

State of ICT4D

Address by Larry Hollon
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Years ago I was in a remote village in northern Senegal where there were no telephones or even electricity, disconnected from the rest of the world. Back home in the U.S., my infant son was in need of emergency surgery and my wife, Sharon, was trying desperately to get a message to me.

It took her an entire day to find someone to go to the village to locate me. It took another day for that person to reach me by car -- then yet another day for the two of us to navigate the poor roads to the nearest town with a post office that had phone service. Once there, I had to make an appointment to come back to use the phone the following day. By the time I was finally able to speak to her, my son was already recuperating.

That's what life was like in rural Africa before cell phones and satellites. Today, cell phone usage in Africa is commonplace, with more than 10.7 million mobile phones in Senegal alone. Mobile technologies are empowering those who were once isolated and transforming the ways they communicate.

Let's take a quick walk through history to see just how much communications have changed in our lifetime.

First - the telephone. In the past, landlines were required for access to phone communications, but, as I learned in Senegal, landlines didn't reach people everywhere.

The communication system in Africa was not designed to serve the people. It was designed to serve the colonial powers. Thus, landlines went from Africa to Paris, London, Brussels, Berlin and Rome, not from country to country, nor village to village.

In a recent Pew Research study across 24 emerging nations, a median of only 23% said they had a working landline telephone in their house, including “as few as 1% in Ghana and Kenya.” If left to landline technology, many of the world’s people would still be waiting for a way to make a call – even if that call were needed to save a life.

Today, cell phone towers can be found dotting the landscape of many rural parts of emerging nations, making mobile communication accessible to over 90% of the world. As far back as 2004, The Guardian reported: “Africa has become the first continent to have more mobile phone users than fixed-line subscribers.” The mobile phone is a game changer – bringing the world’s least heard voices into conversations they were previous excluded from.

Not only has telephone technology changed...so have computers.

One of the early computers, called ENIAC, cost over \$400,000 in 1950s dollars and took up an entire room with its various parts. Later, in 1956, IBM released the first hard drive which held 5MB of data that cost \$10,000 a megabyte – in today’s money, that \$87 thousand dollars a megabyte. It was “as big as two refrigerators.” Today, a flash drive can fit in one’s pocket, costs under \$50 and holds as much as 128 gigabytes – able to contain an entire library of information.

The first 1 GB hard drive I purchased sometime in the 1990s cost \$1,200. I felt I was in high cotton!

In our lifetime, computers have shifted from being operated only by trained professionals to being operated, and sometimes even taught, by children! And while the earliest computers required extensive cooling, some computers today are being built for high-heat climates where air conditioning is unavailable altogether. The tablet computer and e-readers continue to shift the tide of how information can be received. From filling a room, to filling one’s hand, the shift in computer technology is a game changer – providing access to knowledge previously held only by those of affluence and access.

Content

These technologies are game-changers because of the possibilities they hold. But it is the content they deliver that can be the true game-changer.

In the past, libraries have been traditional warehouses of knowledge – holding books that could be accessible only by coming into a particular fixed location. Content – whether it’s used to educate children in the classroom, or provide job skills training to adults – is easily available to anyone who has Internet access, and for those who do not, offline content – that which is available on servers such as this one – can create a library where there is none.

So, what is the church doing with this new age in which we live?

In education –

We are transforming the schools our faith ancestors built from the inside out, using content and the right technologies to stimulate the intellects of children and adults alike. I visited a solar-powered computer lab in Thomas, Haiti last year, to see children turn on computers for the first time. At the time, one of those children – a girl named Angeline – said she wanted to research everything.

She still comes back to the school’s computer lab, even though she’s matriculated onto another school level. And not only has Angeline’s life changed, her mother’s has too. She came to the computer lab and told program manager James Lazarre that she wanted “to see the thing her daughter could not stop talking about.”

Now, Angeline’s mother has access to knowledge that can impact the lives of those in her family and community. The United Methodist Church must continue to overcome the exclusion of girls and women in the field of ICT, and provide the quality of education that empowers each person to live into his or her full gifts – whether male or female.

In health messaging —

We are providing clear messages that save lives through channels that reach people where they are. The phrase was spoken first by The Rev. Gary Henderson of our UMCom executive staff during retreat in which we were considering the future of UMCom.

The Ebola crisis in West Africa demonstrates the great need that exists in low-resource areas for information – so, using a cloud database assembled from names submitted by bishops in Sierra Leone and Liberia, United Methodist Communications staff in Nashville are sending messages of health and of hope to church leaders in Liberia and Sierra Leone.

These leaders then share the messages with others, again through mobile phones, so that even where there are curfews, people can be reached with potentially lifesaving information. A local grassroots organization is relaying these messages again to their network in Liberia – weaving even more United Methodists into the higher-level picture of preparedness and response already happening amidst this crisis.

The health messages are derived from WHO and CDC and reflect accurate instructions for prevention. The pastoral messages are biblically based and encourage people to see Ebola not as punishment from God, nor the result of spells cast or evil spirits. Instead, they remind people that God is with them in this crisis, that we have resources through prayer and that we outside the area are encircling them with the prayers of a global community.

The Reverend Betty Kazadi Musau has reported that use of SMS is reducing the cases of cholera in the Democratic Republic of Congo. She has said that “where there is network coverage” people are receiving text messages that tell them to boil their water, and wash their hands. She said that after the last outbreak, there were even drugs left in the pharmacy – unnecessary because of the prevention that had taken place. Reverend Betty has said that this is “everybody’s job” – not just the job of nurses and doctors – but everyone must participate in the knowledge sharing that prevents illness, disease and death.

Finally, we are transferring knowledge to build jobs and better economies. The human spirit flourishes when people are empowered to seek their own destiny and to share in constructive ways with others. It flowers less when it is the subject of charity. Technologies can be used for income generation – whether a cyber café, computer classes for adult education, or even a solar charging program like this one in the Kindu region of Eastern DR Congo. Run by Rev. Antoine Otoka, this

\$200 solar charging station produces income – helping with staff salary support while providing valuable cell-phone charging services to keep a community connected.

From its beginning, those who led United Methodist Communications have seen communication as more than a support function, more than technical skills and expertise. They have seen communication as a tool for improving the common good; as a means to contribute to human wellbeing. Communication has strategic value. It is more than creative tactics to attract attention, it is an expression of the mission of the church to interpret and invite others to meaningful, purposeful spiritual understanding of life. It's a means to empowerment.

United Methodist Communications began implementing global communication strategy for the church in 2002. By 2004 General Conference mandated United Methodist Communications to lead in the use of “appropriate technology to connect the church globally.” This found expression in training, the introduction of digital technologies and software for a variety of uses, community radio stations, online learning centers, distance learning, the creation of global network capacity, site assessments for internet connectivity, implementing technology in classrooms, health monitoring and education, public awareness campaigns, repair of communication infrastructure damaged in natural disasters, and connecting organizations delivering service to people affected by natural and human caused disasters.

Where possibilities exist for better flow of information that can save lives, and where the need exists to provide voice to those who are otherwise left out of the conversation, the church must work together with partners to overcome barriers.

For much of my life as a journalist, after leaving secular employment and working with Church World Service, I sometimes felt as if I were chasing death around the world. I was reporting on humanitarian aid after disasters. This is important work, of course, but today the game is changing. By empowering people to speak in their own voices, we are able to release life around the world, and not merely chase death.

You see, this isn't only a matter of compassion – it's about justice. Whether you live in an urban or rural area – whether you are rich or poor, communication is a human right, given to us by God. Every voice wants the chance to be heard.

It's our task to ensure that right, and to use this gift for good. Living in the digital age means that equity is measured through access that eliminates the digital divide and ensures that every voice is heard.

I invite each of you to partner with us in reaching this goal. Throughout this conference, you will learn of many ways this can happen. May God grant us the wisdom to do this work well. Amen.