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Internet Use among Nigerian Journalists

By

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Abstract

The Internet has become a major phenomenon of the 21st Century, and, as should be expected in the Information Age, the most auspicious use of the Internet concerns the gathering, organisation and dissemination of information. It has become a mass medium of mass media. For the journalist, it is a source of information and a transmitter of information. Have Nigerian journalists tapped into its invaluable resources to enhance their professional roles? This article analyses a study on how and to what extent journalists in two Nigerian states have used the Internet and whether that use is tied to their professional assignments. The study found that a high percentage of the journalists surveyed are not computer literate, resulting in a very limited use

of the Internet. The most used Internet service was the e-mail and the findings suggests that even this service is used in a very limited way. The study also shows that the journalists barely use Internet resources to enhance the quality of their professional assignments. Finally, the study suggests that the limited use of the Internet is a national problem, not just confined to journalists, but may, in fact, point to other operators in public institutions.

Introduction

The Internet was one of the most revolutionary developments of the 20th Century. It was even more spectacular because it came into its panoply as the century was about to be swept into history and the world was in search of something extraordinary to usher in a new millennium. But the raw materials for something astounding had already been put in place when the Clinton Administration in the United States embarked on the "construction" of what then Vice President Al Gore popularised as an information superhighway. That superhighway was based on the Internet, which was, in fact, like most revolutionary developments, a by-product of something else or things that already existed.

The Internet technology was created as far back as early 1973 by Vinton Cerf as part of a United States Department of Defence project, under the auspices of the Advanced Research Projects Agency (ARPA). Thereafter, Cerf led many efforts to build, scale, and standardise the Internet. In 1984 the technology and the available limited network were turned over to the private sector and to government scientific agencies for further development. Essentially, the Internet is a network of computer networks that now covers every continent and almost all countries, allowing computers in these countries to communicate with one another.

In early 2000, this researcher taught a Mass Communication post-graduate diploma class. His constant references to the Internet and the World Wide Web finally got to one of the students, who asked: "Sir, I am still trying to grapple with what the Internet is all about. Now you've brought the World Wide Web. Which is which and what is what?" That sort of consternation has practically disappeared because *Internet* has come into common vocabulary and *WWW* is as commonplace as saying *dot-come*. By the end of 2000, Internet access was available in over 200 countries, with every country in the world having at least one connection to it (Microsoft, 2004). It is safe to say that in 2006, just over the halfway mark into the first decade of the new

millennium, it is impossible to tell the number of Internet users worldwide because the numbers continue to grow by leaps and bounds.

Purpose of the Study

Wimmer and Dominick (2000), note that mass media research has evolved along definable steps, with each medium's needs for research following similar patterns. The authors identify four phases: Phase 1, explores interest in the medium itself. Phase 2 begins once the medium has developed. This phase deals with specific information about the uses and the users of the medium. Phase 3 "includes investigations of the social, psychological and physical effects of the medium" (p. 6). In Phase 4, research is conducted to determine how the medium can be improved, either in its use or in combination with other technological developments.

The novelty of the Internet technology having worn off, even in the developing countries, the real issue now is how the technology is changing the way several segments of the increasingly global community do business. This study fits into Phase 2 of Wimmer and Dominick's model. In this phase, researchers try to provide answers to questions such as:

> How do people use the medium in real life? Do they use it for information only, to save time, for entertainment, or for some other reason? Do children use it? Do adults use it? Why? What gratifications does the new medium provide? What other types of information and entertainment does the new medium replace? (2000, p. 7).

For journalists and others engaged in mass communication, the Internet has wrought enormous changes; it has become a mass medium in its own right. The development of the World Wide Web, which combines text, colour, images, sounds, and video, was like stoking the fire. According to Baran (2004, p. 306), there were 3 billion Web pages by 2002 and "7.3 million new pages added every day." This suggests that there are more than 10 billion Web pages at this point in time. The Web has become easily the most popular aspect of the Internet for a majority of users.

In such an environment, some traditional concepts of mass communication have been dramatically altered. The traditional mass media concept of gate keeping, for example, has lost its pre-eminent position in the news production process. In traditional media, there are editors who watch over the shoulders of their subordinates in an effort to control the quality of media output. True, online news media have developed structures similar to those of traditional media, and control is increasingly being exerted along professional lines throughout the hierarchy. But what of the fellow who has sufficient expertise to design his own website? He is practically on the loose, capable of placing "news" stories and opinions of his choosing on the Internet.

The Internet also has the potential of causing users of traditional mass media to bypass these media in preference for the new medium. Recognising

this, producers of the traditional media have been creative enough to capitalise on this ravaging new kid on the block by converting it into a mass medium of the mass media. So now on the Internet, we can find radio and television, newspapers and magazines, as well as music, film and theatre, whose producers are trying to reach more of their traditional audiences.

Also, thanks to the Internet, journalists in various parts of the world have unlimited access to enormous databases. In Computer-Assisted Reporting (CAR), journalists can simply go over the heads of public or government officials who hoard information and are economical with the truth to gather data that enable them to construct investigative stories capable of unsettling the status quo. As Larry Grossman, a former president of the US television networks NBC and PBS is credited as saying, "The Internet makes us all journalists, broadcasters, columnists, commentators and critics" (Baran, 2004, p. 309).

This article reports a study conducted in two states in Nigeria to find out the extent of Internet use among journalists, especially to establish how it is affecting the way they perform their professional functions.

Technology Gap

While the Internet and its technology continue to have a profound influence in promoting the sharing of information, making possible rapid transactions among businesses and supporting global collaboration among individuals and organisations, journalists in many developing countries have continued to operate in early 20th Century mode. This study suggests that many journalists in Nigeria may not feel they need the Internet because their work situation accepts what they are offering in spite of what is going on around them. This is a typical case of the technology gap, the widening disparity between the communication technology haves and have-notes.

While doing a feasibility report for a state government-owned newspaper corporation in August 2005, this researcher found one lone computer in the Newsroom, another in the editor's office, while there was none in the Copy Desk Section. The tasks of word processing, typesetting, formatting the pages, placing graphics, photos and other illustrations were done by the pre-press unit of the Production Department. The result was that on the day the newspaper was supposed to roll off the press, the Newsroom and the Copy Desk were empty – the staff had taken French leave, while the four functioning computers in the Production Department (which were not networked with the other two) were over-burdened with loads of copy; hand-written, typeset, corrected, and formatted pages clogged up the system.

Ibekwe (2005) observes that there are many barriers to the success of ICTs in Nigeria's media industry, some of which are technical while others include inadequate method of application, non-availability of ICTs in sufficient numbers, lack of policy, difficulties with communication protocols and overall lack of standardisation. Perhaps, these may simply be summed up

as the reluctance of management to accept, and the tendency of the workers to resist, administrative, structural and technological change.

Yet, the media landscape has changed dramatically in other parts of the world, including some developing countries such as India, Chile, Argentina, South Korea, China, Hong Kong. In Africa, South Africa, Seychelles, Morocco, Algeria and Egypt, and Mauritius are pulling out of the developing counties syndrome (*World Information Society Report 2006*). Ghana is doing better than most West African countries, with a recent governmental ICT strategy promising "a leap from an agricultural economy to an information society by 2025" (Miller and Slater, 2005, p. 317). In these countries, as in other countries that have yielded to change, some pieces of equipment that have been traditional to media production are giving way to new ones. The following model was developed by Ibekwe (2005) and modified for the purpose of this article:

Table 1: Showihg the gradual easing out of some traditional newspaper production equipment and their replacement by modern ones.

Traditional Print Media Equipment	Modern (Digital) ICTs
Landline telephones	Mobile phones, Internet phones
Fax machines	E-mail
Micro recorders	Phone and camera recorders
Photographic cameras	Still digital cameras
Photocopying machines	Computer printers/colour copiers
Teleprinters	Internet – Intranet networks
Typewriters	PCs
Newsprints	Websites
Lithographic camera	Scanners, computer printers
Light table	Monitors
Walkie-Talkie/radios	Satellite phone

Many of the artefacts listed in Table 1 can operate individually, but modern ICTs are more efficiently utilised in integrated systems brought about by merger of various media and technologies. This is more appropriately

referred to as media convergence: the rapid marriage of print, radio, television, film, telephones and computers and communications technologies to a common computer- readable, **digital** form.

Fortunately, some Nigerian newspapers, especially the ones based in Lagos, are gradually coming into the 21st Century.

Theoretical Framework

This study was guided by the Uses and Gratifications paradigm. This approach was particularly suited to the study because it is consistent with the limited effects model of the media effects theory, namely, that the way the media influence people depends on the motives of the users. The undying debate on the effects of the media on people is not a concern in this article. But the Uses and Gratifications paradigm allows a researcher to inquire into how people use the media without the researcher having to subscribe to a particular position on the spectrum of the media effects debate.

As Griffin (2000) notes, "By looking at the differences between people, (one can) explain the relatively small and scattered impact of mass media" (p. 310). For example, though this study may be limited in scope, it could help to explain why, more than half-way through the first decade of the 21st Century, many journalists in Nigeria are almost shielded from the impact of the Internet and other ICTs that have driven mass media functions and practices in the last 10 years.

Method of Study

This study employs the quantitative methodology to examine the use of the Internet by Nigerian journalists. This examination depended on data gathered from a survey of journalists working in Akwa Ibom and Cross River States, two states in Nigeria's South-South political zone. The research instrument was a 22-item questionnaire, which was administered on journalists working in the two states.

Population of the Study

The population of the study consisted of all journalists working in Cross River and Akwa Ibom States. Journalists were defined as those working in any media of mass communication – newspapers and magazines, radio, and television, as well as communications services such as public relations agencies. They conformed to the Nigerian Press Council Act 1992 definition as "any person (not being less than 18 years of age) engaged in the collection, processing, and dissemination of information for use in the press and who has been accredited by the Nigeria Union of Journalists" (Momoh, 2002, p. 61).

From the register of the NUJ in Akwa Ibom States in 2005, there were 200 registered journalists working in various media in the State. In Cross River State, 150 journalists were listed on the membership roll. To arrive at a sample for the study, the researcher adopted the membership rolls as the

sampling frame, after which systematic sampling was used to identify the specific number of journalists to be surveyed. Using a sampling rate of 20 per cent, 70 journalists were selected and served with copies of the questionnaire. Sixty-four questionnaires were filled out and returned, signifying a return rate of 91 percent. The survey was done between August 2005 and January 2006.

It is important to state here that the respondent journalists were not merely the employees of the governments of the two states. They were employees of various media and communication organisations, most of them representatives of national media deployed to the two states.

Data Presentation

The following data, based on an analysis of the questionnaire, are presented for discussion**.**

Table 2: Use of Professional Information from the Internet by the respondents

Respondent's Assignments Organisation	Use of Such Info in Professional			
	Very Often	Sometimes	Not At All	Total
Radio	3	5	2	10
TV	2	3	5	10
Newspapers	10	14	9	33
Magazines	3	1	1	5
PR	1	2	3	6
TOTAL	19	25	20	64

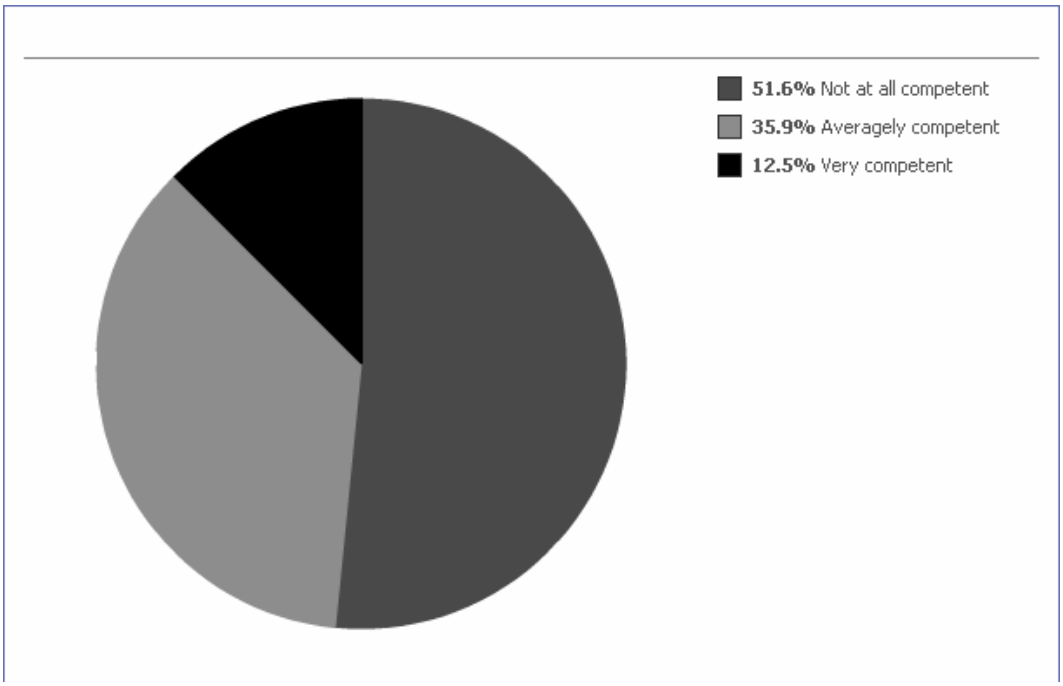

Fig. 1: The Level of Computer Competence among the Respondents

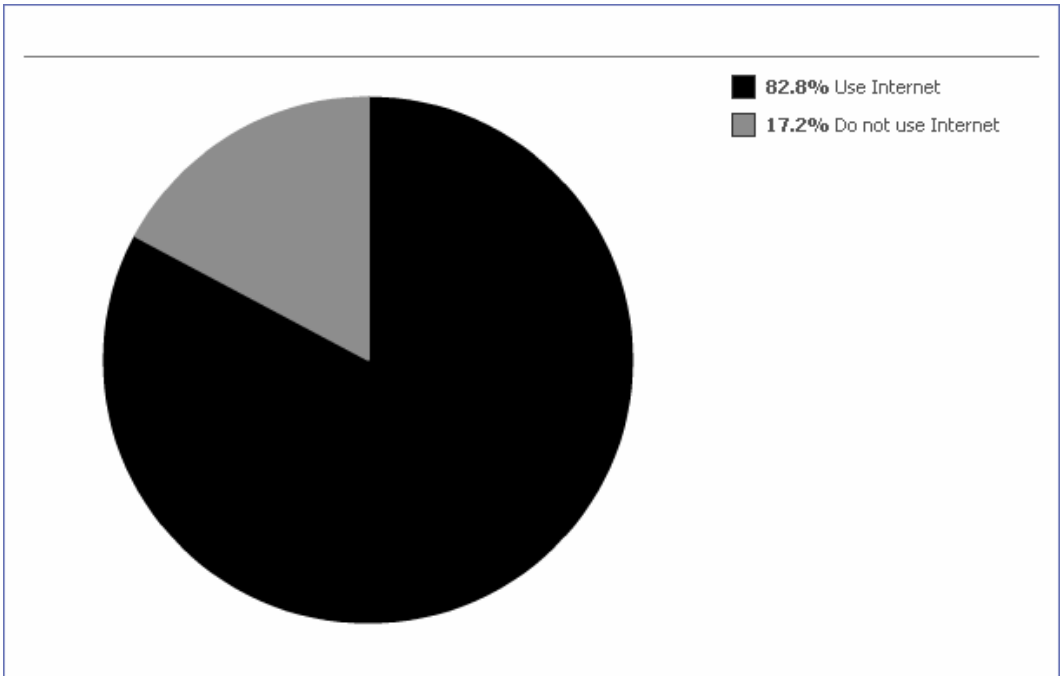

Fig. 2: Users and Non-users of the Internet among Respondents

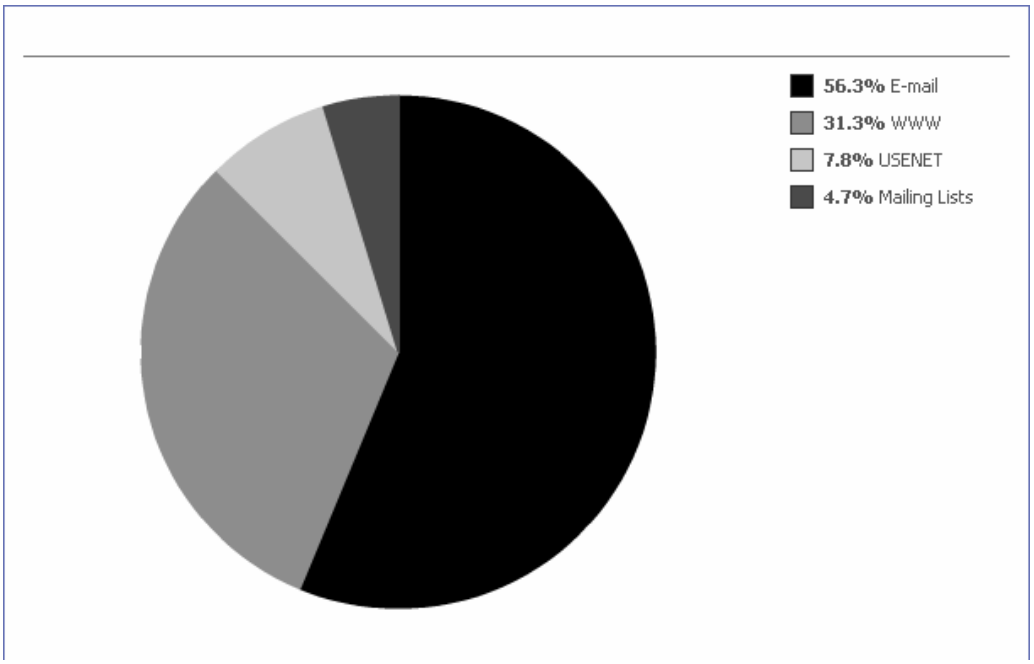

Fig 3: Internet Services Most Used by the Respondents

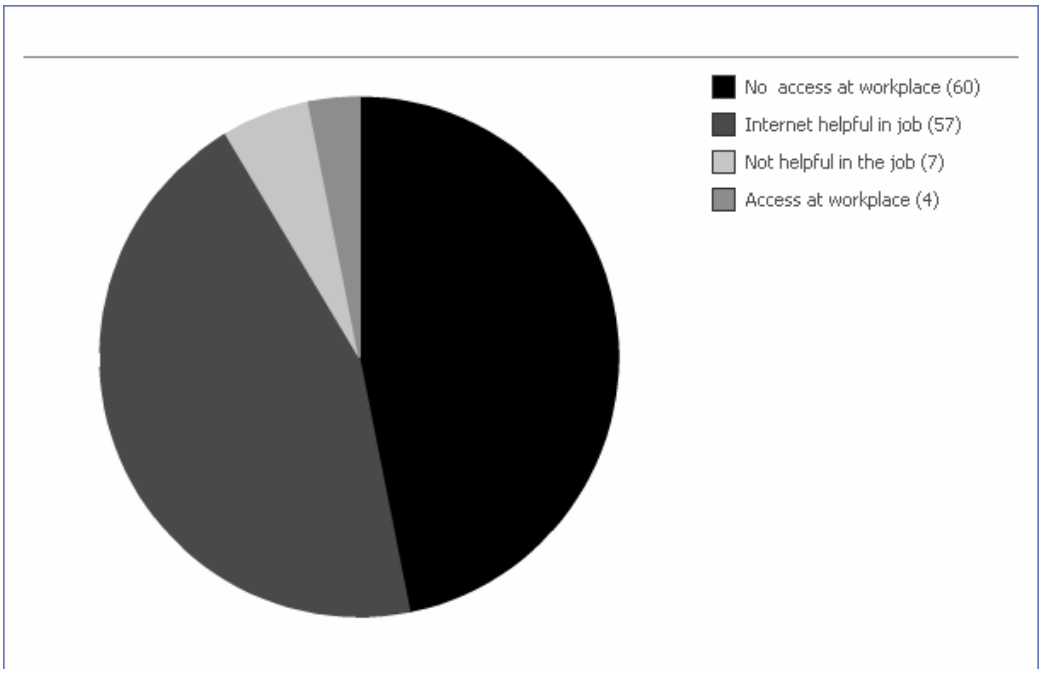

Fig. 4: Indicating respondents' views on usefulness of the Net for their jobs and those who have or don't have access to Internet at the place of work.

Findings

The data in this study indicate that the journalists surveyed were greatly deficient in the use of the computer. As shown in Fig. 1, those who rated themselves as *very competent* in the use of the computer made up only 12. 5% (8) of those surveyed; the *averagely competent* made up 35. 9% (23) while *not at all competent* made up 51.6% (33).

A high percentage (82.8%) of the respondents indicated that they use the Internet while only 17.2% said they did not (Fig. 2). According to Fig. 3, the respondents indicated that they use four Internet services: WWW – 20 (31.25%); E-mail – 36 (56.25%); Mailing List – 3 (4.68%), and USENET – 5 (7.8%). (It should be noted here that the numbers total more than the number of those who used the Internet because many of them used more than one service). The data show that the respondents used E-mail more than the other services. Table 2 indicates that among those who used the Internet, 19 (29.7%) used information from the Net *very often* for their professional

assignments. Twenty-five (31.25%) %) used such information *sometimes*, while *20 (47.16%)* do *not at all* use such information in their assignments as journalists.

Respondents were also asked whether they visited websites of Nigerian and/or foreign newspapers/media. Twenty-six (40.6%) said they did, while 38 (59.4%) said they did not. Only one respondent included the *New York Times Online* and BBC among the websites visited. The websites of the *Vanguard* and *The Punch* newspapers were each listed by 15 respondents, followed by *Thisday* (14), the *Sun* (8), *The Guardian* (7), *Daily Independent* (7) *Tribune* (7), *New Age* (5), and the *Champion* (3). They were also asked whether they visited websites of Nigerian non-media organisations. Twelve said they did and 52 said they didn't. Those who said *Yes* listed NNPC, Zinox Technologies (an indigenous computer manufacturer), Akwa Ibom State government, Cross River State government, Niger Delta Congress, and Nigerian Liquefied Natural Gas Project websites.

Out of those surveyed, 60 said they had no Internet access in their places of work, compared with only 4 who said they did. Fifty-nine of the respondents said having Internet access at the workplaces would help in their jobs and enhance their use of the Internet.

Discussion

Though a high percentage of the respondents said they used the Internet, analysis of the data showed that many of them mixed up the jargons that are common among Internet users. If respondents indicated that they used e-mail the most during Internet sessions and in response to another question said that they spent most of their time on the Internet *browsing*, it is safe to conclude that such respondents are not regular users of the medium. The inference here is that the journalists' use of the medium was more limited than they claimed.

Further analysis suggests that lack of computer competence has a direct correlation to this low Internet activity. Those who rated themselves as *very competent* in the use of the computer were also those who showed greater use of the medium. For example, seven out of eight or 87.5% of respondents in this group indicated that they visited websites of newspapers and other organisations. Ten (43.5%) of those who rated themselves as *averagely competent* in computer use also visited newspaper websites and the websites of non-media organisations.

Not surprisingly, the respondents in these two groups indicated the highest use of information from the Web for their professional assignments. The lack of computer competency reduces the urge to step into Cyberspace, partly because this inadequacy limits an appreciation of what goes on there and partly because of the fear of embarrassment. Lack of competency also reduces the ability to navigate the endless links that are offered on the Web, for example. Those who said they browsed the Web were fewer than those who used e-mail. One reason might be that it is easier to use the e-mail system

than to browse the Web. For the average journalist with a limited sense of what goes on in Cyberspace, the e-mail is merely the fastest means of delivering news copy to Headquarters. They are thus limited to this very practical application of the e-mail system. Yet, e-mail can be used to join mailing lists, bulletin boards, or discussion groups that cover a vast array of subjects.

However, the two (2) respondents who indicated that they used Mailing Lists service also indicated a high level of computer competence. The Mailing Lists, as Ward (2002) observes, prove very useful to most journalists:

> Their contents are more focused. They operate on an e-mail system. Groups of people with similar academic or professional interests will form an e-mail mailing list. Each day, everyone on the list receives messages from anyone in the group who makes a contribution. Such messages usually stay within the e-mail system and are not posted on the web (p. 94).

It takes some savvy and commitment to get involved in such applications of the e-mail system. The respondents who visited websites of organisations such as NNPC or Niger Delta Congress or Nigeria LNG, were also the ones who said they used information from the Internet in their professional assignments. They could use such information in features or opinion pieces or to background their stories. Also, in a country where bureaucrats and public officers are extremely reluctant to give information to the press, it is a lot easier, for example, to go to the NNPC website to get information (assuming the website is regularly updated) than to get such information from officials. Furthermore, a journalist who knows his way round Cyberspace could easily access some foreign databases to obtain information about Nigeria that Nigerian officials would rather not divulge. It obvious that the more computer-literate a journalist is, the more use the person is likely to make of the Internet.

The large number who claimed to use the Internet (82.8%), the fact that most of them used the e-mail (56.3%) - Fig. 3, and the small percentage (29.7%) that actually used information from the Net *very often* for their professional assignments (Table 1), suggest that they go to the Internet more often for reasons that are not associated with their professional work.

Even though 57 respondents (89%) agree that the Internet would help in the performance of their professional functions, the study suggests, as has already been shown, that they are not using it as such. One explanation is the lack of computer competence already discussed. The other explanation is the lack of Internet accessibility for these journalists. Fifty-nine (92%) of the respondents believe that having Internet access at their job locations would encourage their use of the medium.

The lack of Internet access at newspaper offices – even if they are outstation offices - poses a more critical problem. It demonstrates a lack of clear-cut policy by many news organisations to move with contemporary developments in ICTs. But this is not peculiar to the media. Institutions like universities have been quite slow to adopt the Internet and integrate it into their resource infrastructure. In the face of very critical shortages of library books in Nigerian universities, the World Wide Web opens a vast reservoir of book resources to universities. Libraries in and outside the world's best and largest universities can be easily accessed via the Internet; yet the average university in the country regards campus-wide Internet accessibility as unnecessary expenditure.

Even in the universities that have installed wireless receiving systems, provision of terminals in critical sections – like lecture rooms and libraries – has remained elusive. One of the causes might be the lack of appreciation of the enormous scope that the Internet offers by those at the top. This researcher was at a faculty board meeting in one of Nigeria's federal universities in August 2006, where they were just beginning to discuss how to help faculty members become computer-literate. Among about 40 faculty members, many of them professors, only about 12.5 per cent indicated computer competency.

What all this suggests is that there is a policy problem in Nigeria with regard to the adoption of ICT. The World Information Society Report 2006, published August 2006 by the ITU, seven months after this research was conducted, rates Nigeria very low in the Digital Opportunity Index. The DOI was described as an indicator of the opportunity, infrastructure and utilisation of information technologies worldwide. The country was 31st out of 55 countries evaluated in Africa. The report said only **one in 200** Nigerians can afford to surf the Internet. The report added that a major barrier to the digital opportunities is the lack of the necessary underlying infrastructure (The PUNCH, Wednesday, August 16, 2006, p. 3). The report notes that:

> Many of the most desirable applications envisioned for the Information Society are only possible broadband (Internet) access. This has made the availability of high-speed Internet service a key policy objective in both developed and developing nations (The PUNCH, p. 3).

Nigeria is way behind in broadband technology in spite of its acknowledgement that "broadband is an accelerator of social and economic development in the modern world."

To return to the media, if the managements of media organisations saw the need to move every journalist-employee along with the current, they would restructure their training and re-training programmes, and take budgetary measures to provide ICT opportunities, including Internet access, for their reporters. This would give the employees opportunities and incentives to seek self-improvement. The Missouri Group (2001) notes:

> Reporters and editors of today have a wealth of information available at their fingertips. To access it, they must have the right equipment and software, and they must become comfortable with using computers. In addition to making raw data available, computers help reporters organize and analyse information (p. 69).

Besides, access to the world's great newspapers, difficult if not impossible through their print versions, is only some mouse clicks away. Nigerian journalists could read the stories in these Web newspapers and see how good stories are written. They could read editorial comments and study the editorial pages and come to grips with the beauty and power of the editorial column. They could study newspaper layouts and the use of graphics.

This means that contemporary journalists do have access to newspapers of other African countries as well as international newspapers through the Web. Indeed, beyond the online newspapers, journalists can subscribe to the electronic versions (not the Web sites) of many international *print* newspapers which they can download every morning into their computers for later reading. The opportunities for the journalist to improve professionally via the Internet are stupendous.

Conclusion

Apparently, few Nigerian journalists feel threatened by the spreading influence of the ICT-based newspaper organisation. But the reality is that career patterns are changing. Straubhaar and LaRose (2000) make the point that:

> Media convergence will make jobs and careers highly volatile…Most people entering the work force today will have four or five different careers – not jobs, but careers – in their future. That means that young people considering professional careers in journalism, advertising, or television (or even computer science) will eventually have to retool for several very different professions – or join the have-not in the lower strata of the information society. (p. 7).

In effect, many journalists who insist on being stuck in the traditional mode in mass media practices, especially in the print media, have become an endangered species. Their jobs are on the line because unless they are retrained or train themselves to fit into the digital media environment, their jobs will be taken over either by machines or those who are trained to use the machines.

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