

Ghana Must Not Joke With ICT At All

By Mawutodzi K. Abissath

An African proverb alerts us that: “A person who travels sees more things than a person who climbs up a tall tree.” Another one says: “What Cat saw and closed its eyes, Dog did not see it before barking at the top of its voice.”

It appears most of us Ghanaians take delight in talking, talking without actually focusing on what we are mandated or supposed to do for the advancement of our beloved country. If one were to do a sort of SWOT analysis of Ghana as a nation, this “Talk-talk No Action” would be one of her critical weaknesses.

On Friday, August 1, 2008, the *Daily Graphic* wrote a very pathetic editorial headed: “THAT ALL MAY ACCESS WWW.COM” The opening paragraph of that editorial comment even started with the word PATHETIC in capital letters. It reads:

“A PATHETIC picture was painted of the country’s poor Internet use and standing on the African continent, with Ghana placing only ahead of Sierra Leone and Liberia.”

Come to think of it! Ghana, a country that we Ghanaians always claim to be the first in everything and anything in Africa, is sharing a position with Sierra Leone and Liberia in Information and Communication Technology (ICT) on the African Continent. Did something go wrong somewhere, or have we just not moved from the talking point to the action point yet?

Graphic editorial continued: “This sordid state of affairs should be cause for concern to everybody in the 21st century when Information and Communication Technology (ICT) rules the world”

The third paragraph opined: “Ghana’s hold on mobile phone patronage, undoubtedly, is high, as every nook and cranny of the country is somehow connected to some of the major mobile networks. Obviously, the high mobile phone patronage should translate into Internet use to make every hamlet of the country become part of the global village in order to share in its joy and benefits.”

The editorial quoted from 2007 World Bank report on the Internet use in the world, which said that, “only 401,300 Ghanaians, representing 1.8 percent of the country’s population of an estimated 22 million, have access to the Internet.”

“The report cited Ghana as one of the African countries with the lowest record of Internet patronage, coming behind South Africa, Nigeria, Morocco, Algeria, Zimbabwe, Kenya and Senegal.” The question is, how come Ghana, the most peaceful and stable country in Africa should be trailing behind these countries when Ghana has a comprehensive ICT Policy, known as ICT for Accelerated Development (ICT4AD) in place?

The editorial also quoted the President of the Ghana Association of Leasing Companies (GALCO), Mr Ernest Mintah, to have made reference to the World Bank report and called for the government's intervention to give more Ghanaians access to the Internet.

“According to him, the government should waive taxes and duties on computers and their accessories to allow for more importation of computers into the country in order to promote the use of computers and the Internet in schools and at workplaces.

“That Internet facilities and access to the personal computers enhance teaching and learning and increase the productivity of business can no longer be relegated to the background. But it is one thing having access to the personal computers and another having access to the Internet.”

This writer finds this point made by Graphic editorial very, very relevant. In countries like Singapore and others where ICT is leading them to become world superpower, they ensure that all pupils and students at various stages of the educational ladder, ranking from kindergarten to the tertiary levels, computer and Internet facilities are made available for their studies. In fact, in Singapore, most students do no longer go to school with load of bags hanging on their necks. Students do their home works online and email them to their teachers for marking online.

In Ghana, the situation is diametrically the opposite. The evidence is that on the letters page of the Daily Graphic of the same Friday, August 1, 2008 when this pathetic editorial was written, there was a letter to the editor (page9), complaining about lack of computers in schools in Ghana. That letter, written by one Emmanuel Toklo of Gbawe Cluster of Schools, was captioned: “ICT with no computer?”

The opening paragraph of that letter read: “The academic year that ushers in the new educational system would come to an end on July 31, 2008. The introduction of the new system comes with ICT as a subject of study with a comprehensive syllabus.”

Then the second paragraph lamented: “But after three clear terms have passed, the teaching of ICT remains a theoretical subject such as history and social studies. What is more worrying is that there are no textbooks for the students to use to acquire basic computer literacy and they do not have the opportunity for acquiring practical experience.”

One unfortunate observation this writer has made about Ghana is that some times, if not most times, Government's good intentions or laudable programmes and plans to help the citizenry is almost always frustrated and torpedoed by some individuals for their selfish end. If Government waives taxes and duties on computers and their accessories as recommended in the Graphic editorial under review, would importers of ICT equipment respond positively and reduce the prices of their goods for the benefit of the ordinary people, especially school pupils and students in this particular case?

Just take the recent fantastic gesture by government in abolishing or suspending taxes and duties on certain food items including rice, sugar, poultry, cooking oil, as well as petroleum products to alleviate economic hardships on the people of Ghana, being experienced globally. Some importers and retailers are taking undue advantage and have the pleasure to indulge in profiteering thereby making nonsense of Government's magnanimity. Is it fair?

Right now Government has embarked upon the establishment of Community Information Centres (CICs) in all the 230 constituencies to take ICT closer to the door steps of rural communities and deprived zones in the country. There is the urgent need to expedite action on extension and expansion of telecommunications infrastructure to all parts of the country for computer and Internet facilities to reach everybody whether rich or poor.

This explains why this writer wishes to humbly appeal to politicians to minimise talking and politicking and as stated in the Graphic editorial, "that Ghana Telecom should be supported to become viable so that it can extend its land line system to the rural areas."

I further agree with the last but one paragraph of Graphic editorial which pointed out that: "While we support Mr Minta's appeal to the government to waive taxes and duties on computers and their accessories to allow for more importation of computers into the country, we also believe that mobile phone service providers which go to the aid of rural areas should be considered for tax rebates."

As far back as 1997, a South African Minister for Communication predicted that the way ICT was ruling the world, "If you don't Dot Com, you would be Dot Dead!" And, as Graphic editorial headline puts it, for Ghana to advance in the 21st century, we must ensure "THAT ALL MAY ACCESS WWW.COM!"