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Human Society vs. Cyborg Society: As I See Them

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As a practicing librarian of 25 years standing from Nigeria, I have had the opportunity to experience at close range information activities and the application of information technology to information management on the continent. Coming to the U.S. therefore as a Fulbright scholar has given me the opportunity not only to see the other side of the picture but to also study the extent to which Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) have impacted on the information service delivery capacity of think tank libraries in the States.

It is interesting to find that while libraries in Africa are constrained by a paucity of information, their counterparts in the U.S. seem to suffer from an avalanche of information overload. This state of affairs is certainly not unconnected with the existence of enabling environment and the influence of ICTs as tools for information management. Among the think tank libraries, findings show that ICT has impacted more positively in the areas of OPAC, Circulation, Collection Development, resource sharing and reprography but weak in the areas of reference and alerting services. On the whole, the technologies have impacted positively on information service delivery to the extent that there exists a first order effect on the research initiatives and activities of readers, most of whom are research scholars, fellows, faculty and graduate students.

In terms of impression, the high profile nature of the influence of ICTs on American society is visible enough for all to see. Activities and operations of routine nature have been automated so much that the human thought systems and orientations have been affected in a number of ways that beat one's imagination. Consequently, new habits and culture have emerged in much the same way the old ones have been redefined. By way of illustration, it is a common feature to see someone apparently oblivious to her or his environment driving or walking alone down the street talking and grinning at an 'invisible spirit'. One quickly discovers that the person was simply making a cell phone call. This is something of a culture shock, given the chaotic nature of traffic, which calls for extra caution and safety for pedestrians and vehicle users. Furthermore, the individual without necessarily leaving the comfort of his or her home can either talk to or email someone, participate in ICT-mediated discussion group, monitor e-governance related activities, transact e-commerce deals, submit e-education papers, participate in e-journey to spirituality, e-dating the supposedly paragon of beauty who may as well be a robot or even e-marriages to mention a few of the e-possibilities. In all these activities, the notions of time, distance and spatial barriers are completely eliminated and herein lay the true meaning of the concept of global village. The allures of these e-possibilities are so overwhelming that the individual seems not to have any option than to get enmeshed in their raging hysteria. The question that seems to beg for an answer is what are the opportunity costs of this pervasive hysteria. Beneath this

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hysteria, though inadvertently, there is a gradual displacement of the American human society by an ever-emerging cyborg society, which is that plastic and impersonal world that is characterized by the prevalence of information technologies and societal over-reliance on them as platforms for human interactions.

In the human society, personal touch, humanness, warmth, discretion, judgment, and flexibility are cherished core values. Communication and particularly interpersonal conversation readily becomes the fluid that animates the society while facial expressions and body movements or signs all serve to enhance the quality and value of such communication. The unspoken messages or hidden words of the interactions are contained in those signs and it takes a discerning mind to decipher them. In the cyborg society, on the contrary, relationships are close yet distant, cold, emotionless and rigid. Interactions are defined by individual capacity to access technologies including the level of resourcefulness individuals can muster to exploit them. In most cases, decision-making in the cyborg world is more inclined towards mechanical and legalistic frameworks leaving parties to interactions little or no room for discretion. At this level, the dividing line between the human being and the robot becomes very thin or blurred.
Issues and interactions are seen and discussed only through the prism of technologies instead of the human angle just as relationships are depersonalized. This is not to denigrate the importance and relevance of information technologies in the contemporary society. Their invention is certainly one development that has given new meaning to human capacity and imagination.

In utilizing ICTs, there is always the risk for the society, just as is now happening in the U.S., to abdicate its responsibility by sacrificing without knowing, its core values in such a way that human thinking and behavior are conditioned by a combine interaction of hard and software. The consequence of such development is the emergence of a cold and soulless society. It is at this crossroad that the intervention of information professionals becomes very crucial more importantly on the need for them to stand in the vanguard of advocacy for moderation in the human-machine interface. Society needs to maintain a delicate balance between human and machine-mediated interactions. In particular, more research activities are required in order to understand the nature, dynamics and the social effects of ICTs on the human society. The human society cannot afford to surrender its core values to technologies rather technologies must be used to reinforce the values for the sustenance of the society.

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