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The Political Culture of Mass Communication Research and the Role of African Communication Scholars

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Abstract

This article outlines some of the recurring issues in mass communication research. Starting with a discussion of the perennial problem of defining the field of mass communication research, the article reviews the administrative-critical debate or the 'ferment' in mass communication research, and puts forward new concepts which seem to suggest new directions in the field. It finally suggests ways in which African communication scholars might contribute to the on-going debates in the field.

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Culture, politique et recherche en communication de masse: le rôle des chercheurs africains

Résumé

Cet article décrit un certain nombre de problèmes auxquels se trouve confronté de manière cyclique la recherche dans le domaine des communications de masse. L'auteur traite en premier lieu de l'éternelle question de la définition du champ des communications de masse, puis examine le débat sur l'opposition entre recherche "administrative" et recherche "critique"; il avance ensuite quelques nouveaux concepts qui semblent indiquer de nouvelles directions dans le domaine. En conclusion, l'article fait des suggestions sur la manière dont les chercheurs africains pourraient contribuer aux débats actuels sur la question.

Introduction

In the last fifteen years, the persistent debates of self-scrutiny in mass communication research have failed to answer many questions that are germane to the field of communication. These questions include: (1) What is the status of mass communication as a scientific research field? (2) How do we define the parameters of mass communication research? (3) What are appropriate methods of inquiry in the study of communication problems?

That these questions continue to dominate much of our discussions suggests that we have not really answered them to everyone's satisfaction. One of the outcomes of attempts to address these long-standing issues in mass communication research has been a dichotomization of the field. Although not all communication scholars acknowledge such a division, there is plenty of evidence that two dominant and seemingly opposed perspective research groups have emerged in the field of communications administrative scholars on the one hand, and critical scholars on the other. The division is based on the researchers' points of view as well as on their methodological orientations.

It is clear from the basic issues that polarize these two groups that social science research, including the questions asked and the methodologies employed, is not independent of the cultural values of those engaged in the enterprise. This means that what Kuhn (1970) called the structure of scientific revolutions has also a political dimension when applied to paradigmatic changes in mass communication and the other social sciences. As appears to be the case with world politics and the ideologies that drive it, Africans seem to have fallen into and accepted the simple role of taking sides with one dominant research view or the other.

Defining the Field

Despite the increasing number of scholars who have identified themselves as communication researchers, they are occasionally reminded that the field of communication has not been clearly defined by its practitioners. To Foley (1978), it is paradoxical that so many people have chosen to identify their research with a field that is not clearly defined. He, therefore, suggests certain criteria generally associated with scientific research fields that might help in culling a definition for the field of communication: (1) Self-identification, where a group of people identify themselves as researchers in the field; (2) A well-defined set of problems which are considered to be germane to the field; and (3) A set of methodologies which are generally agreed upon to be appropriate for studying these problems. Foley argues that, although many scholars are now identified with the field, and that the

range of problems studied and methodologies used to study these problems have grown rapidly, there is no indication that the field of mass communication research is becoming well defined (Foley 1987).

Berger (1982) further demonstrates how methodologically-rich the field of mass communication research has become. He lists, as appropriate, modes of inquiry for mass communication research methods such as semiological analysis, Marxist analysis, psychoanalytic criticism, and sociological analysis. While semiological analysis is concerned with how meaning is generated in film and television programmes, Marxist analysis is considered a powerful tool that suggests ways to the media analyst for analysing society and its institutions (Berger 1982: 44). He defines the psychoanalytical approach to the study of mass communication as a therapeutic technique which has also been applied to such areas as politics, anthropology, and literary criticism, and calls sociological analysis a technique that deals with sociological concepts that are pertinent to the analysis of the media. These concepts include **DEVIANCE**: behavioral patterns that are different from typical or conventional ones; **ELITES**: people at the top of the social pyramid; **ETHNICITY**: groups existing in society that have certain cultural traits and traditions that distinguish them; **LIFESTYLE**: a person's taste in fashion, cars, entertainment, etc.; **SOCIALIZATION**: the process by which people are taught the rules, roles, and values of their society (Berger 1982: 93-96). It is the relationship between the media and these sociological concepts that concern those who study the sociology of mass communication. Stempel and Westley (1981) have also added the methods of history and legal research to the catalogue of approaches in the study of communication problems.

Despite the apparent lack of definition of the field, mass communication researchers know who they are and what their interests are. That scholars from other disciplines also study communication problems should not blur this fact but must be seen as an indication that the field of communication is indeed a crossroads of academic enterprise which has attracted the attention of mathematicians as well as historians. Wilbur Schramm once observed that 'one can hardly make theory or design research in any field of human behaviour without making assumptions about human communication (1963: 1).' It is no wonder then that political scientists, historians, anthropologists and lawyers continue to show interest in communication, giving the field its multidisciplinary outlook. Nonetheless, it is partly this multidisciplinary nature of communication that makes the task of defining the field so difficult, as each discipline attempts to do so from its own perspective. Consequently, 'the variety of definitions of the field complicates the task of making a diagnosis of the field stick, because there are many fields, each with its own worries' (Peters 1986: 528).

Peters (1986) asserts that communication scholars appear to have

adopted a 'let sleeping dogs lie' attitude toward defining their field. Referring to 'ferment in the field' debates, he states that no stone remains unturned in these arguments save the existence of the field itself 'which seems to enjoy a curious immunity to critical reflection. Both empirical and critical sides of the debates assume the existence of a field of communication research (Peters 1986: 529).' He further states that 'like all other debates so far, this one fails to provide any coherent arguments for communications existence as a self-supporting field. Such arguments simply have never been given. Several questions remained unanswered, and largely unasked. . . . What does communication purport to study? What is the place of a field of communication in university structures? What is the status of communication research as a profession? And, most important, what are the intellectual consequences of the lack of good reasons for the field's existence' (p. 529).

Peters has taken the argument to an extent that has caused some scholars to remark that such discussions are no longer even beneficial for the intellectual growth of the field. As important as the questions he has raised might be, they evoke similar problems of definition facing many other fields of academic enterprise such as political science. May we deny the existence of this field because of the variety of definitions its practitioners, past and present, have given of it. Certainly not. That college-bound students choose communication or one of its sub-areas from the myriad of majors offered at colleges and universities suggests the existence of the field that is separate and distinct from other fields. How else may one differentiate the study of communication from history or from political science.

If one accepts Foley's (1978) criterion of self-identification, then there is no question about the fact that there is a large number of scholars who identify themselves as researchers in the field of communication. What seems to generate the controversy over the definition of the field stems partly from the fact that those who consider themselves as mass communication researchers, because of their variant backgrounds and methodological orientations, do not quite agree upon what constitutes appropriate modes of inquiry for studying communication problems. Herein lies the crux of the raging debate that has polarized the field into administrative and critical researchers. The debate, at times, seems to be merely intuperative and unproductive; it often ignores the basic criterion of good research — the quality of evidence provided. What kind of dynamics or ferment does this debate indicate?

The Ferment

From the debates over methodological approaches in mass communication, one can identify certain traits or schools of thought by which research

in the field might be classified. These may include the nature of the research, the methodological approach, and the orientation of the researcher. The critical-administrative dichotomy has sometimes created a tense atmosphere among communication scholars although some see it merely as a continuation of the self-scrutiny characteristic of the field since the early effects studies of mass communication. However, some scholars have taken extreme positions and formulated new conceptions to describe the different perspectives on methodology that currently prevail in the field of mass communication research. For instance, what Lazarsfeld (1941) once called 'administrative research' as opposed to 'critical research', and Mills (1963) called 'molecular research' as opposed to 'macroscopic research', is for Hamelink (1980) 'repressive science' as opposed to 'liberating science'.

The following viewpoints are important to understanding this critical-administrative dichotomy in mass communication research. The critical scholars 'deal with total social structures in a comparative way; their scope is that of the world historian; they attempt to generalize types of historical phenomena and, in a systematic way, to connect the various institutional spheres of society, and then relate them to prevailing types of men and women' (Mills 1963: 554). On the other hand, administrative research tends to be 'characterized by its usually small-scale problems and by its generally statistical models of verification' (Mills 1963: 554).

Rogers (1982: 125) describes the two orientations thus:

The empirical (administrative) school of communication research is commonly characterized by quantitative empiricism. . . . In the past it has generally emphasized the direct effects of communication, while paying less attention to the broader context in which communication is embedded. In contrast, the essence of the critical school is its philosophical emphasis and its focus on the broader social structural context of communication. . . . and a central concern with the issue of who controls a communication system. Critical scholars believe that a theory of communication is impossible without a theory of society, so their scope of analysis is much wider than that of empirical scholars.

It can be argued that there is (or should be) little or no difference between administrative and critical research. A competent communication scholar is likely to be viewed as one who is able to draw from either research tradition depending upon his research situation. Therefore, some scholars dislike being classified either as administrative or critical, as such designation may have a somewhat delimiting effect on their outlook and capability as scholars in the field. The increasing acceptance of triangulation, the use of more than one method in the study of communication problems, underscores this point. There is, for example, evidence of the use of empirical data or methodology by critical scholars for critical investigation of communication problems and vice versa.

Content analysis, a method of observation which provides a way of quantifying the content of communication in order to make inferences about the communicator, is generally considered to be an administrative methodology. Nevertheless, its usefulness has not escaped the attention of critical scholars. For example, Rogers (1982) cites the classic study by Dorfman and Mattelart, *'How to Read Donald Duck'*, as an instance in which critical scholars used an administrative tool in a critical investigation.

Dorfman and Mattelart 'content-analyzed Walt Disney's *Donald Duck* comic strip as it was published in Latin American newspapers to show that it contained subtle themes of U.S. imperialism toward developing nations' (Rogers 1982: 130). This shows that critical scholars do conduct content analysis in order to make inferences about 'message makers' and, in the case of Dorfman and Mattelart, 'to provide evidence of the imperialistic motivations of Walt Disney and his staff' (Rogers 1982: 130).

Both camps in this debate seem to be less cognizant of the fact that the primary criterion of good research should lie in the strength of the evidence presented as justification for conclusions drawn from that research. But, evidently, as one group insists on such scientific requirements as quantification and replicability of research data, the other, deeply embedded in the historical method, eschews these requirements. The result has been a 'ferment' in the field of communication research. The intense activity represented by a ferment is expected, naturally, to result in a new alignment of forces and/or on production of new phenomena.

New Directions in Mass Communication Research

Attempts to define the field of mass communication research have always provoked a lively debate among communication scholars. For a long time, American scholars have viewed mass communication research as one that is concerned with the effectiveness of communication (Schramm 1963: 14). Emery *et al.* (1973) defined mass communication research simply as one that deals with the communication behaviour of human beings, usually in current situations requiring the gathering of quantitative information that includes the study of the communicators and the content of their messages; the subject matter of mass communication research is the people who make up the audiences of the different media (Emery 1973: 382).

Recent conceptions of mass communication research, however, have now broadened the scope of the field to include, for instance, perceptions of the media of communication as instruments of power that some men or nations use to exploit, oppress, or dominate others. This notion of communication, as distinct from the all-powerful paradigm in media effects studies, is concerned with issues such as the implications of the

persistent negative portrayals of certain nations for the international as well as the national images of these nations; or, how, because of the inequitable distribution of communication technology, some nations wield unfair advantages in trade, cultural, and military affairs. It is also from this notion of communication that has arisen the concept of media imperialism which describes 'the process by which modern communication media have operated to create, maintain and expand systems of domination and dependence on a world scale (Fejes 1982: 345). The concerns of the Third World, expressed in the form of a demand for a New World Information Order (NWIO) also calls the attention of communication researchers to begin to investigate the nature and flow of information within and across national borders, and the cultural implications for Third World countries of the deluge of Western cultural materials into these countries via the Western media. A related concept that has emerged to describe this situation is one known as 'cultural imperialism'. These concerns and concepts have provoked further Eurocentric bias as Western scholars hasten to dismiss them as vague (Fejes 1983: 345) and irrelevant because they are not considered to be amenable to empirical research.

Further, the nearly 300 articles in the two volumes by Mattelart and Siegelau (1979 and 1983) present a new and alternative agenda for mass communication research which address issues such as how exploited people develop their own communication practices in the struggle against exploitation, and the socio-economic and cultural factors that condition communication.

Whereas in the past what has been described as administrative research dominated, and still dominates, the literature in communication, many Third World communication scholars are beginning to see the merits of the critical research approach. For example, Ugboajah (1985: 270), while suggesting a 'de-emphasis on communication and national development approaches of the Wilbur Schramm, Daniel Lerner, and Everett Rogers types', has recommended the use of critical research as one which would be germane to the West African context. It is said that 'neither the empirical (administrative) nor the critical school is dominant in Latin America today, and it is possible that a kind of hybrid school may eventually develop, in which Latin American communication scholars draw upon the elements from both schools that are appropriate for the contemporary communication problems of Latin American societies' (Rogers 1982: 135).

There is an important lesson in this for African communication scholars. Whatever eventually emerges in Africa would be more than likely a hybrid of the two research traditions, with a tendency toward more critical research. For one thing, the tenets of critical research are couched upon principles that challenge the status quo and call for a reconsideration

of the prevailing social, economic, and political relations within and among nations. Secondly, critical scholars call to question the role of the mass media in the imposition of the dominant values on the rest of society. These are matters that strike responsive chords in the hearts and minds of contemporary Africans. It is partly for these reasons that some scholars call critical research a 'liberating science'.

While these various approaches may suggest new directions in mass communication research, they do not, however, yield to the compromise of a single and encompassing definition of what it is that mass communication researchers purport to study. And so one might say that they further make that task more difficult.

The Challenge to African Communication Scholars

What contributions have African communication scholars made to the perennial questions of definition of mass communication research or to the debates over what constitute appropriate problems or appropriate modes of inquiry for studying communication problems? As a group, the contributions by African scholars in these debates have generally been minimal. Although some creative ideas are beginning to emerge from the African group, as we shall see later, these ideas have not yet been systematized and projected into the dominant discussions that have guided the directions of the field. In fact, African communication research has been characterized as 'epidic, casual, serendipitous and non-systematic. Most tragically, these efforts are not informed by any identifiable philosophies, be they indigenous or foreign' (Okigbo 1987: 27).

The late 1950s and the 1960s represent a watershed in the history of Africa, a period that signalled not only the end of an era, but also the beginning of a new one. This new era ushered in a crisis of sorts in which African aspirations have been aimed at the total elimination of the forces of exploitation and oppression that have for so long worked against the interests of the continent. But despite political independence, colonialism has simply refused to die and has now taken on a new mask, what some call neo-colonialism. And despite the emergence of so-called neo-political and neo-economic philosophies and ideologies, Africa still remains in the firm grip of the tentacles of external forces. But even if one concedes the dethronement or demise of the 'old order', the 'new order' is simply not being elevated in its place. In mass communication, as in politics, economics, or cultural affairs, African scholars and those sympathetic to African aspirations have vehemently berated the old and dominant paradigms that have guided the study of communication problems yet they have not quite succeeded in constructing new models to replace them. Lerner's (1958) and Schramm's (1963) studies provoked much of the

debates in the 1960s and 1970s in mass communication research over the role of communication in national development. Upon publication, Schramm's book instantly became a handbook for many African development planners who uncritically embraced its tenets in their development policy considerations. Hence, for many African nations, transistor radios and newspapers were viewed during the 1960s not only as important indices, but sometimes as if they were the primary indicators of development, as Schramm and others had espoused. By the 1970s, however, it became evident that although the works of Schramm and Lerner on development communication demonstrated superb scholarship with 'paramount academic qualifications', such works had little social relevance to the African context (Ugboajah 1985: 279). Meanwhile, Everett Rogers (1978), in an intellectual about face, described the demise of the old models of communication and development and the purported emergence of a new paradigm. Much of the literature on development communication by African scholars in this period constitutes what may be called reactive scholarship, in which the concerns expressed were mainly in reaction to what Schramm, Lerner, Rogers, and others had said about Third World development communication problems. Still, new models of communication and development that were inherently African in perspective as well as in orientation were (and still are) either hard to find or non-existent in the literature.

Hence, the debate over the critical-administrative approaches to mass communication research should be seen as an opportunity through which African communication scholars can influence the dominant views (or paradigms) that have guided the field of communication. Both the administrative and critical schools of thought should be seen merely as two different sides of the same coin, i.e. the Eurocentric philosophy and ideology. Drawing from the unique African cultural and historical experience, the African contribution should be geared toward generating either a hybrid approach that takes into account the operations of both the modern and traditional modes of communication, or an altogether authentic African perspective of the study of communication problems.

This elephantine task undoubtedly falls on the shoulders of the African intellectual in communication. By an intellectual in this context, we mean one who constantly apprises himself of aspects of his environment in order to impart his experience to his fellow men for the purpose of increasing awareness (knowledge) of that environment. From the African perspective, therefore, we may identify two kinds of intellectuals: (1) traditional intellectuals, those without formal (college or university) education but who have acquired certain skills over time that enable them to collect, store, retrieve, and analyse certain kinds of information about

their environment. In this context, the African griot would be considered to be a traditional intellectual; (2) the modern intellectual who has acquired formal education that enables him to play the kind of roles that the traditional intellectuals play but in a formal way through the modern channels of communication. Edward Shills (1972) states that:

There is in every society a minority of persons who, more than the ordinary run of their fellow men, are inquiring, and desirous of being in frequent communication with symbols which are more general than the immediate concrete situations of everyday life and remote in their reference in both time and space. In this minority, there is a need to externalize this quest in oral and written discourse, in poetic or plastic expressions, in historical reminiscence or writing, in ritual performance and acts of worship. This interior need to penetrate beyond the screen of immediate concrete experience marks the existence of the intellectuals in every society (p. 3).

We might, therefore, consider the African musician, the African artist, the African medicine man, the story teller, the town crier and, perhaps, even the African witch doctor as intellectuals who could contribute to our understanding of African communication variables. It can be argued that these intellectuals are constantly engaged in distinct forms of communication that are peculiar to the African social and cultural milieu.

For the traditional intellectual, the primary modes of observation include authority or tenacity, where the views of authority or arguments which our instincts lead us to consider as reasonable may be used to establish the validity of our propositions. For the modern intellectual, it is science, or the social scientific methods. Considering the inherent threats to validity in both science and authority as methods of knowing, how might African scholars reconcile these two modes in their attempts to generate a hybrid approach to the study of communication?

In using survey research and interview, for example, Obeng-Quaidoo (1986) suggests that researchers begin to experiment with interviewing family groups instead of individuals. The rationale is that in the African context, 'children and young adults are not supposed to talk when older people are talking . . . (and) due to the male dominance in most African societies, wives at times want their husbands to answer all questions, even those relating to contraception and family planning (p. 95).' Further, it has been suggested that African scholars undertake studies involving the possible integration of folk media with modern mass media, or the effectiveness of one compared with the other (Ugboajah 1985: 326).

Another useful approach to the study of African modes of communication is to view communication as a form of culture, for it is culture that determines how members of a society communicate with each other and what meanings they assign to various symbols. The cultural basis for the study of communication draws our attention to, *inter alia*, two

levels of analysis of the variables and constructs of mass communication research, namely, the universal and contextual levels. In this respect, we may study the agenda-setting function of the mass media, the ability of the media to determine the important issues of the day, as a universal construct from society to society and wherever forms of the modern media of mass communication are found. We may also study the same construct at the contextual level in a traditional African/rural environment where the modern media might be non-existent. In this case we may ask: to what extent do folklore and traditional media lend salience to certain issues? The context in this case will be defined on the basis of the cultural factors that guide the channels of African communication — folklore, dance, rituals, arts, etc., and the operations of African traditional media. Additionally, this cultural perspective may help resolve the contending issue of Eurocentric bias — the tendency by Westerners or Western-trained scholars to interpret non-Western phenomena from Western perspectives.

Asante (1980: 45) suggests that Africans adopt a posture of 'intellectual vigilance' toward scholarship that ignores the origin of civilization in the highlands of East Africa (1980: 45); that they become 're-creative' intellectuals by taking the visions of our ancestors to new heights (p 50). This evidently would require that the African intellectual goes all the way back into time and re-examines the historical facts about Africa's contribution to world civilization. That Africans were in the vanguard of scientific development, pioneers in medicine, writing and architecture has been widely documented by many African historians (DuBois 1965, Williams 1976, James 1976). One has to study that history to discover the African heritage.

As a way of determining the true African heritage, Chancellor Williams (1976: 19) approached this problem by segregating traditional African institutions from those influenced by Islamic Asia and Christian Europe. 'In this way, and in no other, we can determine what our heritage really is and, instead of just talking about 'identity', we shall know at last what purely African body of principles, value systems or philosophy of life — slowly evolved by our forefathers over countless ages — from which we can develop an African ideology to guide us onward. In other words, there can be no real identity with our heritage until we know what our heritage really is. It is all hidden in our history, but we are ignorant of that history.

Because of such ignorance, African intellectuals sometimes embrace the idea that mass communication was introduced in Africa by Europeans. That is not so. Our history is replete with many creative uses of the drum as a form of mass communication before the advent of the modern media. Consider, for instance, the amazing feat of ingenuity by Queen Nzinga, a

17th century Angolan ruler of valor who inspired her people to continue the war of resistance against the Portuguese. Dethroned and exiled by the Portuguese, Queen Nzinga mobilized an army and orchestrated many guerilla attacks against the Portuguese, eventually winning the war and regaining her crown. Meanwhile, news of her war efforts was being simultaneously spread among her people through coded messages of the drum (Williams 1976: 19).

Makinde (1986) makes a strong argument for the modern use of the town crier in an African context, noting that 'town criers, like the village minstrel, the drums, the gongs, and various musical devices, have been used since time immemorial as veritable means of disseminating information in rural communities'.

It is not unreasonable, therefore, to suggest that not only did the drum as a channel of mass communication exist in Africa before the advent of the modern media, but that genuine research and development in African communication must take serious interest in the drum and other modes of African communication from both historical and contemporary perspectives.

It is important to remember that conventional (Western) definition of mass communication, with its stipulation of an institutionalized source, and newspapers and the electronic media (radio and television) as channels, precludes the purely African modes of communication. For this reason, the parameters of African mass communication research do not necessarily have to conform to such obviously delimiting, and culturally influenced (Eurocentric) definition. Ideally, African mass communication research efforts should be geared toward syncretization, as exemplified, for example, in Makinde's (1986) conceptualization of the town crier for rural communication:

The modern town crier, as is being proposed for use in rural communication, would retain some of the trappings of his olden counterparts; he would be well known to the community in which he operates; he would be able to speak in the language in which his audience is versed; he would understand the culture and traditions of his audience, and would, possibly, be a resident of the area in which he operates. He would as well imbibe the attributes of the modern communicator: fairly educated, knowledgeable of government policies, programmes, objectives, and activities and armed with government publications and a loudspeaker. He would be able to accommodate questions and measure people's reaction for eventual feedback to government. The modern day town crier would move about on four wheels which enables him to cover long distances within a short time.

Several propositions have been made for a formulation of a philosophical foundation for African communication research. For example, Asante's Afrocentricity, which advocates that the African heritage become the primary frame of reference for the African in his day-

to-day existence, could be viewed as a philosophical treatise that can provide guidance for African communication research. For, 'Afrocentricity seeks to modify the traditional where necessary to conform to the demands of modern society rather than to abandon those systems that have lasted through the centuries' (1980: 46). Okigbo (1987) argues for a philosophy of communication derived from the African tradition that could give meaning and direction to African communication research. Such philosophy, 'if fully articulated, developed and nurtured, will contribute immensely in improving our thinking and activities concerning our important daily problems' (p. 21).

Similarly, Blake (1979) argues for the 'pedagogical bases for communication studies in Africa', that take into account 'the philosophical influences that guide our structure and practice of teaching', particularly in regard to the practical aspects of structure/content and instruction in African institutions of higher learning (p. 219).

Although the parameters of some of these propositions are not so well defined as yet, they are interesting and important ideas that should be a part of the African communication research agenda.

Conclusion

In the search for new paradigms of communication, the African communication group must be guided by the socio-historical and cultural factors that condition the production of knowledge. In this way, the phenomenal colonial experience, the slave trade, the African contribution to world civilization, and the objective realities of the day-to-day existence of African people would provide expanding intellectual vistas from which to draw in order to make sense of our immediate environment and the world around us.

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