

TOWARDS A CRITICAL INTERPRETIVE RESEARCH APPROACH FOR ICT/E-COMMERCE RESEARCH IN LDCs

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1. INTRODUCTION

Information Communication and Technology (ICT) and Electronic Commerce (E-Commerce) research in Least Developing Countries (LDC) has received insignificant attention and has been highly generalised as yielding the same results as the more advanced developing countries, for example, South Africa (Mbarika et al, 2005). This is despite the fact that each country's needs, problems and social discourse practices are different. The generalisation that for example E-Commerce models developed in the west can benefit Africa, and more specifically LDCs in Africa is erroneous because:

“Contextual differences, (both organizational and environmental), between these two socio-economic arenas have not supported the generalizability of developed countries' findings in other markets” (Molla and Licker, 2005)

This is not to say that there have been no studies focusing on LDCs. There have been a number of them but most are more on identifying problems than providing practical solutions that are context specific. If solutions are advised at all, most tend to work for a while and then become absolute. This is as a result of the techno-centric approach used by many researchers in the investigation of both ICTs and “internet” as artefacts or simple appliances, rather than multifaceted processes of internetworking made possible by a series of inter-linked computer networks, a compendium of hardware and software, data flows and most importantly, human agents (Pare, 2002). A techno-centric approach fails to result in significant returns in LDC and lessons learned from other developing regions show that sudden exposure to technology does not lead to meaningful usage or concomitant acquisition of knowledge (Musa et al, 2005).

IS research in LDCs is mostly restricted to the positivist research approach that supposes that the world conforms to fixed laws of causation and that any complexity can be tackled by reductionism. For example, Mbarika et al (2005) found that nearly half the articles in the most top journals (Information Systems Research, Journal of Management Information Systems, MIS Quarterly) adopted a positivist research approach. Although positivist research approach provides good insight on the object being investigated, they fail to give explicit recognition to the world of consciousness and humanly created meanings (Ngwenyama and Lee, 1997).

To this end, critics of positivism are now turning to an interpretive inquiry discourse which is viewed as a construction of social realities through its effects on actors' thoughts, interpretations, and actions (Heracleous and Barrett, 2001). In this regard, actors are viewed as active sense-makers, engaged participants, and creators of life in their settings and their identities emerge from discourse (Alvarez, 2002). However, there have been very few interpretive studies of ICT and E-Commerce in LDC; and as for the few, they do not go further to identify means of critiquing the status quo so as to understand existing pattern of power and authority. Understanding the issue of power and authority is critical in the Information Systems as ICT are increasingly mediating how power circulates, is exercised

and what it produces. Analysis of the discursive nature of ICT use can provide in depth insight into the role of power and politics and whether ICT is used argumentatively to reinforce the status quo or transformatively (Mingers and Willcocks, 2004). According to Mingers and Willcocks (2004) an *IT discourse demonstrates how power relations in an IT decision context influenced discussions regarding the acceptability of solutions*. By understanding power, one is in better position to provide means of emancipating the actors who need to change either their perception and attitudes towards ICT or the way they do things. Instead of identifying a list problems and challenges of E-Commerce in LDCs, this study investigates how E-Commerce is typically made sense of by specific stakeholders (SME, Donors and government) and how the sense making is produced, sustained and affected by structural frameworks and social practices of LDCs. We therefore intend to find answers to the following research questions:

- i. What are the concerns of SMEs with regard to E-Commerce?
- ii. What are the structural frameworks and practices of each stakeholder?
- iii. What is government's stance with regard to E-Commerce?
- iv. What does the country's E-Commerce Policy Framework state?
- v. How do these elements interact to produce and reproduce social structures that either promote or inhibit E-Commerce activities amongst SMEs?

2. TOWARDS A CRITICAL INTERPRETIVE RESEARCH APPROACH FOR ICT/E-COMMERCE RESEARCH IN LDC

2.1 Critical Interpretive Research

This study proposes the use of critical interpretive research methodologies in LDCs research. Studies that follow an interpretive and critical stance, concern themselves with trying to understand actor's meaning to identify possible distortions in the text. Such studies prefer meaning-oriented methods which differ from positivist researcher's preference of measurement-oriented methods (Pozzebon, 2004). Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) has been hailed as the best methodology and perspective for studying social phenomena as it provides a vehicle for thought, communication and action within its sphere of influence (Pozzebon, 2004). It is linked with Habermas's theoretical framework of theory of communicative action (TCA) which provides a theoretical framework for the critical analysis of both the structures for and reproduction of discourses of the public sphere. We therefore employ Habermas' theory of communication to CDA and follow Cukier et al (2008)'s research proposition to CDA:

- Defining the corpus of data to be analysed from various stakeholders (SMEs, donors and Government policies). This involves carefully identification of documents necessary to explicating the context as well as the documents of immediate communicative exchange.
- Content analysis on the individual articles as well as the aggregate compilation of the articles to uncover the use of the rhetorical strategy of repetition of specific opinions; and to identify empirical observations pertaining to the validity claims and frequency

of use of specific arguments. This is then followed up by a coding procedure to identify the speech dimensions that signify each validity claim,

- The texts are read to uncover implied or explicit validity claims. These claims are then tested to search for empirical observations that negate the validity of claims made in the texts.
- The findings are then explained based on the broader context of the textual analysis and explored deep structures it reflects.

CONCLUSION

This study recognises that in order to understand and change the practices of ICT and E-Commerce implementation and perception in LDCs we will have to not only identify causal relationships and regularities between objects but we also need to identify the structures at work that generate those relationships and events. We need to look beyond just at the object and go further into the historical context of that object as it is this historicity that informs our interpretations of the current situation. The study therefore proposes critical discourse perspective to not only allow the discovery of how specific conceptions, social practices and functions lead to various behaviour adoptions and implementation strategies; but also provides an edge for critiquing the forms of domination and distorted communication by showing how they are produced and reproduced. Currently, the author is implementing the proposed research approach to study ICT/E-Commerce challenges in Tanzania.

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