
This book is directed towards the domain of international communication and development as practiced in North America as regards to Africa. Because its focus is a new research area, that of communication technology and development, and because the author himself comes from the targeted continent of this analysis, the book needs to be read by scholars and business-persons, as well as by neophytes. The author tackles tough questions such as the “African Mind” or the political and social image of Africa. The book also depicts the reality which exists in Africa.

The stated objective of the book is to “be a tutorial package for companies, governments, new-comers into the world of communication technologies and their role in assisting African countries toward the realization of their development objectives” (p. 5). In order to fulfill this task, the author examines the Africans’ culture, the consequences of communication technologies for Africa, and the conditions under which the transfer of technology can succeed.

The book contains seven chapters divided into two parts. The first part (including chapter 1) emphasizes the theoretical and academic aspects surrounding modern technologies. The second part examines the role which information technology plays in economic development and analyzes the realities and the consequences of the policies dealing with the export of communication technologies to Africa. In chapter 1, the author examines the broad issue concerning communication technology; in chapter 2, foreign telecommunication companies with their market dynamics and services are analyzed. The presentation of a case study forms the backbone of chapter 3. Chapters 4 and 5 describe the link between Africa and the New Information Supermarket along with the export of communication technology to Africa. Telecommunication policies in Africa are treated in chapter 6. Finally, in chapter 7, the question is raised of how information technology is used in grassroots development.

Overall, the reviewer has mixed feelings about this book. While the author is able to answer some of the questions that he raises, there is nevertheless the sense that the analysis is incomplete. A central pillar of the text is the belief in the revolutionary characteristics of communication technology or new telecommunication networks. Here, the author prefers to emphasize the positive consequences of communication technology from an economic perspective. In this sense, he supports the idea that a strong commitment to communication technology would help integrate Africa into the international market and would increase the earnings of its inhabitants. Similarly, the author is quite critical of the cultural consequences of such a transfer. He is also skeptical about the readiness of the African elite to enter into a new world order based on the exchange of information. In fact, he shows the impact of colonization on the African countries. He also points to a kind of hybrid mentality that has arisen in the sense that most Africans prefer to use European or occidental tools, books, or technologies instead of those created indigenously. But he is doubtful about whether the exchange of information can serve to integrate African societies given their strong belief in privacy. Moreover, he wonders who will benefit the most from the transfer of communication technology: the exporter, importer, or the user of this equipment.

In addition to indicating the economic and cultural consequences of technology transfer, the author offers a detailed description of the advantages that would be created with the use of the new information highway in developing countries. Thus, he describes health-care facilities, education databases, distance-learning programs, increased availability of information, and the facilitation of communication as some of the positive aspects of technology.
Apart from these key ideas, the book has many merits, including a revealing portrait of the telecommunication situation found in some African countries. Ngwainmbi also analyses the socioeconomic and political factors which exist in those states. Botswana, Chad, Guinea, Kenya, Lesotho, South Africa, and Zambia are analyzed in such a reflective manner, which helps the reader to be much more aware of the countries’ profiles.

In addition to his excellent depiction of the transfer of communication technology, Ngwainmbi’s methodological approach is one of the book’s strengths. For example, the author carefully defines most of the keywords that he deploys, including telecommunication, technology, communication, computer, satellite, Internet, Information society, and so forth. Also, since the book is a case study, in chapter 3 the author explains at length under which conditions his study was made: the background of the study and the respondents’ traits, as well as the study’s limitations and the results of another study that he conducted.

One of the key issues raised by Ngwainmbi’s analysis is whether Africa is ready for the importation and use of communication technology. One should consider that even if the author is skeptical about the cultural consequences of communication technology in Africa, he is really an advocate of the profit that would be generated with the transfer of communication technology to Africa.

A very innovative aspect of this book is its analysis of the local information technology that exists in Africa. Tools like the “talking drum,” flutes, bells, or “gong” are described in such a manner that this part helps to understand African traditional communication. This description incites the reader to think about new ways to improve the use of traditional technologies in a more modern manner. Even if the description of local technologies is presented in only four pages, there are suggestions about how a more documented research on some of the traditional African technologies might be accomplished. Furthermore, the book succeeds in its goal of presenting some of the obstacles linked to the export of such technologies (i.e., lack of trained personnel, limited electricity, expensive-ness, and climatic conditions).

Unfortunately, the book fails to present a complete picture of the “exportation of communication technology to developing countries.” In fact, the book is based solely on material from Africa, ignoring other developing countries in Asia or in Latin America. Moreover, some parts of the book seem irrelevant to the African context. For example, the author’s description of the history of the telephone is based only on the United States and on some European countries with no reference made to developing countries. Similarly inappropriate is the description of the nature of competition among U.S. long-distance telephone companies. A number of questions can be raised about these organizations. What are their contributions to this reflection on the transfer of communication technology to developing countries? What can be the link between the market size that exists in the U.S. and the one in Africa?

Moreover, the arguments presented by Ngwainmbi in relation to communication technology can be criticized. One of the disturbing parts of this book is the dogmatic way in which the author deals with some questions. For instance, he makes the following statements: “the material development of countries relies on the operation of computers” (p. 18), “certainly, the computer is an effective advanced technology and it has upgraded the quality of life where it is used constantly” (p. 19), “without laws there is chaos, without technology there is poverty” (p. 40), or “most Africans earn terminal degrees in foreign languages, hence their reasoning or psychic stimuli favour European culture, not that of Africa” (p. 99).

In terms of the book’s form, there are a good number of typographical mistakes. For example, the author writes machineryhuman, instead of machinery/human (p. 17), despiet for despite (p. 105), and Kiz Zerbo rather than Ki Zerbo (p. 73). He also occasionally repeats words like ravaging ravaging (p. 4). In several instances the last sentence of a
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These criticisms notwithstanding, the overall analysis of the African situation in relation to communication technology is of high quality. The author asserts that, given the pace of change, most of the information will be out of date as soon as the book is published. However, it will be of much more lasting value than that expected by the author. Moreover, the book’s depiction of technology transfer offers a new way of questioning the everlasting search for alternative solutions to developmental issues. And one should recognize that the book is written without taking sides with either occidental colonizers or the African elite and leaders. And even if some of his arguments are severe, Emmanuel Ngwanmbi cannot be blamed for having misconceptions or assumptions about Africa because he himself is an African from Cameroon. And surely the fact that the book has been written by an African and has addressed issues concerning this continent gives it a unique and important value.

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