

Nigerian Literature and Current Realities: The Challenge of Illiteracy and E-Literacy

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Abstract

Today's world is becoming more and more technology-driven, and the speed of change in technology has become neck-breaking, mind-breaking and intractable to many related fields. Literature is one of such fields that have much to do with the information technology, particularly in relation to language use and retrieval and utilization of information resources activities that require high or relatively high level of literacy. This paper examines the issues of illiteracy and e-literacy as some of the challenges confronting the 21st century Nigerian literary writer, critic and reader. Hence, it has three trajectories: the Nigerian writer's use of information technology as a tool for propagating African literature; the Nigerian critic's use of information technology as a tool for propagating the criticism of African literature; and the Nigerian reader's use of information technology as a tool for accessing African literature. The study looks at the response of the Nigerian literary scholar to the global requirement of e-literacy against the backdrops of poor reading culture and high rate of illiteracy in Nigeria.

Index terms— illiteracy, e-literacy, information, communication, technology, literature, globalization.

1 Introduction

The above prediction by Joseph Odumodu, made at the close of the last century, emphasizes the increasing importance of the application of technology to business and to all areas of life in the human society. This effect of technological advancement is in nowhere more conspicuous than in the areas of information computation, information transmission and communication acts and processes. And a major tool that is extensively being exploited in the present day technologically-driven human society is language. This is what has informed the task of examining language use in the 21st century, especially in relation to the observed evolution from information technology to communication technology. The focus of this paper is to examine the role and nature of language in the information technology compared with the role and nature of language use in the communication technology.

2 II.

3 Origin and Nature of Communication

It seems natural to trace the origin of communication to the creation of life, when all living creatures in the universe, whether aquatic or terrestrial, needed to communicate in order to interact with one another. For the human species, Adam and Eve were the first to communicate with each other, making use of language. This, however, is not to undermine the divine/human interaction through language that had existed between God and Adam, before Eve came into the scene.

In the ancient human societies, which were relatively smaller in size, there was minimum recognizable formal integration and cohesion. Communication was much simpler. The various localities were united only by moral

7 B) THE CHANGING FACE OF COMMUNICATION SYSTEMS IN RECENT TIMES

consensus, where values, ideas and economic activities differ from one locality to another (Okolo et al 1998). Then, for instance, the family or village head could communicate a message of communal importance through the village or town crier, who would beat his gong or 'egogo' at night to summon members of the community and deliver the message to them. In some other instances, some special messages could be symbolically sent to the members of the community through fire signals, tying of shrubs or leaves, and making of cuts or marks on trees, or through verbal codes or cat calls.

4 (G)

Global Journal of Human Social Science -Year 2016 Vincent P. A. Obobolo resently, the world is referred to as a global village. This is the extent to which technological advances have shaped our world. Organizations will increasingly be seeing the world as their playing field?.Technological advances made in the present century are only a tip of the iceberg. The Internet, the electronic system, the mass media explosion have all contributed to sharing of information and service delivery quicker and more efficiently. There will be a greater reality in the future and the difference between success and failure?will be the ability to create and maintain sustainable competitive advantage in the application of technology to deliver better value to the customers (Odumodu 1999).

5 P

With growth in size and in complexity of modern societies, however, it becomes difficult, and even impossible, to employ such simple, crude and direct forms of communication that were used in the ancient societies. That is, as society becomes more and more sophisticated in nature, the need for more sophisticated, more efficient and more effective systems of communication continues to arise in order to have clearer and unambiguous information transfer within modern societies. And such information and communication systems must be designed to promote optimum understanding of the message (or information) and a near accurate prediction of the response of the recipient(s). Most probably, the need to meet these requirements is the reason why changes in the information and communication industry have been so rapid, especially in this 21 st century.

6 a) The Advent of Information Technology

Since the turn of the 21 st century, information has become pronounced as the omnipotent catalyst for improved human relationship, business productivity, national development, international relations and globalization. Today's world is becoming more and more technology-driven, and the speed of change in technology has become neck-breaking, mind-breaking and intractable to many related fields. To a very large extent, Technological innovation has changed the social, political, economic, and cultural fabric of life since the end of the Cold War (Taylor, 2001). Information and communication technologies (ICTs) have been instrumental in social transformations -from industrial society of the 20 th century to the 'network society' of the new age of 'informationalism' -where even intercontinental neighbours are now one buttonpush away (Castells, 1996). ??Adebisi, 3, 2012). Also, as observed by Aderemi Raji-Oyelade,

The electronic media has become a dynamic space to determine the presence, significance and rating of disciplines -the humanities and the sciences -and professionals including literature and literary traditions, to the extent that the dictum has come to say: 'if you are not on the website, you are out of sight.'" ("Reflections?" 15). Raji-Oyelade's succinct observation, here, underlines the need for every discipline to register its presence in, as well as take full advantage of the electronic media in order to command relevance in the current 21 st century world.

Obviously, the 21 st century world is a world that is ruled by information and communication technology (ICT). And any individual, organization, people of group and even discipline that would fit into this world must not but become literate in the true sense of the word. And, by becoming literate, here, we mean it both in the literal sense and as it apply to the reigning technology of the day -the e-technology.

7 b) The Changing Face of Communication Systems in Recent Times

That there have been changes in the forms of communication systems employed since the ancient/pre-historic period to the present modern period requires no argument whatsoever. It is very obvious that the simple and crude communication methods of sending messages through village/town criers or through symbolic fire signals, cat calls or marks on trees have long given way to more sophisticated communication systems. The computer age did not only usher in the analog system, which made communication systems more effective and more efficient, but the more recent digital system has stupendously increased their speed and coverage, while at the same time becoming smaller and smaller in size. And, in very recent times, the telecommunication, telephone and audio/visual systems have found a meeting place via the Internet, and the world has been reduced far beyond the size of a global village to a global neighbourhood.

But in spite of all these technological miracles of the present age, the problem that seems to stand out is that of determining the effectiveness and relevance of the modern systems of communication, e.g. the Internet, especially in terms of language use in social and business relationships. Can we really say that there is marked

difference in effectiveness and relevance between the old and modern systems of communication? How have the changes in the information and communication ages affected language use in social and business relationships? While the exhaustive discussion of these issues is far beyond the scope of this paper, I nevertheless intend to hazard a word or two in this regard.

8 c) Changes in Modern Information and Communication Systems in the 21st Century

As we move from the general to the specific, the pendulum is swinging very swiftly from the sense of regarding communication as a process of social/business interaction to that of seeing it as a system of exchanging information between individuals or groups, especially in social/business environments. What this simply means is that we are using 'communication system' interchangeably with 'information system'. And this, in fact, calls for a redefinition of terms.

Kenneth C. Laudon and spouse (2000) see communication system -rather, information system -as "interrelated components working together to collect, process, store, and disseminate information to support decision making, coordination, control, analysis, and visualization in an organization." This definition tends to point towards Management Information System (MIS). Laudon and wife further establish this when they define 'information system' from a business perspective, as "organizational and management solution, based on information technology, to a challenge posed by the environment." Gradually, we are obviously being led towards appreciating the role of communication or information systems in organizations.

And, talking about the pivotal role of management information system in today's organizations, Laudon and his partner hold: "it is difficult, if not impossible, to manage a modern organization without at least some knowledge of information system what they are, how they affect the organization and its employees, and how they can make business more competitive and efficient. They submit: "Information systems have become essential for creating competitive firms, managing global corporations and providing useful products and services to customers." Of course, we cannot help but agree with Laudon and his wife, as they echo Leonard Barton's (1995) observation: "Across all industries, information and the technology that delivers it have become critical, strategic assets for business firms and their managers." In this light, Laudon strongly believes:

Information systems are needed to optimize the flow of information and knowledge within the organisation and to help management maximize the firm's knowledge resources. Because the productivity of employees will depend on the quality of the systems serving them, management decisions about information technology are critically important to the prosperity and survival of a firm.

9 d) The Internet as a Modern Communication System

Having established the pivotal role(s) of Management Information Systems in today's business and social environments, the next thing to do is to identify some of those information systems, or gadgets, that help to perform this essential function. We said in the above section that there have been remarkable changes in the forms of communication system employed since the ancient/pre-historic periods to the present modern period. One of the areas of such remarkable change is in the use of the typewriter keyboard. Of recent, the Lord Lugard kind of manual typewriting keyboard has metamorphosed into the allpurpose electronic keyboard, which now serves as an input device for the computer. And the computer itself has gone through countless stages of metamorphoses until it now stands as the powerful wizard of the business and social world.

We cannot help but agree that technology has revolutionized communication during the past decade and access to people and information anywhere in the world has become quicker, cheaper, and easier. This observation is in line with an earlier one by The United Nation's publication, Human Development Report (2003), "People's lives around the globe are linked more deeply, more intensely, more immediately than ever before." This new wave in the communication highway is made possible by no other single factor than the reigning computer technology. With the multidimensional metamorphoses of the computer system, the computer has become a kind of demi-god with, please permit me to say, omnipotent ability. Today, there seems to be a marriage between the computer system and the telephone system that has produced a most powerful wizard for the information and communication use of the 21st century.

Yes, the Internet is where it is all happening right now. The Internet seems to provide a level playfield for all corporate entities and individuals in the world today to showcase their wares. It is now generally believed that the Internet is providing the hottest selling business opportunity in the world today. And with the advent of social media, almost every Tom, Dick and Harry is keying into the advantage (and disadvantage?) of reaching the world with whatever he has to offer in real time; and those who do not learn to use it will be left out. This exciting new business and social revolution has created a wide variety of opportunities for almost everything imaginable to be done through the Internet. These include the possibility of personalized consulting on Internet, electronic marketing, new advertising/sales promotion media, business automation, e-mail services, electronic publishing, match-making, social relationship, counselling, research, education, etc. The result of the Internet opportunities is that people now have more access to other people's lives, products and ideas. And the ultimate goal is to enhance the way people live, work and play.

10 e) The Challenge of Illiteracy and E-literacy in Today's World

Literally, illiteracy is a state of being unable to read and write; it implies a state of being uneducated. Hence, a person who has not had the privilege of acquiring formal education is often regarded as an illiterate. With the level of civilization in the world today, every member of the human society is expected to possess the minimum level of education -primary school education. It is needless to say that anybody who does not possess this minimum level of education would be at a very serious disadvantage, as far as functioning in the systems of today's world is concerned.

But it must be strongly noted that the world has gone far beyond having its members possess the minimum level of education, to having them possess the minimum level of e-literacy. And e-literacy, here, goes beyond computer literacy to literacy in the sophisticated ever-changing technology of the present day. The starting point for acquiring the required e-literacy is for members of the human society to gain some level of competence in the use the facilities of the present day information and communication technology.

11 Alphonsus Adebisi informs:

The ??2000), regarding the swinging of the pendulum to arrive at the use of ICT facilities as vehicles for education: "It is important to consider how these electronic technologies differ and what characteristics make them important as vehicles for education." (4). But our focus in this paper is the use of ICT facilities in the areas of language and literature.

12 III.

13 Nigerian Literature Versus Information and Communication

Technology (ict) Literature is one of the fields of learning that have much to do with the information technology, particularly in relation to language use and retrieval, and the utilization of information resources -activities that require high or relatively high level of e-literacy. This is also so, considering the fact that literature, using the words of Aderemi Raji-Oyelade, is "the concrete science of imagination". (15). It therefore follows that we must respond positively to Raji-Oyelade's posers on the interface of technology and creative writing: "how much of the interface of technology and creative writing has been exploited? How much of the technologization of the world has been achieved in this national literary culture? ("Reflections..." 14-15); And, ...how much of the software technology has been explored and exploited on its behalf, in contemporary Nigerian literary space? (15) These questions establish the need of the Nigerian literary scholar to positively respond to, embrace and fully utilize the available multi-varied facilities of information technology to access, appreciate, project and promote the cultural wealth of the nation, that are contained in her literatures, before the global community for full patronage.

14 a) The Nigerian Writer and ICT

Here, we are concerned about how well the Nigerian writer has employed the facilities of the Information and Communication Technology for propagating the Nigerian literature. First, let us examine how Raji-Oyelade has demarcated the generations of Nigerian writers:

The pioneer generation of Nigerian writers including Gabriel Okara, Chinua Achebe, J.P. Clark, Wole Soyinka, Mabel Segun, Christopher Okigbo and Flora Nwapa belong to the period before the media revolution which initiated the language and the activity of the hypertext. (15). The second generation, especially those who emerged in the mid 1980s, including Kole Omotoso, Pol Ndu, Ossie Enekwe, Femi Osofisan, Niya Osundare, Buchi Emecheta, Festus Iyayi and Tanure Ojaide arrived at the beginning of the revolution, but their inability to appreciate the portal can be described as the apt example of the postcolonial African condition of being the catch-up rung of Late Capitalism's cultural imperialist achievement. At a later decade?some of these authors began to embrace electronic technology as supplementary means of their presence on the global scene, even if tangential. (15).

The Third Generation of Nigerian writers, signalled off in the late 1980s and emerging in the mid 1990s, can be said to be the inheritors of traditions including the advantage of Web 2.0? Notable among Nigerian writers who have pushed the borders of writing beyond the print are Sola Osofisan (nigeriansinamerica.com), Nnorom Azunoye (sentinel.uk), Peter Anny-Nzekwe ([Dublin Quarterly](http://DublinQuarterly)), Afam Akeh, Chuma Nwokolo ([African writing online](http://Africanwritingonline)), and more recent examples by Dami Ajayi and Emmanuel Iduma (Saraba) and Richard Ali ([Sentinel, Nigeria online](http://SentinelNigeriaonline)). (??5)

The trouble with Raji-Oyelade's demarcation is mainly with the first two generations; and it is in the fact that the time of arrival into the literary scene has nothing to do with when a writer chooses to register his epresence. In other words, that Kole Omotosho arrived the literary scene at the period before the media revolution does not fit him into the later generation of Nigerian writers as against a writer like Wole Soyinka who though arriving long before him, may have indeed embraced the new technology first. In the same way, that a writer like Afam Akeh arrived at the period that web 2.0 is the reigning tradition does not make him a third generation Nigerian writer as against a writer like Ossie Enekwe who may have embraced the new technology earlier than him.

Therefore belonging to a generation of Nigerian writers, as far as the information and communication technology is concerned does not depend on when a writer arrives the literary scene, but more on when a writer embraces the reigning electronic technology, how well the writer has utilized the technology to remarkably register his e-presence and how often the writer is upgrading himself in response to the ever-changing technology.

Regardless of the generation to which the Nigerian literary writer belongs, the paucity of materials in the Internet, whether of the older generation, second generation or even the newer generation of Nigerian writers is a clear testimony to the fact that the Nigerian literary writer is yet to come to terms with global technological realities; and something urgently needs to be done by Nigerian literary writers or their agents in order to fill this gap and make our literature available to readers in the information and communication super highways.

15 b) The Nigerian Literary Critic and ICT

Our focus here is not on literary critics of Nigerian literature, since this would bring into consideration such foreign literary critics of Nigerian literature as Bernth Lindfors and many others. But our focus here is on Nigerians who are functioning as literary critics, whether they are studying Nigerian literature or any other literature in the world for that matter. Our examination is about how far and how well Nigerian literary critics are taking advantage of the multi-varied information/communication systems to enrich and propagate their critical ideas/opinions to the world.

Definitely, it cannot be argued to the contrary that Nigeria has produced a huge crop of literary critics of international stamina. With the proclaimed dynamism and robustness of the critical works of such Nigerian literary critics as Dan Izevbaye, D.I. Nwoga, Romanus Egudu, Biodun Jeyifo, Tejumola Olaniyan, Chinweizu, Madubuike, Abiola Irele, Wole Soyinka, Harry Garuba, Emmanuel Obiechina, Ernest N. Emenyonu, Charles E. Nnolim, Ezenwa Ohaeto, Peter Onwudinjo, Femi Ojo-Ade, A.E Ohaegbu, Kalu Uka, Chris Nwamuo, Funso Aiyejina, Odia Ofeimun, Olu Obafemi, Niyi Osundare, Catherine Acholonu, Chidi Maduka, Molara Ogundipe, Isidore Okpewho, Steve Ogude, Sunday Anozie, Theo Vincent, J.A.J. Nwachukwu-Agbada, Ropo Sekoni, Nwahunanya, G.G. Darah, Chidi Amuta and lots of others, Nigeria can boast of having showcased some of the best literary critics in the continent of Africa. But a look at these foremost Nigerian literary critics would reveal that majority of them are already gearing towards retirement or are already retired from active service, from productive academic activities or from critical exercises. For this reason, many of them would most probably prefer to enjoy their retirement in peace and quietness, rather than be bothered by the information and communication technology systems that are reigning sway in today's world. And, outside these great icons of international repute, there seems to be nobody left in the literary criticism scene in Nigeria.

A look at our academic journals and publications of today seems to reveal lack of the dynamism, robustness and prolificacy that we saw in the works of Nigerian literary scholars of yesteryears, who were able to clearly etch their names in annals of history as renown literary critics. Yet, with the great wealth of resource materials that are made available in the electronic (information and communication) systems today, one would think that the writings of our literary critics of today would be richer in depth and variety than those of the previous generations of Nigerian literary scholars; and one would also think that the literary critics of today would be more prolific and more visible in the electronic media than those of the older generations.

16 c) Readers of Literature in Nigeria and ICT

Here, it seems we also have a problem of definition. By readers of literature in Nigeria, are we limited to Nigerian readers of Nigerian literature, or are we to include non-Nigerian readers of Nigerian literature? Or, looking at it the other way round, should we or shouldn't we be talking about Nigerians who are readers of literature, regardless of whether they are readers of Nigerian literary texts or non-Nigerian literary texts?

If the first group of people identified above is the case in question, then we have in our hands what we could call, 'double tragedy'. This is clearly because we have in Nigeria a non-reading culture, which is further made tragic by the fact that literary creativity, more than any other form of creativity, is neither encouraged nor appreciated in Nigeria. Therefore to look for Nigerian readers of Nigerian literature within the facilities of the ICT is almost like looking for water in the desert.

If the second group -the non-Nigerian readers of Nigerian literature -is the case under reference, then there could be some hope. But the questions that readily come to mind are: How many non-Nigerian literary readers are interested in Nigerian literature? How much of Nigerian literature is uploaded and made available online? I guess that the answers to these questions are obvious. First, we do not expect other people to show more interest in our literatures than us. If there are readers of Nigerian literature, our best bet should be Nigerians. And if Nigerians are not interested in reading their own literature, neither should we expect others to read our literature? So we have a situation in which almost nobody or very few people are reading Nigerian literature, whether offline or online. Second, not much of Nigerian literature is available online. You can try it by using any of the search engines to see for yourself. So, even if the non-Nigerian literary readers are interested in reading Nigerian literature, much of the literature is not available, and consequently inaccessible within the ICT facilities.

But if the third group-Nigerians who are readers of literature (generally speaking) -is our focus, then there is brighter hope here; the reason being that, today, there is a huge avalanche and a wide variety of literature available within the ICT facilities; and any and every good reader has more than enough literature online to

occupy him probably for ages to come. But, Nigerians being who we are, how many Nigerian literary readers are computer compliant, let alone Internet savvy?
IV.

17 Conclusion

We may conclude by re-affirming the following facts about the Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) and Nigerian Literature in the 21 st century:

? Today's world has become more and more technology-driven and the speed of technological changes is very rapid and intractable. Literary writers should rise up to their responsibility of making their literary works available, both offline and online. ? There is a huge avalanche and wide variety of literature of literary writers of other nations of the world available within the ICT facilities that many Nigerian literary readers do not get to read because they are not computer compliant or Internet savvy. This negative trend needs to be urgently addressed. Despite the strong temptation to go ahead and investigate or pursue the numerous questions and issues raised in this paper, time and space would not permit us to do so here. Therefore, this paper is meant to agitate our minds and probably serve as a curtain raiser for a possible academic debate among scholars regarding the issues of Information and Communication ^{1 2}

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? The 21 st century world is a world that is ruled by information and communication technology.

? In this 21 st century, information has become pronounced as the omnipotent catalyst for improved relationships, business productivity, national development, international relations and globalization.

? Information and communication technologies (ICTs) have been instrumental to social transformations in the 21 st century.

? Technology has revolutionized communication in the past decade and access to people and information has become quicker, cheaper and easier.

? The electronic media have created a dynamic space to determine the presence, significance and rating of disciplines.

? The Internet provides a level playfield for corporate entities and individuals to showcase their wares.

? The Internet has enhanced the way people live, work and play.

? Everybody in today's world is expected to possess the minimum level of education and of e-literacy (i.e. considerable competence in the use of facilities of today's

sophisticated
changing

technology) in order to function in the systems of today's world.

Figure 1:

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Technologies (ICTs) and Nigerian Literature in the 21 st century.

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