Social Communicative Contexts between Technological Determinism and the New Media

Timehin Saheed Olurotimi

Department of Foreign Languages,Lagos State University

ABSTRAT : The advent of the new media is a major paradigm shift in human communication and the traditional media that sustained communication from the earliest times till today. Human social progress is almost entirely dependent on the nature of communication that exists in the society. No society survives without a good system of managing information within it as no meaningful encounter and engagement that can drive growth and development can occur without the media. The 21st century brought in its wake several innovations in the information and communication technologies that totally changed the nature of communication, its processes, practice and management. This paradigm shift has given birth to new orientations and attitudes which have combined to create the notion of technological determinism which is the belief that technology is the principal initiator of the society's transformation. This view of the society is usually attributed to the American sociologist, Thorstein Veblen, who argued that there is a causal link between technology and the society. He opines therefore that all social transformations in the society are controlled by technology and the new media orientation it has birthed. Using content analysis as its main methodological tool, this paper examines the nature of communication, its role in the human society and the interaction between it, its media and the society which is its theatre of action. It argues that the new media technologies and the society have a symbiotic relationship that has altered, redefined, refashioned and redirected social communicative contexts in such a way that has changed the way the human society and individuals act and react leading to a total overhaul of the ways everything is done-trading, teaching, learning, paying taxes, interacting and negotiating. It concludes that social communicative contexts are not distorted by the new media but are rather recontextualised by affirming existing identities and creating new roles in stimulating specialised communication.

KEYWORD: new media, social communicative contexts, technological determinism, social changes.

INTRODUCTION

Human communication is perhaps as complex as human beings and the multiplicity of their urges, drives and interests. It is the relational process of creating, interpreting and exchanging messages that carry meanings that can both be understood and attract a response. Messages thus lie at the heart of communication while meanings are at the core of messages. Communication therefore involves all relational efforts among the human race ranging from talking, listening, writing, reading, demonstrating, or doing anything that has to do with giving and receiving 'messages' in any form, medium or situation" (Robert T Craig, 2006).

Communication is the basis of all relationships and it is through it that the human ideational essence is achieved. The survival or destruction of humanity depends on, or is determined by it. The messages exchanged in human communication form the bases of all interactions and there are always purposes or objectives behind them. Whether at the interpersonal or group level, there is always a conscious or unconscious objective behind communication. These objectives, which may be, to inform, motivate, entertain, persuade, teach, mobilise or inspire, are manifested through the communication process in diverse contexts and settings. The breakthrough in information and communication technology and its attendant multiplicity of devices and gadgets have also significantly changed the communication paradigm and the contexts of communication have also evolved therefrom, leading to a polysemy of perceptions on contexts within the communication social milieu (Terje Rasmussen, 1997).

Since all types of communication are done within specific contexts, the communication context for a radio broadcaster will naturally differ from that of a hawker who shouts to draw attention to goods to be sold. Both are engaged in communication but the contexts differ. According to Rollo (2021), context in communication refers to the factors that work together to determine the meaning of a message. In human communication, the context interprets parts of the message exchanged. Similarly, the way people communicate, the people they are communicating with, the place where the communication is taking place, as well as their feelings at the time the communication is taking place all change the communication flow and affect the meaning of messages at the time of encoding, decoding and by extension, the feedback.

Social Communicative Contexts between Technological Determinism and the New Media

A communication context in this light can be seen as the environment or human eco-system, in which communication takes place. Knowing the context of communication therefore depends on the interaction between cultural, historical, psychological, social and physical factors involved in the process. It is context that gives meaning to communication. It gives the message contained in the communication its unique impact and when it is ignored, miscommunication and misunderstanding occur and avoidable conflicts are born. The effectiveness or otherwise of communication in any given setting is thus determined by context.

The practice of communication typified by the mass media also depends on contexts for the deconstruction of meanings in the messages encoded and this dependency is as true of the traditional media as it is of the new media. According to Holmes (2009), the idea of new media has a history as long as communication studies itself. As far back as the 1950s, Marshall McLuhan had, with clairvoyant precision, proposed in his discussions on the effects of electronic revolution the possibility of a complex information system characterised by instantaneous transmission and reception of information. Holmes argued that McLuhan's formulations in the 1950s were to become prophetic with the advent of the internet in the 1990s. McLuhan's time finally arrived as the instantaneous exchange of information through the Internet became a reality.

New forms of media will naturally demand new approaches and new methods as they challenge traditional media systems not only by technological innovations, but also by substantial, qualitative changes signifying what may be called a cyber-culture with modern computer technology and its digital systems at its core. Youth, in particular, are fascinated by its speed, spontaneity, immediacy and ease of access to information through internet compliant gadgets which provide them information of their choice anytime, anywhere without having to wait for any broadcasting schedule to be connected to get the information (Agboola, 2014).

The appurtenances of the new media such as Internet blogs, news portals and online news, Facebook, YouTube, Twitter, podcast and webcast, and even WhatsApp and the short messaging system (SMS) have turned almost everybody into a journalist of a sort and at very little cost with global reach. This revolution has had far-reaching socio-economic and political impacts. Some government officials in nations that have invested billions of dollars into the development of the new media may have been stupefied at how seats in parliaments have been lost courtesy of the new media's uncensored, audience-penetration and interactive tendencies (Nagasvare & Krishnasamy, 2011).

TECHNOLOGICAL DETERMINISM AND THE NEW MEDIA

Technological determinism is the term given to the notion that technology is the society's transformations are initiated and controlled by technology. This notion came into existence through the postulations of the American sociologist Thorstein Veblen, who proposed the existence of a causal link between the technology and the society. According to the supporters of technological determinism, most social changes are determined by controlled by technological development and scientific inventions (Thomas Hauer, 2017). The innovations in information and communications technology in the modern times have created new horizons for human communication as a result of the social changes they have brought. These new technologies have activated the appearance of new attitudes and dispositions with diverse social and political implications.

Supporters of technological determinism generally argue that because the society is shaped by technological development, it has to adjust and adapt to the social requirements of new technologies and innovations. According to them, any negative consequence of a gift of technology should be blamed on poor use of such technology by the people not on the technology per se. Toffler (1980), held that technology is a determinant of all changes that have fatal impact on all areas of human life. He described the current situation as the "third wave", which according to him would herald what he called the ''the shock of the future'' because of the tremendous transformations that would be brought about by the continuous development of technology. Negroponte (1996: 74), was more optimistic. He held a somewhat utopian view of the issue, when he likens the situation to "replacing atoms with bits". He saw a world in the future driven by profound digitization processes (decentralization, globalization, harmonization and strengthening) that would be totally unstoppable.

A contrary world view supports social determinism which is the belief that the social sphere conditions and determines technological development. It argues that introduction, reception/rejection, and use of new technologies is a product of social order. Proponents of this notion, according to Castells (1996:156-163), argue in favour of the bi-directionality of the interaction between technology and the society because both are not heterogeneously in their essence. The society is created and populated by human beings who are naturally gregarious. Technical innovations are made within the socioeconomic system created by men who, through demand and supply, invest their energies in it. The society and technology are mutually dependent entities. While a society is known through the technologies it is able to create, technology is just one of many social processes which is brought into existence through the society's decision to develop and use it.

In light of this, Castells rejected the idea that the society must adapt to Information and Communication Technology because he saw technology as a social process. He argued that the society and technology relate in a two-way formative process which he called social embeddedness- a concept of the society evolving from technical change, and technical change being shaped by the society. With this notion, he achieved a fusion of society and technology into a unified whole through his declaration: "The technology does not determine the society, the technology is the society".

Social Communicative Contexts between Technological Determinism and the New Media

The term 'new media' emerged quite significantly from the late 1980s as a result of technological developments that brought major changes into the world of media and communications. Though the traditional media from printing, photography, through television, to telecommunications had always been in a state of constant technological shifts and fluxes, the kind of changes witnessed in this period necessitated its complete marking off from the trends before it. This experience was not confined only to an aspect of the media but rather a comprehensive multisectoral dimensions of change bringing in its wake broad sociocultural changes indicative of new orientations, attitudes and approach to the challenges in the society (Martin Lister et al, 2009).

New media therefore represents a shift from modernity to postmodernity, and a globalising force which is removing on a daily basis the informational, educational, ideological, cultural and economic boundaries between nations. Seen thus, it can be said to be an epoch-making phenomenon which itself is a part of a universal landscape of social, technological and cultural transformation signifying a new technoculture. This why Martin Lister and his colleagues argue that there is a strong ideological dimension to the connotation of the 'new' in new media. One the one hand, it carries the notion of 'new means better', while on the other hand, it carries a plethora of interesting connotations. Of these latter connotations are the 'new' as 'the cutting edge', the 'avant-garde', and 'the place for progressive minds to be'.

These connotations of 'the new' embrace the new media and define the number of investments that go into them as well as the 'weight' of the claims made about them that they will deliver increased productivity, open better educational opportunities and promote new creative and communicative horizons. Strongly supported (often innocently) by private entrepreneurs, large corporations, media academics, professional journalists, technologists, administrators, educationists and cultural activists, the new media cannot be said to be ideologically neutral as their being celebrated and promoted in both state and corporate sectors are not unconnected with the agents of globalisation.

SOCIAL CONTEXTS AND NEW MEDIA'S TECHNOCULTURE

New communication technologies construct new contexts for communication in very different ways. Before examining how the new media assist in the construction of contexts of interaction, it is necessary to briefly interrogate contexts within the matrix of communication experience. According to Jo Amy Rollo (2021), there are four main types of contexts in communication. These contexts are factors that influence the way communication takes place, the way that communicators react, and the way messages are delivered and received. These context types include: physical, temporal, social-psychological and cultural context.

- **Physical Context in Communication**

This refers to the actual setting in which the communication is taking place. It includes physical aspects such as the weather, noise in the area, the time of day the communication is taking place, the location in which it is held, and other physical factors. The physical context usually has a huge impact on the way communication occurs.

Temporal Context in Communication

This refers to how individuals rely on past behaviours to set the tone for communication. This is any alteration in an established behavioural pattern which is expected at the time of communication. If the expected behaviour is absent, communication would be affected as those expecting to see the behaviour may be confused or worried.

Rollo gives an example of the Smith family:

The family eats dinner every night at 5 pm. They have a tradition of taking turns to share something about their day as they eat. If Susan shows up to dinner and refuses to share something about her day, the other family members will likely be confused and think that something is wrong because she is not behaving as she always does. While it is common for many people to shy away from sharing personal details of their lives, in this context it is different because the other family members are relying on the Susan's past behaviour to meet their expectations.

- **Social-Psychological Context in Communication**

This context in communication pictures the relationships between communicators and their emotions. In the social-psychological context, the personal mood and psychological state of each person must be balanced vis a vis the relationship between them. When a positive relationship had been established easier, it becomes easier to manage personal emotional crisis during communication. Rollo writes:

Brad has a meeting with a new co-worker. Although Brad is having a bad day, he does not want to share this information with his co-worker. He has only met him a few times and they are not close, so Brad does not feel comfortable talking to his new co-worker about his mood that day. During the meeting he pushes his mood aside and presents himself in a professional way. After the meeting, Brad meets up with his brother and lets his guard down. They talk about his day and everything that has been going on with him. The relationship between Brad and his co-worker and the relationship between Brad and his brother represent different social-psychological contexts

In investigating the relationships between the new media, social interaction and social context, it is pertinent to affirm that in relation to the new media, contexts pose several complicated questions. For example, how does one determine the 'context' of watching television or being engaged in computer-mediated communication? Or how do we describe the situation when communication takes place in a setting where material and communicative contexts overlap and are fused into new ones? These

questions no doubt show how complex the communicative experiences of the post-modern era are with the wide range of modes of mediation the new media offer.

Contexts therefore fall under various distinctive parameters. Some are bound by meaning or place, while others are bound by the media technologies employed. When a communicative context within the new media is bound by meaning, the mediation of context depends on the communicative competence of the communicators. The term 'communicative competence' describes the notion that effective communication does not only require the ability to use language in interaction but also an awareness of its use in different contexts (Hymes, 1972).

Communicative competence is however a slippery term which, on the surface, may not be thoroughly grasped because of its use not only in media studies but also in sociolinguistics and second language teaching. Widdowson (1983) made a distinction between competence and capacity. In this definition, he borrowed from insights into discourse analysis and pragmatics and posited that communicative competence entails the knowledge of linguistic and sociolinguistic conventions, while communicative capacity, which he also referred to as procedural capacity, is the ability to use knowledge as means of creating meaning in a language. According to him, capacity is not a component of competence, but rather "an active force for continuing creativity", i.e., a force for the realization of what Halliday called the "meaning potential" (Widdowson, 1983:27).

When on the other hand the mediation of context is bound by place, objects in the physical environment where communication is taking place are factored into it to produce semantic evaluations. Materiality is central to this feature as one of its ontological pillars as everything in the environment are semiotically and semantically related to meaning, knowledge and values. This is what Goffman (1959), termed 'setting' and what Giddens (1991), referred to as 'locale''. According to Terje Rasmussen (1997), it underlines the materiality of context: it refers to the physical place, the decor, furniture, that is, the bodily, scenic part of context.

In social interaction, features of locales are incorporated into the process of generating meanings. For instance, rooms in the home connote different things. While the bedroom may suggest rest, the living room may suggest relaxation or indoor recreation. Different levels of temporality and spatiality separate and connect individual and institutional praxis. Time is the dimension in which social activities repeat themselves and so construct continuity and co-ordination.

In a face-to-face communication, the individual is able to control, correct and adjust impressions. The new media make such control more possible. One can pretend to be in a place when in fact one is in another place. The post COVID-19 experience has also shown that access to information beyond particular locales means that one can enter into contact with diverse audiences and perform communicative function. In computer conferencing, virtual classes and online interactive sessions, communication takes place across thousands of miles and new contexts are formed.

CONCLUSION

Human social encounters naturally involve different kinds of communication. These encounters have, since the earliest days of man on earth, continued to metamorphose. What was not possible in earlier communication paradigms have been made possible by the new media, which, unlike the mass media, combine the situations of producing the communication, with the communication itself. Unlike the space of print, radio and television, the virtual contexts of the new media's 'cyberspace' is made up of heterogeneous, isolated, selective and distinct stages of construction of meaning.

The technological progress, rapidly growing in the 21st century, has continued to assert itself in the ways in which information, knowledge, and skills are created, distributed, and evaluated today. The basic defining features of the new media transcend the limits of locales while still sustaining the connections and differences within social groups. They, rather than decontextualising social interactions, recontextualise them by affirming existing identities and creating new roles in stimulating specialised communication.

REFERENCES

1) Toffler, Alvin. (1980). The Third Wave. New York: Bantam Books, pp. 45-49,
2) AbdulHameed K. Agboola (2014) The Influence of New Media on Conventional Media in Nigeria, Academic Research International Vol. 5(4) July 2014, www.savap.org.pk ISSN: 2223-9944, e ISSN: 2223-9553.
3) Castells, Manuel, (1996) The Rise of the Network Society, The Information Age: Economy, Society and Culture Vol. I. Cambridge, MA; Oxford, UK: Blackwell.
4) Eddo Rigotti & Andrea Rocci (2006), *Towards a Definition of Communication Context: Foundations of an Interdisciplinary Approach to Communication* Studies in Communication Sciences, Vol. 6, No. 2, 2006
5) Giddens, Anthony (1991) *Modernity and Self-Identity*. Cambridge:
6) Goffman, Erving (1959) *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, NY: Doubleday
7) Holmes, David. (2009) "*New Media Theory*." Encyclopedia of Communication Theory. Ed. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE, 685-89. SAGE.
8) Hymes, D. H. (1972). *On Communicative Competence*. In Pride, J. B., & J. Holmes (Eds.). Sociolinguistics. Harmondsworth: Penguin.

9) Jo Amy Rollo, (2021), *what is Context in Communication* https://study.com/academy/lesson/the-importance-of-context-in communication.html. Accessed on Tuesday, 25th October, 2022.

10) Justin Beach. (2018) https://classroom.synonym.com/types-of-communication-contexts-12083248.html. Accessed on Tuesday 25th, October, 2022.

11) Martin L, Jon D, Seth G, Jain G, Kieran K, (2009), New Media: A Critical Introduction, 2nd Edition, Routledge, Canada,

12) N. Negroponte (1996). Being Digital, Coronet Books; New edition.

13) Nagasvare, D., & Krishnasamy, O.M. (2011). New Media vs Traditional Media. Accessed on Thursday, 20th October, 2022 from http://www.aibd.org.my/node/1226.

14) Robert T. Craig, 2006, "Communication as a Practice," in Journal of Communication, Perspectives on Theory, p. DOI10.4135/9781483329055.n5

15) Terje Rasmussen, (1997), Social interaction and the new Media: The Construction of Communicative contexts, in Nordicom Review , ISSN 1403-1108,E-ISSN 2001-5119, Vol.18, no2.

16) Thomas Hauer, (2017) Technological Determinism and the New Media, International Journal of English, Literature and Social Science (IJELS) Vol-2, Issue-2, ISSN: 2456-7620

17) Widdowson, H. G. (1983). Learning Purpose and Language Use. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

.