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Towards a Diachronic-Synchronic View of Future Communication Policies in Africa

by Des Wilson*

Abstract

This article argues that communication is the manifestation of the cultural norms of society and that, through its presentations, the culture of a people is reinforced, new patterns are created within it and, sometimes, modifications are made to its existing norms. It examines different aspects of the cultural content of communication and proposes the need to adopt a view of communication which recognizes the systems and processes of the past along with on-going ones with the view to adopting a more perceptive policy for the continent. It concludes that a dualist approach, the diachronic-synchronic, is necessary now in order to overcome the problems examined.

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Pour une analyse synchronique- diachronique des politiques de communication en Afrique

Résumé

Cet article soutient que la communication est la manifestation des normes culturelles d'une société et que par ses présentations, la culture d'un peuple se trouve renforcée, permettant ainsi l'émergence de nouveaux modèles en son sein et parfois des modifications de ces mêmes normes.

L'auteur analyse les différents aspects du contenu culturel de la communication et avance qu'il est nécessaire d'adopter une compréhension des communications qui reconnaisse les systèmes et les processus du passé et ceux du présent en vue d'arriver à une politique plus ouverte pour le continent. Il conclut qu'une approche dualiste diachronique-synchronique est nécessaire pour résoudre les problèmes ainsi soulevés.

Introduction

The need for a truly democratic and virile communication policy for Africa has been canvassed for some time (Ugboajah 1985, 1979, 1972; Nwuneli 1983; Wilson 1987a, 1987b, 1982; Blake 1983). Although such views have not been expressed in exactly the same way, they all advocate new communication policies and options which should reflect a new order. Communication is big business. Africa cannot, therefore, continue to allow itself to be exploited by nations which now have advantages in some aspects of communication.

The reasons for Africa remaining seemingly helpless in the communications sector for so long are clear. Her leaders equate a longing for technological catching up with the West, which they euphemistically refer to as technology transfer, as being embodied in the acquisition of media hardware. To the chagrin of concerned Africans, this expectation has not been met. Moreover it is, to say the least, unrealistic.

There is, therefore, a need to re-examine our indigenous systems which we do not fully understand and then try to isolate those aspects of the traditional and the new which should be incorporated under a new communication and information order. Such an examination should be carried out over time in order not to miss out on the essential aspects of our culture which must necessarily form the bedrock of the new communication strategy. This is a result of a diachronic-synchronic study which should lead to more effective communication systems for Africa.

A Diachronic-Synchronic View of Communication

It is proposed in this paper that a historical perspective of Africa's communication system should be adopted to go hand-in-hand with those approaches which have been used over time. This diachronic-synchronic view of communication will enable us to tackle our communication problems more realistically. This view sees communication as a cultural transaction and transmission taking place over time. The technology for transmission of messages undergoes changes and is shaped and sharpened through the ages. Old processes are synchronized with modern technology as new ones replace some of the functions of the old ones. This process of synchronization of the old with the new shows the past as acting as a guide to the future. With this, there is no cultural or age gap created by jumping from one form to the other without being part of the socialization process.

Thus, a diachronic-synchronic view of communication places in focus a traditional modern communication model which Wilson (1987a) suggests for developing societies. This view encourages the study, classification,

and examination of traditional communication theories and practices as well as their changes over time. The traditional modes become the roots of modern communication while the present ones act as appendages or outgrowths of the past. This calls for a closure of the cultural gap between traditional and modern societies. In practical terms, this means the marrying of traditional communication practices with modern practices in appropriate proportions, an establishment of an interface between the two in an equal linkage without one suffering loss of status. This approach should be gradualist, taking into account the rate of growth of society.

The traditional communication processes have been ignored for too long for what often appears to be more efficient but ineffective, faster but limited, heterogeneous but alienating, time-saving but expensive modern processes which are after all, culturally threatening to the process of democratization and legitimization. The new processes should aim at returning information dissemination processes back to the people because they belong to the people. Communication as an industry has now become an elite enterprise richly touted in expensive boxes (television and radio), and in costly news sheets (newspapers and magazines). The processes of democratization have been reversed for most societies since those for whom information is meant never gain access to it. Even when they do, they treat it with distrust because the political organization which controls the system is alien to them and the leadership is often seen as an off-shoot of the dehumanizing colonial experience. Political leadership is often established through brazen fraud and thus forfeits the legitimacy which it demands but which it lacks. It is, therefore, inevitable that in order to return Africa to its period of innocence the present policies must be reversed to pave the way for a truly democratic and legitimate information system hinged on a traditional-modern communication policy.

Communication as Culture

Communication is a word which is eclectic in its forms and is varied in meaning. It has, therefore, been visualized as anything that contributes a meaning of its own, or any activity which is carried out by man within his cultural milieu. Fiske (1982: 1) sees it as a multifaceted area of study which includes interpersonal talk, television, spreading information, the hair style, literary criticism, and many others. It is from such a broad spectrum of views that communication as a term has acquired its present image of being a melange of sociological and language-related activities. It is this that probably led Watzlawick *et al.* (1976) to say that one cannot not communicate. Whether in sleep or in consciousness, man is known to communicate in so many ways. It is inconceivable to imagine a situation of

sensory deprivation resulting from total blackout of a living person from events around him. A person communicates as long as there is breath left in him. Thus, every culture has its varying forms and symbolisms of communication. Communication is culture since it is a manifestation of the cultural norms of society. Through the language of presentation to the very symbols, themes, channels and media used, the culture of a specific group is reinforced; a new awareness is created and, sometimes, modifications are made to existing norms. This monopolistic pattern of cultural generation in more technologically advanced cultures has led to cultural or media imperialism in the Third World. The situation of technologically-disadvantaged nations has been that in which communication, backed by powerful technology, has led to their economic and political capitulation.

So, as communication reinforces the cultural norms, creates a new awareness or modifies existing patterns of behaviour, it does so through a certain role-set created for it by the very culture it reflects. First, it educates individuals within the culture. Thus, it operates as a regeneration system forged to maintain the commonly-shared norms of the people. Second, it provides entertainment and pleasure, thus acting as a balm to the loins of the weary or tired. Third, it informs the society about events through the watchful eyes of its agents. It thus trains its search-lights on every aspect of society from the king to the thing. Fourth, in Western capitalist society, it exists and operates to make profit in order to be able to sustain the system. This role distinguishes the press system of the socialist countries from those of the capitalist countries. With these we are confronted with the inevitability of viewing communication as culture. It is reasonable to agree with Fiske (1982: 2) that 'the study of communication involves the study of the culture with which it is integrated'.

The Cultural Content of Communication

Communication theory has broadly borrowed from the fields of anthropology, psychology, history, sociology, linguistics, music, religion, mythology and the physical sciences. Being derived from such a motley of disciplines invests the field of communication with the identity of a culturally-derived field, i.e. its roots firmly set or fixed in the culture of the people. It is also seen as a multidisciplinary field which strongly reflects the music, arts (sculptures), architecture, religion, ideology, politics, social norms, science and technology of the society. It is a field which has status because it derives its strength from a variety of sources. The communication industry which sustains the business of communication is as varied and far-flung as its different antecedents. The industry comprises

the electronic gadgetry, wood and paper, machinery, chemicals, educational institutions, computers and a whole complex of trades and professionals. It is no wonder then that the cultural content of communication is like a mirror of human activities.

The over-riding communication message reflects the ideology and politics of the dominant powers. Through communication the long-dead events of history become an unending dialogue with the past. The ideology and politics of the past become the beacon stones and search-lights of today and the future. Therefore, an understanding of the past leads to a greater awareness and better grasp of the strategies of modern living.

In our time, religion has become a big cultural or communication activity in many parts of the world. Televangelism is a significant feature programme in many states. A few years back, the conflict created by different religious interests led to a government ban on radio and television broadcasts of religious programmes outside the regular days of worship of the two dominant religious groups on Nigeria. Religion, in spite of these difficulties, is still a media event and almost a permanent fixture in the Nigerian society. These religious diversities span the whole Nigerian cultural spectrum. There are extremists on all sides of the religious divide. The horizon and landscape are peopled with as many religious groups as there are countries in the world. Religious television and radio programmes in many Nigerian states, apart from reflecting traditional practices, are also channels for expounding the cultures of the originating countries of the particular religion.

Furthermore, the arts and music of the people are often expressed through the traditional channels in society. For example, sculptures and art pieces speak as eloquently of the culture of the people just as their architectural designs say a lot about their tastes and habits. Moreover, the scientific and technological developments of any nation are communicated through communication channels which have their roots in the culture of the people. Scientific and technological devices have made modern communication possible through various devices which, in turn, have become part of the social norms of the people.

Then one may ask, what is communication if not a young African saying 'Good Morning' to an elder with an appropriate gesture of respect? Communication and culture lie in the individual's use of proxemics, chronemics, kinesics, haptics, numbers, colours, odours, olfactory and gustatory senses, symbolic display, semiotics, picture, gesture, facial expressions and appearance, among others, to express relationships. Some examples will suffice here. The distance between two persons in an open place could be used as an indicator of the relationship between them.

The student's early or late arrival for lectures or other academic

activities may be an indication of a personal attitude, perhaps, deep-rooted in his cultural environment. The way a young lady walks into the class, perhaps wriggling her waist and rolling her eyes with a knowing smile on her face speaks, more eloquently than verbal expression, of those actions.

Girls and young men are always conscious of the way they look — jerry curls, the mini-, midi-, or maxi-skirt, jeans, blouses cut deep in front, skirts (slit or plain), Lady Di make-ups, the Maryam Babangida shawl, ect. A young lady in a maxi-skirt, wearing plaited hair, with an ash-coloured face, with no ear-rings, in flat soled shoes and wearing no cosmetics or make-up could be communicating the following message: 'I am a Born-Again Christin, virtuous, decent and hate the 'good' life. I am unapproachable in matters outside the scriptures, so keep your distance hungry wolf!'

On the other hand, another young lady wearing Jerry curls (or low cut), slit midi-skirt or puffed jeans, a shirt partly buttoned at the top, long eye lashes with near-invisible ear-rings (or none), a heavily masked face, and also wearing fancy perfumes (and if of average height), in moderately high-heeled shoes) could also be saying the following: 'Look here cassanova; if you must come near me you should make sure you've got 'bread' in your pocket. I don't suffer fools readily'.

If these are taken to be personal mannerisms, then because of the frequency of their occurrence, one may say they are the personal mannerisms of the group or culture.

Colours also play some part in cultural communication. They are free from linguistic barriers and have the advantage of the speed of impact which other forms lack. Although there are colour universals, some cultures differ in the application or use of colours. For example, some colours have been given racist overtones, especially the colours black and white. It is a fact that Africans of brown skin never called themselves black until the 'white' man started calling them so. All the negative connotations given to black seem to be all racially motivated and, since the English language found a conducive colour label for its people, it became necessary as a fact of colonialism and imperialism that the thinking of the people was also subverted through the tripartite god of gold, glory and God.¹

Forms of culture may be modifications of existing patterns of innovations which bring about new awareness, or they may be merely forms of reinforcement. The cultural content of communication is, therefore, diverse and diffuse. Thus, one cannot communicate what is not in existence either in the sciences, myths, religion or practices of the people. What is communicated is. What is not is not and cannot be reasonably communicated. Obviously communication media are used as vehicles for transmitting culture. Therefore, culture is their message.

Traditional Communication Technology and Strategies

The technology which works the traditional communication system is simple and depends extensively on sonic devices. Wilson (1988) describes these devices as instrumental communication media. They comprise instruments also associated with music, namely, idiophones, aerophones, membranophones, and chordophones. These devices are used independently to transmit messages or are employed as part of certain communication modes or strategies to effect the exchange of information. These strategies include demonstrative, iconographic, institutional, visual and extra-mundane modes. Wilson (1987a: 90-94) also discusses these devices and modes. These devices or instruments are beaten, blown, struck or plucked to produce sounds (signals) and messages whose clarity and efficacy may be dependent on the dexterity or expertise of the traditional newsman and on the nature of his message. The sound (signal) produced by the device acts as an attention-directing signal before the actual broadcast is made. For example, the wooden drum, as Alexandre (1972: 113) shows, when beaten by the newsman, 'reproduces . . . the rhythms and tones characteristic of the sentence he wants to transmit'. Wilson (1988: 9) also points out that 'most modes and forms display the capacity for multi-social functions and the choice of each medium may be determined by the nature of the communication message, the ability of the medium to get the message across to the audience in good time, and by cultural prescriptions of each society. . .'

The technology used in traditional communication is cheap and, at times, is acquired at no cost to the community. The communication process is also relatively simple. The traditional communication system operates in basically similar ways as modern media systems in many African countries. The message originates from an organizational source which is part of the political system, inseparably linked by the mutuality of their roles in society. The source is the village council of elders and chiefs, at the head of which is the village head. The gongman (town crier) is part of the gate-keeping process but, within the system, he functions essentially as a broadcaster or reporter. He uses the gong, drum (skin, metal or wood), flutes, and other instruments which he beats or blows to win or attract the attention of the expected audience in their various homes. The sound produced by the instrument acts as a signal. He then broadcasts his message which may also contain all the elements of modern radio broadcasting. His audience is in close contact with him and readily provides feedback, individually seeking explanations to issues that may not be explicit at first. The gongman then takes the feed-back message to the village head or the council where observations or objections to

directives may be discussed or reviewed. This immediate talk-back system puts the traditional communication system ahead of its modern counterpart (Fig. 1).

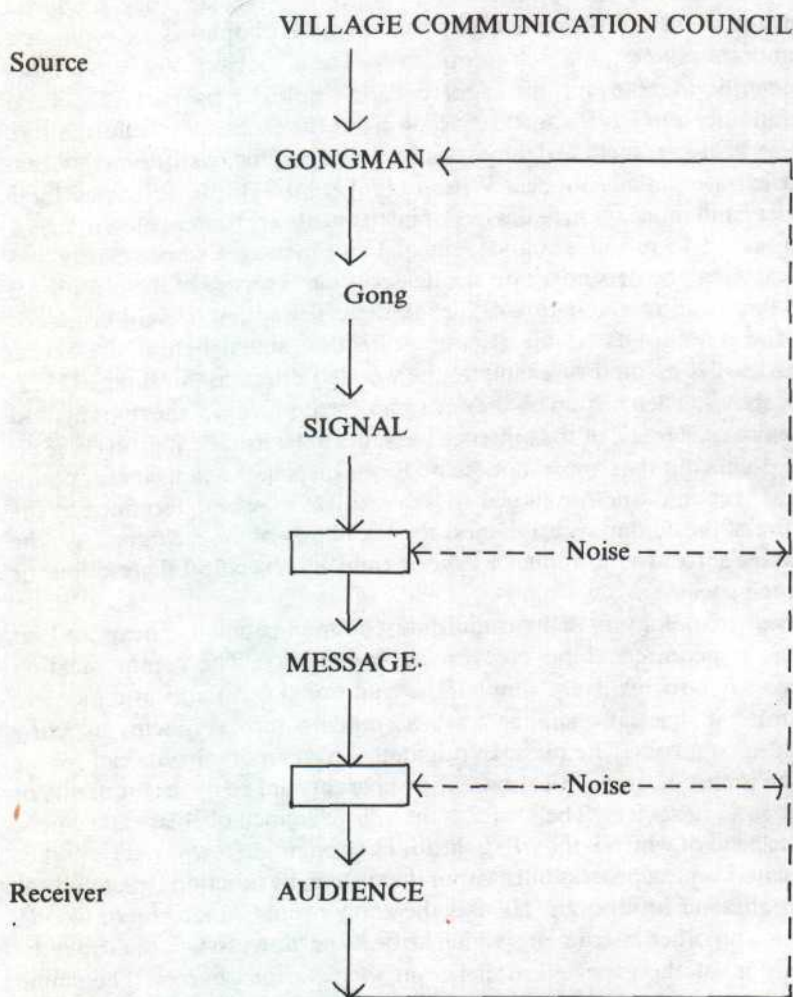


Figure 1. The Communication Process in Traditional Society.

There are also similarities between the traditional communication process and the modern system. First, in many African countries, the broadcasting system comes directly under a ministry which is headed by an

appointee of the president or prime minister. The minister reports to the executive council or whatever body is responsible for executive decisions. This council also appoints the chief executive of the broadcasting organisation who in turn reports all the activities of government to the people. So is the traditional media system except for the fact that the modern media system lack immediate feedback channels. Ubgoajah (1985: 167-170) discusses the use of traditional media systems in contemporary society and Wilson (1987b: 3-11) also highlights the important uses of these media and channels. Jubril Bala Mohammed (1987: 148-156) writes on the use of the mosque as a channel of development communication.

Modern Communication Technology

Modern communication systems are too expensive and sometimes too predatory to be ignored. There may still be several localities where television and, sometimes, radio sets are unavailable today. But this is not on account of the inability of transmission facilities to reach them (as the case may be for a few), but because of the needs of the stomach exerting a stronger pull than those of the eyes.

Modern communication facilities ranging from the satellite systems, data links, computer machines, printing machines, transmitters, cameras, compugraphic machines, word processors, picturephones, among others, abound. They can be purchased especially by poor countries at sums quite beyond their national budgets. They are available to facilitate or make possible radio and television broadcasting, newspaper, magazine and book publication, as well as supporting services like cable television, videotapes or videocassette, phonograph records, and audio cassette and audiotape production.

These are all powerful instruments of communication for the technologically-advanced world but they become liabilities in Third World countries. The hardware may be available for purchase but it is not easy to purchase the knowledge which may make its maintenance possible. The cost of buying the hardware (usually outdated by some five years or more) is always prohibitive. The maintenance cost is always even more outrageous. Thus, the situation sometimes arises when the buyer country has to abandon the equipment to buy a new one because of the prohibitive cost of spare parts and maintenance. This is one area of drain in the resources of Third World countries. The present situation calls for a new approach to communication policies in Africa in particular, and the Third World in general.

Problems of Communication in Africa

Africa seems saddled by multifarious problems ranging from its perennial drought and food crises, political instability, economic crises, neo-colonial and imperialistic subversions, and booty traps created by erstwhile colonial masters, and by media and cultural imperialism of the Western type. These difficulties have arisen from a number of factors. First, most African countries have very weak technological bases which cannot sustain them in the present century if the philistine tastes of their leadership must hold sway. The false tastes of the ruling class have contributed immensely to the political and technological humiliation of our countries because of the lack of supportive local 'duplicating' interests in the acquired technology. Thus, the superstructure, created largely on account of hardware fascination is not an enduring one, hence the widespread decay of public property all over the continent.

Close on the heels of a weak technological base is the issue of media and cultural imperialism. Many of today's African leaders have had some form of education or orientation in the technologically-advanced countries. Their exposure to the media in those societies sometimes leads them to propose similar systems for their countries. Even people with only a few days or weeks of exposure to Western media systems are often the most ardent propagators of this form of media imperialism. They often take the media and their hardware out of the social and cultural contexts in which they found them and then proceed to impose them in their own countries. As pointed out earlier, communication is culture just as culture is communication. It is abundantly clear to many observers in the Western world as well as their agents in the Third World that the forms, structures and socio-cultural conditions under which the media operate in the West cannot be replicated in Africa for very obvious reasons, one of which is that our socio-cultural experiences are different. It is, therefore, in the interest of the dominating powers to continue to sell these instruments of power and culture to a people who, by virtue of the state of stupor in which they find themselves, and their drive for profit for themselves or tribes, are unable to free themselves from this stranglehold.

Further, socio-economic problems are also tied up with the above. Most African countries do not have the hard cash to pay for equipment offered for sale by the dominating power. So they have recourse to foreign loans which have today built up into massive amounts. Africa's rampant poverty notwithstanding, if only African countries were prepared to limit their tastes to what they can afford, the debt problem which today hangs like an albatross around the necks of every African country would not have been there.

The other problem confronting many African countries today is that of political instability and diversity created by the nineteenth century European political chess game which gave today's Africa the variegated political colour it has. The economic problem has its own role to play here. Thus, every dependent African economy is vulnerable to the political power play in Europe, America or the Soviet Union. Each power base tries to foist its own stooge on the people first by trying to create the society in its own image, and funding local Turks especially restless soldiers who, denied the Congo and Biafra experience, find routine barrack life monotonous and boring. Needless to say, every budding African soldier sees himself as a potential head of state. Herein lies the origins of incessant coups d'etre with the accompanying allegations of corruption and abuse of power against those unseated. Such incessant political changes bring with them frequent policy changes as well. For example, when Colonel Anthony Ukpo was Nigeria's Information Minister, he promoted the idea of the use of the town crier for local, regional and perhaps national communication services. When he was replaced, his successor, Mr. Anthony Momoh, a newspaper journalist, reverted to the old order or, at best, adopted a policy of benign neglect. Also allied to the political problem is the need for the democratization of the communication processes.

A very serious communication problem for most of Africa is that of literacy and the use of foreign languages in the mass media. Ironically, foreign languages sometimes provide the only medium for reaching the majority of the literate public. But this is often taken to mean that such a minority public is greater in importance than the predominantly 'illiterate' population.

But since there are numerous local languages in Africa and since the foreign languages (usually of European or Arab extraction e.g. English and Swahili) are often the only means of reaching the educated across the various linguistic barriers, it may suffice for now to continue to use them until literacy in the local languages has been increased. This seeming lack of a common language to reach all of our people is responsible for some of the distortions encountered in our communicational relationships.

Finally, the present system of information flow between the rich and poor nations is the one-way flow. Since the dominating powers have the means of projecting themselves and their culture, the culture of the poorer nations is often distorted whenever it is portrayed. Exhibition of African culture is rare and, therefore, Western culture is frequently transmitted to poor nations through satellite systems belonging to and controlled by the rich nations. This reinforces media and cultural imperialism and, hence, the poor countries are hardly heard at the

international level outside the United Nations and its agencies.

All these problems also point to one fact: the need to review our communication processes and reassess our developmental goals. Perhaps something close to a moratorium on all cultural, technological and media hardware considered to be of little value to the national objective should be declared for a period of at least twenty to thirty years. Then a renewal of faith in our cultural drive could begin to build on whatever our indigenous scientists and technologists can produce.

Conclusion

This paper has viewed communication as the expression and reflection of the culture of any society except in those cases where media and cultural imperialism have taken over. It, therefore, advocates the strengthening of the present communication systems with traditional cultural content. It has also examined the cultural content of communication, as well as traditional and modern communication strategies. Finally, it advocates a diachronic-synchronic approach to communication studies and policies in Africa. It is posited that any policy which does not address itself to this dualist approach is bound to compound Africa's communication problems even more.

Notes

1. Professor Ali Mazrui's comment in the TV documentary, *Africa*.

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