activate personal social networks according to ethnic similarities shared with others provides some answers and, by implication, introduces the value of social networks to immigrants' acculturation to a host nation. Similarly, studies of cross-racial networks (see, e.g., Korte & Milgram, 1970; Milgram, 1967; Travers & Milgram, 1969) conclude that friendship networks are not laid down randomly. Conversely, friendships tend to reflect the social cleavages and divisions that characterise society (Korte & Milgram, 1970). These conclusions appear to suggest that emigrants' communicative patterns may be wider and deeper than the interaction they may maintain with the host culture. Apparently, social networking would have to occur within and across cultures with both types of engagement being differentially beneficial to emigrants' successful adaptation. Also, ties established with persons of the same ilk in the networks tend to continue in spite of the direction/depth of adaptation adopted/achieved by individuals.

Mitchell (1969) and Laumann (1979) agree that a social network exists when individuals, social groups and corporate entities constitute nodes with multidimensional linkages to and in relationship with each other. The characteristics of the linkages established may be used to interpret the social behavior of the persons, groups and corporate entities involved in the network. In particular, when communication flows between and within the nodes in a network, a communication network with descriptive and predictive capabilities is bound to emerge. Rogers and Kincaid (1981) note that such a communication network allows a number of analytic procedures to be undertaken.

One possibility is the ability to identify specific communication roles within the network. By mapping the flow of communication within networks it is, for instance, possible to identify individuals most often mentioned as sources of information and influence. Opinion leadership<sup>6</sup> and other crucial functions within networks may be isolated. A few other identifiable communication roles include:

'liaisons', (who link two or more cliques without being a member of these cliques),  
'bridges', (who are members of one clique and link it to another clique), 'cosmopolites'

(who link the system to other systems), and 'isolates' (who are totally isolated by lacking any contact or link), (Weimann, 1989, p.189).

In an earlier study, however, Weimann (1982) found that a division of labour existed among the communication roles identified in social networks. For instance, 'bridges' tend to wield marginal intra-group influences but are often importers of new information from other cliques or groups. On the other hand, opinion leaders are pivotal personalities who use their central role to disseminate information within the group.

An evaluation of networks can also recognize the existence of cliques and determine how these subgroups may affect the communicative behavior of the system. Operationally, a clique is a subsystem or group within a network whose members interact more frequently than with members of the larger network. A highly split network will consist of cliques with a low level of integration. Another way to observe a clique is to determine the attributes of its members. Cliques formed on the basis of age, sex, occupation, education, kinship and social status commonality or diversity should be informative. So should a determination of the homogeneity and heterogeneity of their formation. The similarities and differences identified have implications for the flow of communication within the network. Further, the analysis of social networks has been used to relate small group interaction to such macro-scale engagements as the flow of communication across racial, ethnic, cultural, or national boundaries. In the process, the formation of public opinion (Weimann, 1989) could also be tracked.

The foregoing exposition of the nature and character of social networks may have suggested a resolution to the fundamental difference between the cumulative-progressive and the pluralistic-typological views of adaptation. Essentially, the notion that pluralised adaptation methods do not reduce the potency of social networks motivated our interest in evaluating the possibilities of an Internet-mediated social network that would include African media, information providers and emigrants in the diaspora.

### **African media and information providers on the Internet**

What is the quality of African content providers' presence on the Internet? Our review of the quality of African online content providers drawn from all six regions – Central Africa, East Africa, the Horn of Africa, the Indian Ocean Islands, Southern Africa and West Africa – found that only very few own domain names.<sup>7</sup> Notably, content providers in South Africa take the lead in domain name ownership (see, e.g., <http://www.mg.co.za>). Other providers either post their web sites on web directories or allow their content to be licensed for use by third-party websites. Coincidentally, many of these third party directories are owned and/or run by African nationals based in the West.<sup>8</sup> Nonetheless, the web sites are open to the difficulty attendant to residence on

third party sites. One problem is the inability of unfamiliar visitors to find the content providers via the major search engines. Another problem, whose occurrence is frequent, is that hosts' technical problems often reduce the accessibility of the content provider to visitors.

In nearly all cases, the news content placed by the media outlets is the same as the text published in the hard-copy versions. We found no attempt to provide additional context that may enable an external audience to gain a better understanding of the stories placed online. The use of hypertext linkages to provide readers access to background and/or additional information about news posted is more rampant among such foreign news outlets that carry African news as <http://www.bbconline.co.uk> than among African providers. Therefore, the diet of news supplied is static, delayed and flat. At the time of our review, only AfricaNewsNow, <http://www.AfricaNewsNow.com>, which uploads African news credited to media organisations around the world, provides timely news stories. Many of the site's sources are themselves foreign news outlets that provide 24-hour news updates.

There is a dearth of graphics on the web sites of African content providers. In addition, only few carry banner advertising<sup>9</sup> placed by local and/or foreign businesses. The South African media organisations are the exception. Banner ads found on South African content providers' sites were sponsored by local and foreign businesses. In some cases, hypertext linkages from media sites connect readers to the classified sections of sponsors' web sites. Evidently, banner advertisements work differently on web sites hosted by third parties. In a few cases (see, e.g., <http://www.nigerianews.com>; <http://www.odili.net>; <http://www.nigeria.com>), some of these directories carried advertisements placed by businesses located in their respective host countries. Notable among sponsors of advertising are computer manufacturers, financial institutions and employment agencies to name a few. Though there were hypertext linkages to pages providing information about businesses in Africa, we found no banner advertisements placed by businesses located in Africa. On these directories, text of African news would upload without the corresponding advertisement that may have been in the hard copy. We were unable to verify whether or not African news organisations share the advertising revenue derived by third party directories that carry their news items.

Furthermore, there is a very low level of interactivity between African content providers and visitors. Often, the coordinates of persons in the respective organisations are missing from the web sites. In a few cases, the coordinates provide impersonal addresses such as [feedback@company.com](mailto:feedback@company.com). In addition, most of the sites do not offer archival capabilities that enable visitors to conduct research and/or influence the composition of the information needed. Most of the web sites we visited expressly stated that the content was the web edition of the print version of the newspaper or magazine.

Few African content providers had hypertext links to individual, group and businesses in the diaspora. Some of the providers, for instance the South African news organisations, stated that their target was the local urban audience. Conversely, most of the third party sites hosting African content providers are directories. They carry a myriad of other items that include news, directories of emigrant businesses and professional groups in African and in the diaspora. Some provided linkages to personal web pages of Africans in the diaspora. A few also provided chat rooms where visitors to the site could engage in online discussions with other visitors. By comparison, therefore, third party sites were more interactive than sites posted by content providers on the continent. Though not available from its home page, South Africa's *Daily Mail and Guardian*, <http://www.mg.co.za/mg/news/98sep1/exileblues.html>, offers services dedicated to readers abroad. A free classified service allows visitors to search for old friends who have emigrated. A chat protocol allows South African exiles/expatriates to discuss life abroad. They could also discuss South African politics and other issues with South Africans living in the country.

Overall, the current use of the Internet by content providers in Africa is lackluster. The reluctance of many to invest in domain ownership may be indicative of late adoption of the full capabilities of the Internet than the lack of awareness. Hill and Hughes (1998) note that the Internet is a medium, a place and an enormous collaboration tool that offers cost efficiency. Though the Internet 'offers a venue for one-to-many communication (broadcasting), one-to-one communication (e-mail), and many-to-many communication (web pages and Usenet newsgroups)', (p.18), African content providers have not fully exploited these multiple dimensions.

There also appears to be an underestimation of the unprecedented access to a global audience that the Internet provides. The absence of local and foreign advertising on sites that contain African content may also be indicative of two connected factors in their current mode of Internet presence. First, African media are yet to fully tap the Internet as a resource that could enable increased participation in a global economy. Secondly, the indirect connection to a global economy that the universally positioned African emigrants represent is either being ignored or overlooked. In particular, the absence of protocol for direct interaction between the content providers and visitors to their web sites limits the level of interaction that is encouraged. As a collective, African media organisations currently 'lurk' on the Internet.

### **A profile of African emigrants**

Who are African emigrants and what is the nature of their Internet usage? Our construction of a profile of African emigrants benefited from immigration studies as well as cultural adjustment and social networks' literature. Also, the review of an ethnographic study of African virtual communities was informative. In addition, the author's 12-year experience as an African emigrant resid-



ing in the US provided valuable first-hand information. The profile is, however, neither exhaustive nor does it account for all of the variations that might be observed in individual African emigrants.

Among other things, the profile presented here offers a peak into the identity and motives behind emigrants' media and Internet use. It is now widely acknowledged that audience activity is the core of the uses and gratification research. However, communication motives are key components of audience activity (see, e.g., Emerson & Perse, 1995; Ferguson & Perse, 2000; Palmgreen, Wenner, & Rayburn, 1981; Papacharissi & Rubin, 2000; Rayburn, Palmgreen, & Acker, 1984; Rubin, 1984; Rubin, 1993). Perhaps, an understanding of African emigrants' use of the Internet will provide information valuable to content providers resident in Africa.

African emigrants to the west are predominantly educated elites (see Bastian, 1999) whose professional qualifications are attractive to the host countries that offer them first priority among equals in visa issuance. In the last ten years, thousands of Africans have benefited from the diversity visa program run by the US.<sup>10</sup> Other professionals enter either as guest workers or diplomats while others are employees of multinational corporations on temporary or permanent posting to foreign countries. Bastian (1999) also observed that students attending universities form another group of African emigrants with a predominant presence in the west.

The motivation behind the departure of African emigrants does not defer remarkably from that of emigrants from other parts of the world. Studies of immigration into the west (see e.g., Kim, 1977; 1978a; 1978b; 1980; 1986; Bastian, 1999; Robinson & Carey, 2000) indicate that many immigrants moved in search of further qualifications and superior occupational experience. Three careerist reasons often cited include better quality and more varied training to allow rapid career progression, post-graduate qualifications, and access to the latest ideas, equipment, procedures and methods (Robinson & Carey, 2000). Immigrants claim environmental factors such as escape from the daily grind and bureaucracy of work in understaffed and under-resourced conditions as the reason for relocation. Some offer familial reasons such as the need to support aged parents, siblings and children while securing their own future – a feat difficult to achieve with limited local resources and opportunities. The decision to migrate is, however, not driven solely by career and environmental aspirations but also by non-economic factors such as a sense of adventure and curiosity (Robinson & Carey, 2000). Pro-democracy and other political activists constitute another group of emigrants that escape the radar of immigration scholars. These emigrants leave to avoid political victimisation, are on self-imposed or forced exile, and are beneficiaries of the host country's political asylum provisions. Emigrants may also leave for a combination of the stated reasons. A few travel for educational purposes and transition into the professions. Yet others

leave for professional reasons that eventually demand additional educational and/or professional qualifications.

Both immigration and cultural adjustment studies (Kim, 1986; Robinson & Carey, 2000) agree that emigrants participate in social networks that consist of other emigrants who are nationals of their native country. Both fields also agree that these social networks are vital at the transitional and post-transition stages of emigrants' itinerary. From pre-departure through entry and sojourn in the host culture as well as reentry into the original culture, the emigrant benefits from resources supplied by persons and groups in these social networks. The social networks of families, friends and fellow nationals invariably constitute the support system that assist and buffer emigrants' adjustment to and negotiation with the new culture. Emigrants also tend to maintain association with persons in these networks beyond the initial stages of sojourn (Robinson & Carey, 2000). Other post-entry ties to the original culture include the consumption of traditional food items and the tendency to seek information and such associative interaction that may include marriage to spouses from the home country.

Emigrants do not lose their sense of nationalism as a result of continued residency in a foreign country. Bastian (1999) observed a high level of nationalism among Nigerians residing in the US. As a group, they 'displayed the ambiguities associated with being nationalists who do not make their homes within the borders of their nation', (p.2). Bastian finds that Nigerians produce and consume various forms of media focused on the nation state and the emigrant population. The author considered Nigerians an immigrant population with a keen interest in explaining itself and its many subcultures both to itself and to a global audience. A typical issue of such a publication often includes news of home, critical positions toward the government, articles about immigrant life in the west, and society features that show Nigerians at public and social functions. Advertisements in these publications are placed by Nigerian-owned businesses in the respective regions of publication. Notable among such businesses are airline ticketing agencies, African produce outlets, and taxicab companies. Others are real estate, medical and legal services to name a few.

Research shows that emigrants use the English language only in public formal settings. The native language is continually used in informal, non-public settings (see, e.g., Edelman, Cooper & Fishman, 1968; Kimble, Cooper, & Fishman, 1969; Ryan & Carranza, 1977). Data on immigrants from other parts of the world (see, e.g., Dittmar, 1976; Giles & Powesland, 1975; Gumperz, 1982a, 1982b; Gumperz & Hymes, 1972) and, in particular, Africa (Mgbo-Elue, 1987) confirm that the need to switch codes increases during encounters with in-group members. Further, the topic of the conversation is believed to influence the code employed in conversation. The native language tends to be culled when stressful or exciting topics (e.g., Brook, 1973; Herman, 1961) and when issues concerning life in the native country (Ervin-Tripp, 1968) are tabled for discussion.

African emigrants who are fully established in career tracks eventually gain access to a global financial system. At this stage of their sojourn, when basic subsistence in the new culture ceases to be an issue, many emigrants confess to such fundamental but sentimental responses as nostalgia. The timing of this sentiment may be consistent with the progressive-cumulative view that emigrants tend to culturally regress after ten years. Some emigrants speak of frustration with their inability to directly contribute their expertise to their respective home countries and begin to seek ways of doing so. Others find ways to traverse both geographical spaces by establishing actual ties between professional contacts in both contexts while others return to contest for political offices and/or find employment.

Those who vow not to return to their countries due to the continuation of the conditions that motivated their departure do engage in a 'myth of return' that may be manifested in varied ways. Some exploit the higher exchange rate between the foreign and the local currencies as a springboard to invest in the local economy. A significant number build personal houses in their villages as a mark of maturity. Such houses may be unoccupied and managed by relatives. Many continually suspend actual return while others reenter upon reaching retirement age.

African emigrants throughout the world with access to personal computers with modems or office workstations connected to local area networks are entering into cyberspace in increasing numbers (see, e.g., Bastian, 1999). Given that the ongoing information revolution is largely concentrated in G7 nations (US, Japan, Germany, France, the UK, Canada and Italy) with advanced information technology (IT) infrastructure, we assume that the highest concentration of Africans with computer access and connection to the Internet reside in G7 nations. Most of these engage, on a daily basis, with a computer-assisted network of Africans living and working in these same nations and elsewhere. The majority of these Africans live in five of the seven nations (US, Japan, Germany, France, and the UK). Coincidentally, these five nations accounted for 80% of the IT global market in 1994 (see OECD, 1996). The Internet, a worldwide network of personal computers connected to host computers, is overwhelmingly American-based, English speaking, and extensively Western-focused (OECD, 1996).

African emigrants in the west are constructing virtual national communities through the use of the electronic mail, a myriad of websites devoted to ethnic, professional and national content. Bastian's (1999) ethnographic study of Internet use by Nigerians demonstrates that the emergent culture of interaction observed in cyberspace is not peculiar to the online context. Rather, offline behavior may have been transported online; an indication that the Internet-enabled context had no dramatic influence on the traits that the author observed. For instance, Nigerian politics dominates online discussions among Nigerians as it does offline deliberations. Bastian notes that the slow growth of

*Naijanet*<sup>11</sup> became exponential in the aftermath of the controversy surrounding General Babangida's annulment of the June 12, 1993 presidential elections in Nigeria. Thereafter, the emergence of General Sanni Abacha and the political uncertainty that followed his four-year tyrannical rule dominated online discussions among Nigerians.

Notably also, discussions of controversial and sensitive aspects of Nigeria's political history such as the civil war, the annulment of the presidential election, among others, motivated the creation of five fractional online networks. *Oduduwa*<sup>12</sup>, which non-Yoruba speakers were not encouraged to join, was created in response to the discomfort of other Nigerians with the dominance of Yoruba-speaking participants on *Naijanet*. The creation of *ANA-net*<sup>13</sup> was motivated by the gulf created between *Naijanetters* interested in possible actions against the military government for annulling the 1993 presidential elections and subscribers uncomfortable with activism. Some of the activists broke away, formed the Association of Nigerians Abroad and created an online network called *ANA-net*.

*Naijawoman-net* was also created for and dominated by women discussants who grew weary of the domination of male reference and perspectives on *Naijanet*. The controversy generated by an extensive discussion of circumcision in 1994 did not help the attempts made by women discussants to rectify the observed anomaly. By the same token, *Igbo-net*, dominated by Igbo speaking Nigerians, was also created after a heated debate over the secession of Biafra from Nigeria and the resultant civil war. Similarly, *Rivnet* grew out of discussions of the aftermath of the Nigerian civil war. The controversy over property abandoned during the war and the rights of Rivers State indigenes to regain usage of such properties did not go down well with members of *Naijanet* from the affected area. *Rivnet* was especially active during the detention and eventual execution of Ken Saro-Wiwa and the Ogoni ten by the Abacha regime. The bone of contention was the treatment of the oil-producing areas by the federal government and such multinationals as the Shell Oil Company.

Though these five fractional groups broke away so as to create avenues separate from the central network, they maintained communication ties with *Naijanet* (see Bastian, 1999). Remarkably, the inability of Nigerians from different ethnic groups to hold online discussions on sensitive aspects of Nigeria's history is consistent with the nature of inter-ethnic discussions offline and reminiscent of inter-group relations in Nigeria. This trait is informative in three ways. One, Nigerian emigrants have exported a national characteristic to foreign geographical spaces. Two, characteristics observable offline have not been tainted by computer mediation. Remarkably also, gender-specific role assignment as well as the exclusion and intolerance of women's opinion in national issues are collectively manifested as curious subtexts to the online experience of Nigerian emigrants.

Notwithstanding the ethnic and gender-specific fissions that Bastian observed among Nigerian users of the Internet, many participants noted that their online engagement increased the frequency and breadth of their participation in social networks constituted by fellow Nigerians. In specific terms, one participant considered the net 'an avenue for communing with ... compatriots', a 'national lifeline', and a cure for pre-existent loneliness. The same netter thought that the Internet created the 'opportunity to think with' fellow emigrants, 'expose and confront our maladies', (Bastian, 1999, p.9) with persons that share identical national origin. Along with the motivation to associate with others of the same ilk is the instrumental use of the Internet to seek information that is unavailable in other media. Frequently, breaking news from the continent about which there is scarcity of information qualifies for a rigorous online search. At such times, other emigrants become sources of the information sought, discussants of particular events and co-predictors of their outcomes.

Bastian also unveiled the existence of a myriad of functions undertaken by persons engaged in this prototypical social network. Many were subscribers to main and/or clique networks created by other individuals. Others functioned as net administrators of listserv and creators of websites whose tasks include the survey of other news services for news and information that might interest their emigrant subscribers. They also provide the rendezvous for an online community of interested persons to engage each other in sociopolitical discussions. Few opinion leaders emerged while others are so active in their contributions that they qualify to be called denizens. There were also cosmopolites who link the network to other off- and online networks to which they belong by sharing information relevant to the needs of both networks. In some cases, these cosmopolites post notices that lead interested persons to other domains focused on career or scholarship opportunities. Other individuals emerged as paterfamilias on- and offline while some confess to being lurkers or isolates that follow discussions without writing in contributions.

As groups, some of the spin-off cliques from the Nigerian network played important roles that qualify them to be termed bridges in the Nigerian social network. For instance, ANA-net (Association of Nigerians Abroad) mounted a solicitation campaign directed at the main network – Naijanet – and Camnet (the Cameroonian network) at the height of the border dispute between Nigeria and Cameroon. The objective was to compose and obtain signatories to a letter that was forwarded to General Abacha and President Paul Biya of Cameroon. The letter proposed a diplomatic resolution that would ward off an impending war between both countries. ANA's role as a bridge between two previously unrelated national networks coincides with its practice of track-two diplomacy.<sup>14</sup> On other occasions, ANA placed advertorials in Nigerian publications to express its views on ongoing national issues.

The foregoing depicts the existence of a place for governments in some of the activities of social networks to which emigrants belong. Bastian's (1999)

study also found instances of governments' interaction with the networks before and after the Internet became a nexus for sociopolitical discussions and the exchange of news. For instance, state governments place advertisements in newspapers and magazines to solicit investments from affluent Nigerians who are indigenes of their respective states. During the era of the Internet and at the height of Abacha's tenure, the likelihood that the Nigerian Military Government had commenced a surveillance of Naijanet had a chilling effect on contributions to the listserv. Evidently, there is room for persons, organisations and governments to cohabit as readers, subscribers, business owners, service providers, advertisers, programmers and government-sponsored spies.

Our literature search found no empirical evidence that suggests a model of adaptation that Africans exhibit. However, we derive that the experience of individual Africans should be varied enough to find partial representation in the opposing models of adaptation discussed earlier. In other words, some Africans may exhibit a unidirectional adaptation while others may traverse any of the options proposed by the pluralistic-typological view. We note that the exhibition of traits peculiar to either of the adaptation models does not preclude an individual from associating with other immigrants in a social network.

Further, there is no evidence suggesting that immigrants who display the progressive adaptation style have essentially rejected all associative connections with their culture and country of origin. Yet, the composite profile proffered here allows us to safely claim that Africans may fit more into the emigrant type cast by the pluralistic-typological view of adaptation. Moreover, our review found no evidence indicating that the intended outcome of an African immigrant's adaptation is complete assimilation into the host culture. We contend that should assimilation be the goal of all emigrants' functional adaptation into new cultures, balkanization would not be so evident in multicultural and multiracial societies. Additionally, that Africans will be categorised as minorities in western countries may be a disincentive to the motivation to abandon their cultural identities.

We also derive from the literature that emigrants from the same country who may exhibit varying models of adaptation may, nonetheless, cohabit and undertake varying functions within a social network. The literature of social networks recognizes the existence of strength in weak ties (see Weimann, 1989: 191). Presumably also, individuals in a network may belong to and communicate from bases in different cliques. As such, we propose that African content providers and emigrants' online networks can find creative and mutually beneficial ways to cohabit online. Computer mediated communication scholars (e.g., Garton, Haythornthwaite & Wellman, 1999) affirm that the Internet, a computer network that is a set of machines, can connect persons, organizations, and, is therefore, capable of enabling a macroscopic social network across geographical and cultural boundaries. Earlier, Weimann (1989) had suggested that the virtual communication network that emerges when individuals, groups and

organisations interact this way is capable of stability and behavioral predictability. Presumably, the computer-supported social networks (CSSNs) that Africans in the diaspora have created present content providers in Africa with springboards for the cultivation of a virtual target audience. A global audience should provide African content providers with increased participation on the Internet. There is also the likelihood that participation could provide the pedestal for increased involvement in a global economy.

### **Stimulus for a paradigm shift**

What problems account for the current stature of African content providers on the Internet? Three pertinent problems may explain the current stature of African media and content providers on the Internet.

One is African governments' refusal to either invest in or encourage the development of the requisite infrastructure. This oversight in policy resulted in a low level of connectivity to the Internet from African countries before 1999 (Jensen, 1999).

Secondly and by extension, the near-absence of a mass audience on the continent collaborated with the latter problem to justify African content providers' lackadaisical commitment to bolder Internet presence. However, the absence of a mass audience for online content persists in spite of recent changes in the level of connectivity.

A third problem is the continuing underestimation of the posture of African emigrants on the Internet. We suggest that this oversight is the offspring of a lukewarm off-line relationship between Africa and its emigrant communities worldwide. In general, emigrants are perceived as deserters and saboteurs whose complicity contributes to the brain drain<sup>15</sup> that Africa consistently suffers. As Nigeria's unemployment of fresh university graduates led to labour flight in the late 1980's, the media were employed to discourage emigration. Government-sponsored jingles on national television negatively portrayed emigrating persons as deserters and peddled the idea of staying in the country to help solve the economic challenges. Citizen Andrew, who epitomised the unpatriotic deserter, was shown catching a flight out of the International airport. Andrew, the main character in the jingles, was neither depicted as an expert with internationally marketable skills nor as a nationalist without geographical boundary. This blatant denigration of would-be emigrants over public airwaves has neither been programmatically reversed nor has the resultant negative conditioning been socially deconstructed.

That African emigrants are not considered an audience worthy of cultivation suggests that content providers may be operating from the cumulative-progressive view of cultural adjustment. The inconsistency between the latter notion of adjustment and our profile of African emigrants suggests that African content providers in the public and private sectors may need a paradigm shift.<sup>16</sup> If our inference about African emigrants is remotely accurate, then

these audiences' motivation for Internet usage draws primarily from dissatisfaction<sup>17</sup> with the media available in their respective host countries. Marketing researchers (see, e.g., Oliver, 1980) affirm that satisfaction influences product choices and related behavior.

### **Preemptive supply of African content over the Internet**

In what ways may content providers in Africa enrich the Internet with information on and about the continent? African countries' increasing level of connectivity to the Internet may determine the transformation of media forms and content provision as much as, and in collaboration with, the wave of liberalisation that is sweeping over the continent. If this assumption is accurate, then Africa's emigrant population in the diaspora will have to be a vital part of the equation. Increased connectivity to the Internet and African emigrants' ongoing use of computer-mediated platforms to sustain social networks, two seemingly unrelated developments, provide content providers in Africa with a unique opportunity to interact with a natural and global audience. Remarkably, this audience has little need for external motivation.

Notwithstanding the existence of immigrant media forms in several host countries, content providers in Africa can enrich emigrants' on- and off-line discussions with news and sector-specific information. One advantage is that information will be generated and supplied by sources located in the operative contexts whose proximity to the subject matter should offer credibility to the flow. Information routed to the Internet could include the background necessary to ensure that a global audience can appreciate the historical antecedents that lead to some of the events. Incrementally, this should lead to the accumulation of a database of information about Africa that is available on the Internet. Progressively also, content providers in Africa can become clearinghouses for information on Africa. Especially, the provision of background to newsworthy African events should reify the need for correlation – explaining, interpreting, and commenting on the meaning of events and information, setting orders of priority – to a new level.

Though this engagement may alter the current mode of information production and distribution in significant ways, it should not, for instance, mortgage providers' ability to conduct surveillance and entertain. Moreover, the 'functions of gatekeeping, editorial intervention ... will continue to be called for in an age of abundance', (McQuail. 2000: 119) when hypertext linkages and archival retrieval protocols have both increased audience access to information. To enable the success of this approach, as much of the morgue housed in traditional media outlets as possible should eventually move online so that such user interaction with sites as *archival retrieval* may be enhanced. There are immediate advantages to these capabilities. One is that the on- and off-line discussions of sensitive issues should benefit from the context-based fillers and so should the fading individual and collective memories of discussants in cases



where the issues tabled for discussion have, as is so often the case, historical antecedents. A long-term advantage is that ongoing under-reportage of and imbalances in the coverage of Africa should quantitatively and qualitatively be enriched.

Reciprocally, emigrants' intense discussion of politics and other national issues on the Internet (see, e.g., Bastian, 1999) could provide material that may enhance the dimensions from which local issues are evaluated in and by the media. The discussions should contribute an 'external perspective' and enrich the consideration of national issues. The latter factor is particularly crucial in Africa's new democracies where the public sphere is either a new or a reopened space that could use all strands of opinion. In many African countries, some of the voices needed in the public sphere have either been politicised, compromised or are unfamiliar with the new political dispensation.

Conversely, the Internet's anarchical, decentralised and instantaneous nature (Breslow, 1998) offers an advantage in that it supplies the local media with readily available opinion that exploits the Internet's ability to circumvent bureaucratic and location bound state apparatuses. Some contributions may lead to externally motivated problem-solving actions, cross-boundary collaborations between persons and groups as well as provide motivation for policy changes. As such, content providers' dissemination of information that generate and/or enrich emigrants' online discussions and itinerant experience becomes an investment that may yield multiple dividends when such deliberations, in turn, feed local discourse with additional perspectives and action items. In this new role, African content providers become social intermediaries between geographically dispersed communities while enabling the itinerant members a vital opportunity to continually function as citizens. This role finds operators of old media forms tapping into new media on behalf of the digitally excluded while maintaining ties with connected 'community' members in distant places. Through this creative avenue also, the media can reduce the digital divide by becoming digital bridges in a macroscopic network of social networks.

Through the foregoing engagements, African content providers and emigrants worldwide may become nodes in a macroscopic network of networks (Garton, Haythornthwaite & Wellman, 1999: 86) with multidimensional linkages to and in relationship with one another (Mitchell, 1969; Laumann, 1979). Each node brings its existent network of persons, groups, institutions / corporations, governmental and non-governmental agencies to the macroscopic network. In the process, symmetrical, cross-boundary and multi-directional ties are continually formed for the mutual benefit of all nodes. The value of each node to the macroscopic network represented here is not quantifiable.

The media and information providers in Africa are better positioned to lead nodes in all sectors of the continent's economy to emigrants' online networks in creative ways that may include matchmaking needs on both sides of the geo-

graphical divide. Progressively, African content providers could become equipped to fulfill other functional roles by engaging the internal strategic and operational changes that will enhance their location in macroscopic social networks as bridges. One of such roles is to provide local participants with the information necessary for their engagement of the foreign nodes in the supranational network. Another is the ability to map and define the social networks in which African emigrants participate. The latter should provide valuable data that may inform content development and audience definition cum segmentation. Also through mapping, the media can identify the opinion leaders,<sup>18</sup> the liaisons, the bridges, the cosmopolites, the isolates, and the cliques (Weimann, 1989: 189) within the networks. The overriding goal should be the surveillance of the networks so as to facilitate the formation of public opinion and the diffusion of innovations. Media survey of the interests of the participants in the networks should provide useful information to providers of goods and services that may benefit segments of the networks. At its functional best, this macroscopic network should feature multiple and multidirectional links between nodes at the interpersonal, inter-group, inter-organisational and intergovernmental levels within and outside of computer mediation.

The ability of media and information providers to identify the peculiar needs of emigrant groups should create opportunities for variants of Internet-mediated services that corporate entities may compete to provide. Creative elements in all sectors of the economy that include the media industry may carve niches that could warrant the provider's specialised focus on the emigrant segment as a target population. The latter does not preclude collaborative interaction between media outlets, news agencies and a mixture of service providers in affiliate areas to fill identified gaps. Further, the structure of the old media in Africa should enable both independent and public media organizations to have the opportunity to liaison between entities in the private and public sectors and the emigrants in areas in which the respective networks of each node can interface.

The foregoing may unveil new sources of local and global revenue for African content providers. For instance, content providers can capitalise on web commerce by developing commission streams based on exposing visitors to service providers. In 1999, USA Today.com generated 40% of its revenue from operating 'marketplace'. Analysts have predicted that e-commerce revenue will increasingly represent large chunks of Internet revenue. When used creatively, classified advertising also present revenue opportunities.

Another growing trend online is the formation of and participation of content providers in national and regional classified networks. This process enables each provider to contribute classified ads to central web databases so that users can search for products and services in multiple locations. A few examples include <http://www.careerpath.com> and <http://www.adone.com>. Both are advertising databases pooled by member newspapers. When users

search the classified section of Lycos, a large Internet directory and search engine, and select a geographical area they are, technically and indirectly, searching classified ads posted by newspapers located in multiple cities. The latter capability is enabled by the partnership between Adone and Lycos. The expanded base of local and global advertising revenue that could be generated should reduce media dependence on the government for advertising subsidies and increase their respective margin of political freedom.<sup>19</sup>

Yet, media accountability in this role should remain open to the scrutiny of Internet users on both sides who are instantaneous authors whose evaluation can be disseminated within and between networks without media ability to function as gatekeepers of such responses. As this hydra-headed and multilevel interactions increase, content providers could invest in providing local access to individuals and communities. In the latter case, less emphasis should be placed on revenue. Purveyors of free access to the Internet have found that the Internet is a means to other means and not always a direct means to revenue. Invariably, the two-step avenue offers the opportunity to convert free usage into revenue.

On the other hand, emigrants' can benefit from a constant supply of information and services that represent the varieties of need associated with difference stages of emigration. These needs range from the desire for reliable 'home news' to participation in the political and economic affairs of their respective countries. In between are such social needs as the fulfillment of familial responsibilities that is predominantly financial, given their relative distance and economic status. The media in Africa can provide an online rendezvous for these ties to become part of the interchange between the social networks.

Beyond participation in a network of networks, there are especial advantages to a more active exploitation of the Internet by the African media. One is the opportunity to disseminate information and other cultural content without relying on the magnanimity of multinational corporations. This opportunity for de-intermediation should reduce the historical dependence of Africa on the multinationals for the global dissemination of information and begin to correct the North-South imbalance in the quality and quantity of Africa's coverage. The need to address the existent condition dominated global discussions for decades,<sup>20</sup> was taken off international agenda but has remained on the minds of those who are directly affected by it. By extension, the media and content providers may lead Africa to an increased, direct and less fragmented engagement with a global economy (Braungart & Braungart, 1997).

Some experts (see, e.g., Golden & Harris, 1997) are pessimistic about the potential of African countries to become players in the new arena of global information. They foresee the continued dominance of the West and a continuation of operations after the distribution patterns of economic and military power structures that will widen the gap between the North and the South. This pessimism should be motivation for the innovative use of the Internet in Africa

and by Africans. Fortunately, new technologies allow leapfrogging without the construction of elaborate infrastructure. Besides, the dramatically reduced costs of transportation and communication (Nye, 2000) should continue to melt the boundaries such that technological innovations are freely diffused across geopolitical and economic zones. Therefore, content providers that are swift enough to alter paradigms may become key players in their industries.

### **Implications for policy and research**

What are the implications of this prototypical presence of African content providers on the Internet for policy and research? Given that the services fundamental to consistent Internet use remain erratic and are mismanaged by public agencies, African governments need to engage the process of liberalisation in the energy and telecommunications industries without delay. In both areas, the need for policy that enables competition as a way of inducing steady supply and better services is long overdue. A valid corollary to competition in these sectors is universal access to ensure that more Africans have the prerequisites for Internet connectivity.

Given the cost of connectivity, the process of enabling universal access in Africa cannot be left solely in the hands of governments. As indicated earlier, entities in the private sector as well as non-profit organisations will have to become investors and pressure groups respectively. Of primary importance is the need for increased access in the rural and suburban areas where over 80% of Africans reside. As indicated earlier, there are indirect dividends attached to increased and/or free access.

When persons, groups and organizational entities across geographical and cultural boundaries begin to interact via the Internet, complications concerning the basic notion of citizenship, the 'permeability of borders', 'mobility across borders', and 'border straddling' may arise. Hedley (1998) hinted that the 'permeability of borders' is a meltdown condition enabled by electronic communications while 'mobility across borders' occurs when technological innovations increase the rate at which corporations engage in cross-border transactions. 'Border straddling' occurs when corporations operate simultaneously in different sovereign jurisdictions. The latter, in particular, will create confusion as agencies are unclear which jurisdiction has precedence over which corporate activities at what time.

All of these border-related issues will blur legal boundaries between countries, challenge state control over corporate activities and raise new questions about intellectual property. That the Internet constitutes a threat to the traditional sovereignty of states is now a common theme in discussions about Cyberspace (see, e.g., Fidler, 1998). Some scholars (e.g., Aoki, 1998; Goldsmith, 1998) have questioned the extent to which the Internet can be singled out for consideration as a unique threat to sovereignty when larger non-Internet transactions have been problematic. Certainly, Internet related developments

should introduce new elements to the dynamics of international relations. The impending challenges, however, require that African governments engage others in the discussion of strategies pertinent to policy and regulations that will govern individual, corporate and sovereign rights of states. One way to do this is to join other governments in designing and implementing policies and international security mechanisms that will support deepening global economic interdependence, especially e-commerce, and in ways that protect the integrity of all participants (see, e.g., Dell, 1990; Perritt, 1998).

The central location of emigrants to the propositions of this paper provides a motivation for the suggestion of policy that deconstructs existent social perceptions about emigrants. In the long term, such policy could explore ways to commence the reversal of the *brain drain paradigm* in very specific ways. One such area is the reengagement of emigrants in national and international affairs – a process that should not be dependent on the geographical location of persons. The perceptual and policy conversion from seeing emigration as a collective drainage should also combine to motivate a dramatic change in the handling of issues germane to the welfare of African emigrants by such agents as consular representatives in foreign countries. By virtue of their location, African consular offices worldwide are better positioned to assist emigrants and interested nodes in Africa in locating areas of joint cooperation.

In sum, our profile of African emigrants offers confirmation of cultural continuity that should interest scholars of intercultural adaptation and sociologists. In particular, the prospects of a macroscopic engagement of geographically displaced and computer-mediated social networks should raise questions of interest to intercultural communication, social networks, computer-mediated communications and new media scholars (see, e.g., Garton, Haythornthwaite & Wellman, 1999: 86-88). The policies drafted to monitor these engagements should also interest researchers in public policy, international law and international relations. Essentially, the changes that all of the above should introduce to the practice of journalism in Africa should interest mass communication scholars.

## Notes

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1. Wherever the term 'information provider' appears in this paper, it is used as a collective descriptor to cover all individuals, groups, and corporate entities in all sectors of the economy with online content that may be of value to African emigrants. Examples include operatives in the media, industrial, tourism, service, educational, and financial sectors. Public agencies are not excluded. The term content provider is also used interchangeably. For a comprehensive listing of Africa re-

lated information providers, located in and outside of the continent, see <http://www-sul.stanford.edu/depts/ssrg>.

2. In 1996, Tunisia, Egypt, Namibia and South Africa had Internet connectivity at more than 64 Kbps. Morocco, Ghana, Uganda, Senegal, and the Gambia had Internet connectivity at 64 Kbps.
3. This term does not exclude countries in Africa with democratic forms of government. We suggest that democratic countries with non-liberal economic policies continue to display autocratic tendencies where the information sector is concerned.
4. In this paper, we use the term African emigrants to refer, loosely, to men and women of African origin who left the shores of African countries for reasons that may be educational, professional, and/or job-related. There is no limitation to departure time frame.
5. Cupach & Spitzberg (1983: 565) offer that one aspect of communication competence includes those communication skills that are instrumental to smooth and successful interaction.
6. Defined as the number of sociometric choices received by each individual when the flow of communication within a network is mapped.
7. Our review used the Internet search engine, [www.yahoo.com](http://www.yahoo.com) as a basis for the examination of the nature of African media organisations presence on the Internet.
8. Many of the third party hosts are located in Australia, the UK and the US.
9. We are aware that the use of banners as a method of online advertising has not been universally successful as most visitors to websites hardly click the banners. However, the content of sites devoted to African issues possesses the clout of the specialised – a qualification for successful online advertising.
10. The US Immigration Act of 1990 provides for an annual diversity immigration program that makes available by random computer selection 55,000 permanent resident visas. All African countries are eligible.
11. *Naijanet* is a discussion listserv to which Nigerians worldwide subscribe.
12. The listserv of Yorubas on the net subscribe.
13. Network created by members of the Association of Nigerians Abroad, an activist group.
14. Track-two diplomacy refers to informal, unofficial interaction outside the formal governmental power structure, providing the means for historically conflicting groups to improve communication and gain a better understanding of each other's point of view. In doing so, the tactic reduces anger, fear or tension, and facilitates the resolution of substantive conflicts.
15. An outpouring of labor emigrants perceived as irreversible and as having a debilitating impact on the local economy.
16. 'Paradigm shift' was a concept introduced by Thomas Kuhn in his seminal book titled, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*. Kuhn argues that every significant break-through in science was a break with tradition, with old ways of thinking, with old paradigms.

17. Communication satisfaction has been defined as an outcome related to fulfilling one's expectations through interaction (see Hetch, 1978). Others have also categorised it as an affective dimension of audience activity.
18. In the language of social networks, these are individuals most often mentioned as sources of information and influence by other nodes.
19. In this paper, we define margin of political freedom as the latitude or elbow room that the media enjoy based on the comparative level of political and economic control to which they may be subjected by such third parties as the government.
20. Discussions of these imbalances dominated the New World Information and Communication Order debate hosted by UNESCO in the 70's and 80's. The 'free vs. balanced flow' debate led to the withdrawal of the United States and a few western allies from UNESCO.

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