From an Echo of the West to a Voice of Its Own?

Sub-Saharan African Research under the Loophole

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One paradox of our time is the fact that, parallel to debates on globalization paradigms, discussions about the de-westernization of communication research have emerged (e.g., Alfaro Moreno 2006; Murphy & Rodriguez 2006; Couldry *et al.* 2007; Martín-Barbero 2006; Thussu 2006; Tomaselli & Teer-Tomaselli 2007; Tunstall *et al.* 2007; Wang 2008; Wasserman & de Beer 2009; Xiaoge 2009). Reterritorialization seems to be a by-product of the talk on globalization and the cultural homogenization that is said to come with it. It is noticeable that the recent flow of de-westernization studies is largely lacking in straight-forward claims of media domination, media imperialism or core/periphery contradiction. The most central concept is mediatization. The absence of one single centre is acknowledged; the US is considered as "only one node in a complex system" (Sparks 2007: 141). Zigzag routes of media flows seem to have been accepted as a starting point.

Self-analysis has also reached African media and communication research, thus far perhaps the least known of the territorial research spheres. Quite frequently, African media research has been assessed as semi-Western, reflecting the tones originally set by especially Anglo-American research. This short introduction attempts to catch glimpses of African media and communication research today. Quantitatively speaking, it is not very extensive, especially on international platforms, but it is in fact more diversified than may be assumed.

The elaborations of difference and of "new" areas of emphasis in communication research have most often been presented within regional frameworks – authors seem to think that research in Latin America, Asia or Africa can be defined, at least to a certain extent, from a territorial perspective. This viewpoint is problematic, at least in the case of Africa. How could anyone dream of grouping together, in a single basket, Sub-Saharan African researchers, who are divided by a huge territorial area and some 40 media systems, by three *lingua franca* each with their own strong colonial legacies, by hundreds of African languages also with their own impact on today's situation, and finally by individual educational histories, from home as well as from the West? There is in fact no justification for talking about African media research within one framework. In order to have any relevance, an examination should be made using far more sophisticated spectacles.

One counter-argumentation to avoidance of territorialization could be the fact that all research is frequently and sweepingly territorialized – we talk about "Northern", "Anglo-American", "Central European" or "Nordic" media research. But there is still a difference. African media and communication research is rich in disjunctions based on time and place, and researchers in different parts of the region are often more familiar with research from the so-called West than with research from their own region.

Further, there are huge differences in publishing potential in different parts of the region.

South Africa has a strong research component, but it has long been isolated from the rest of the continent. Only recently have South African researchers begun to acquaint themselves with their neighbours. South Africa is a realm of its own, still quite strongly inwardly oriented – but with its windows open to the West and Australia. This complex society has strong educational institutions in media and communication, and it has researchers who have been forced to develop publishing arenas of their own during the period of isolation. Nigeria also plays a strong role: It has a multitude of educational institutions carrying on research, too. Ghana has had a long tradition of researchers with a voice of their own. Both also have large diasporic communities of researchers in the West. Nairobi, Kenya, has long been a centre for publishing, although its significance has been decreasing. On the other hand, especially media research carried out in the Portuguese-speaking countries of Africa is unknown even in neighbouring countries.

In Africa, comparisons between media systems in various countries are problematic. As we know, African borders were mainly drawn on the desks of European colonial masters. It is better to talk about "media cultures" in the same sense as Nick Couldry (2007: 249) or Rosa Maria Alfaro Moreno (2006) do. Couldry takes a cultural line of consideration and encourages researchers to focus on creative agencies outside the dominant centres. This is a valid point, although Herman Wasserman and Arnold de Beer (2009: 432) justifiably warn that, in such a line of thought, structural inequalities are easily pushed aside, and that were unethical in the African situation. Resources available for education and research also vary markedly across the continent.

Alfaro Moreno talks about Latin American circumstances, but her thoughts are well suited to Africa as well. She focuses on publics, counter-publics, strong and weak publics and the dynamism embedded in communication, and she stresses the fact that the construction of public opinion does not belong only to the space of the media, but also to articulations of ethnicity and folklore (Alfaro Moreno 2006: 303-308). This type of argumentation is of relevance also in Africa.

Why in Stockholm?

The paradox of reterritorialization can be challenged with ease. Media movements do take other forms of institutionality as well. However, territory is the framework of the following texts. A panel session at the IAMCR Stockholm Conference was devoted to African media research, and some of the panel members' papers are collected in this volume. The panel comprised a group of eastern and southern African researchers, all of whom have English as their working language. This means that a large number of research traditions and researchers from Africa were left out. Above all, research from West Africa, both in English and in French, was under-represented.

However, this was the first time African media research had been given the opportunity to have a special panel at an IAMCR conference. At its previous conferences, the IAMCR has regularly presented media or communication research in a particular region, most recently with a focus on Asia and the Arab world, when IAMCR conferences have been held in these regions.

Then, why a session on African research at a conference held in Stockholm, in Scandinavia? The main reason is that Nordic media researchers and journalism educators have a long history of collaboration with Sub-Saharan Africa, mainly as a side-path to development assistance activities. However, the oldest layer of joint history dates back to Finnish missionaries in Namibia in the 19th century. The most recent and no doubt best-known layers of joint history are part of the various media and democracy projects started in the 1990s when multi-party democracy began in most countries of Africa and changed the media landscapes there. Sweden, Norway and Denmark have supported such projects.

This does not mean that the Nordic countries can claim any credit for media research in Africa. Nordic assistance agencies have been interested, occasionally but not systematically, in media matters, mainly in journalism education, in campaign organization and, most recently, in promotion of democracy in the region. Networks have been developed, and some Nordic researchers have been involved in research cooperation as well. That is all, but it is enough for us to organize a special panel presenting African media research at the IAMCR Conference.

Unfortunately, not all who were invited could come, and not all of the panel participants who presented their papers in Stockholm were able to develop their presentations into articles for this volume. African academicians are burdened with a great deal of teaching and administration. They are pressured by the same demands to "publish or perish" as their colleagues in the West are, but their possibility to allocate time for research is extremely limited.

It is thus understandable, but regrettable, that Ruth Teer-Tomaselli from South Africa, who talked about the challenges posed by new technology in South Africa, Edwin Nyuitho from Kenya, who talked about media monitoring of the coverage of the Kenyan presidential elections in 2007, and Amin Alhassan, a diasporic Ghanaian researcher based in Canada, who expressed his concerns about the recolonization of African media research[1], were not able to develop their presentations into articles to be published in this volume. All three scholars represent a relevant and interesting dimension of African media research today. Of course, it is even more respected that Guy Berger from South Africa and George Lugalambi from Uganda took the time and effort to develop their presentations into texts published in this volume.

As such, the group of panellists was quite representative in terms of the range of subject matter. The speakers dealt with media policy research, media monitoring on current issues, research on media and politics, as well as more theoretical dimensions. What was missing was perhaps the gender perspective. During the past 10-15 years, several monitoring or case studies (e.g. Lowe Morna 2004; Mlama 1994; Solomon 2007) have been carried out in different parts of the continent on the status of women in the media, but taking into consideration the lively woman journalists' associations in Africa, the interest devoted to gender studies could still be considered low. In the same way, research on the political economy of media has not been popular on the continent.

In the following, some aspects of recent African media and communication research will be shortly described.

From Development to Democracy

The aspect most frequently linked with African media and communication research is no doubt the development aspect – and quite justifiably so. Development is embedded in Sub-Saharan African research, but within it, a considerable move has taken place from campaign and nation-building research to the analysis of participation and community orientation. An interesting feature is also the fact that, during the past 10-15 years, development has partly been replaced by democracy as a "basic value" for any communication research. The originality of such development could naturally be questioned, because the form and dimensions given to democracy sound quite European. A far more indigenous natural trend involves discussions on identity matters (Wasserman 2003: Shepperson & Tomaselli 2002).

In the 1970s, Africa became famous for its nation-wide literacy and health campaigns. Research on these campaigns and, for example, the "literacy papers" attached to such campaigns articulated the development optimism that was predominant at the time. Research has never analysed properly the downfall of nationwide campaigns. Were the reasons entirely political, economic or did unsuccessful communication perhaps also play a role in the exercise? Since the 1990s, this branch of development communication research has been redirected to health communication, especially HIV/AIDS communication in various African countries. Such studies – mainly quantitative, though qualitative designs have become more popular in the recent years – are far more sophisticated than those carried out by media practitioners and researchers some two decades earlier.

Development communication has mainly been related to practical activity promoting health, agriculture, or education. It has not been intended to be academically challenging. The ghosts of modernization are easily detected in the theoretical considerations in, say, the introduction parts of project plans. Such texts are often designed according to northern donors' or international organizations' wishes. It would hardly be justified to expect original theoretical thinking under such circumstances.

In the development-oriented texts, communication is usually a tool only, subordinated to special knowledge in the particular subject field. Some recent texts (e.g., Tarawalie 2008) have combined new technology, rural development and indigenous culture, but they are exceptions.[2] A somewhat similar subordinate role has been reserved for communication in the democracy-related monitoring processes of elections, women's role in public life, or the urban/rural contradiction. Notions of communication are frequent, but in fact they still only play a minor role.

The service orientation has long been a strong component in African communication research. Quite frequently, research reports also conclude with a list of recommendations – the goal is to work for social change. This kind of implicit development quest is found also in research that does not have direct development objectives. It can perhaps be said that development is still an implicit value for African communication research. To date, purely academic research has appeared as a phenomenon that Africa cannot afford. Those who have had the privilege to complete a higher education and take trips abroad have the responsibility to pay back and assist in the process of developing their society.

These kinds of links can easily be found, for example, in the development of one African particularity, the community media. The 1990s has been the decade of democracy and community media in Africa. The idea of giving a "voice to the voiceless" has also encouraged northern donors to support community media projects in various parts of Sub-Saharan Africa. Hundreds of community radio stations, on-air as well as off-air, have provided media researchers with rich empirical material.

However, the link to democracy has turned out to be more complicated than expected. Community media in Africa have taken a fairly strong educational course, avoiding political questions, and especially the relationship between the community radio and the community it is obliged to serve has emerged as problematic. There seems to be plenty of room for reconsidering the implementation strategies investing on radio promoting community participation (Manyozo 2007). These studies have theoretical connections to the discussion about alternative media in the West (Moyo 2007). Analyses of community media are no longer solely stories with a happy ending, but a media policy orientation is still quite often missing, because project-based radio stations come and go.

The problematic relationship between national policies and local participation has been known since the nationwide campaigns (e.g., Ng'awanakilala 1981), but this problem has been rediscovered with the renaissance of community media. Recent studies on the difficulties encountered in the relations between community media and local governance (e.g., Teer-Tomaselli & Mjwacu 2003) indicate how complex the relationships between communities and community media can become.

On the other hand, complexities surrounding the concept of participation, also discussed by northern researchers (e.g., Sparks 2007), appear in many recent African texts (e.g., Manyozo 2007). The group interested in community media could perhaps be called somewhat eclectic in their focus (e.g., Alumuku 2006; Ansu-Kyeremeh 1997), but their texts definitely provide food for thought for those concerned about community media in the so-called North as well. Many African views on participation operate through a more down-to-earth approach than, for example, Colin Sparks in his recent considerations, but both streams are relevant in the discussion on participatory communication. African texts provide important ideas about the problems that prevent true participation, and they do base their argumentation not only on experience, but also on media policy and political economy.

Community media have been the favourite baby of northern donors. However, day-to-day reality provides evidence of the fact that both journalists and journalism educators know almost nothing about this sphere in Africa. Community media have, according to media policies in many countries, a space of their own in society, operating alongside public and private nationwide media. In practice, however, community media remain an isolated sphere, and participation is still more a popular slogan than an integral part of the mediascape.

Thus, development-oriented African research provides relevant and interesting issues for communication research outside the region as well. One aspect, however, has remained unchanged. African research, whether using the development or democracy frameworks, is still very serious, and avoids entertainment themes. Case studies on developmental soap operas, above all the South African cult youth series *YizoYizo* and a few studies on cartoons (e.g., Eko 2007) are exceptions, but still it is justified to claim that, for example, the African urban youth culture has not yet received the attention it is due.

South-South Networks are Weak

Besides the far-too-obvious notion of development, there is a multiplicity of characteristics typical to African – or, more precisely in this text, Sub-Saharan African – media and communication research. There is a strong emphasis on journalism research, which has its origin in the journalism education that has been an important part of African nation-building since the early 1960s. Journalism research started as a strongly skills-oriented field, but it has diversified considerably, now discussing news criteria, ethics, as well as media and identity issues.

There is also a long tradition of diasporic research. African scholars have worked in the West but done research on African media. Simultaneously, non-African researchers based in Africa have focused their interests accordingly. Typical of the latter has frequently been a very broad focus, leading to overview types of texts. As Wasserman and de Beer note, the strong influence of authors from the North writing on African journalism studies seems to be changing, because African authors have recently been able to get their texts published in international arenas. One unfortunate characteristic is the fact that South-South coordination still does not work well in Africa. African researchers know neither other African researchers nor researchers from Asia or Latin America. Accordingly, influences have come mainly from the Anglo-American sphere, where many have studied.

With some exaggeration, one could claim that African communication research has largely viewed Africa through northern eyes. It can be said that African media theory has long been quite narrow, borrowing, for example, European concepts of democracy for research on media and democracy. African media theory has often been linked with notions of freedom of expression, again borrowed from European discourses. However, the most recent texts on media and democracy have clearly been framed more in African societies (e.g., Berger & Barratt 2007, Nyamnjoh 2005, Rønning & Kupe 2000; Tomaselli & Dunn 2002).

Given the dependency on northern thinking, it is understandable that counter-reactions have occasionally been overdone, romanticizing "true Africanness" and "genuine" African forms of communication. Critical voices (e.g., Fourie 2008) have pointed out, for example, that a "true" African community ideology such as the South African *ubuntu* no longer exists in any other field of social activity – why then think that it could be the basis for normative principles in media activity? On the other hand, knowledge about tradition and oral communication has proved valid especially in research on community-based forms of communication (e.g., Mlama 1994; Mda 1993).

Against this background and knowing the variety of languages spoken in Africa, it is interesting that research on language and communication is limited. Practically no media research is published in African languages today, although especially in countries such as Tanzania, the media field has a strong local language – in this particular case, Swahili – emphasis. Languages used by the media have an explicit link to democracy. The situation is extremely interesting, for example, in Tanzania, where the multi-party system has meant a clear preference for Swahili-language media.

Language choices have been politically sensitive issues, linked not only to culture, but also to colonialism, nation-building and democracy. In most Sub-Saharan societies, the media operate with a diversity of languages – far more than Western societies have to cope with. Even the most interesting studies (e.g., Alexander 1992; Kamwangamalu

1999) do not devote much space to the languages used by the media. A challenge totally unknown to Western media systems, requiring regular media operation in 6-9 languages, does not seem to create a situation worth researching in southern Africa. Only extremely rarely has it been thought valuable enough to deserve the attention of scholars.

During the past 15-20 years, two other features of the research have grown in significance: media policy research with a leaning towards media monitoring, and research on media ethics. Media monitoring could perhaps be considered a foreign product, initiated and largely financed by northern donors. It has focused mainly on elections and gender issues. Quite interestingly, the gender issue does not come up in other related situations, but in the sphere of monitoring, it does. The ethics feature (e.g., Kasoma 1994; Rønning & Kasoma 2002) has obviously strengthened owing to the fact that with increased diversity in the media landscape, a wave of sensationalism has emerged in most Sub-Saharan societies. It has created a quest for ethics, and quite interestingly, ethics has been discussed within the framework of African identities.

Growth of Platforms

African researchers living in diaspora have not usually had special difficulties in finding publication channels for their texts, but the situation has been markedly different in the case of African researchers working inside Africa. A remarkable change has taken place during the past 10-15 years, partly thanks to new technology, and partly due to the fact that African research has grown and received attention owing to the quality of the work. The number of platforms has increased, and northern publishing houses have opened their doors to African authors more frequently than before. Further, texts by African researchers appear regularly in northern, refereed journals.

Since the 1970s, *Africa Media Review* has been able to cross the language barrier between English- and French-speaking authors, and the journal was long the only one distributed outside the region as well. The quality of texts varied, but the journal showed that African media educators did have an interest in more academic issues as well. Unfortunately, the journal seems to be dead today, mainly because its publisher, the African Council for Communication Education, based in Nairobi, Kenya, is apparently defunct. Instead, a new peer-reviewed journal, Tanzania-based *African Communication Research* started in 2008. Thus far, its focus has been on grassroots communication and media ethics.

South Africa has a long tradition of journals, which during the apartheid years were totally unknown to the rest of the continent, but which today are fairly well distributed also in eastern and western Africa. *Ecquid Novi. African Journalism Studies* has already published its 30th volume, and with increased resources to Stellenbosch University thanks to a new co-publisher (University of Wisconsin Press). Especially in its Forum sections, the journal has frequently published intense debates on burning current media policy themes. Another established – in fact, even older – South African academic journal is *Communicatio: South African Journal of Communication Theory and Research,* which has published its 35th volume. Somewhat younger is *Critical Arts: A South-North Journal of Cultural and Media Studies.* As the title indicates, the journal has a strong cultural studies orientation, while the other two have a wider focus, from journalism studies and media ethics to communication theory. All also publish articles relevant to Africa but written by non-African scholars. All are referee based.

The most recent layer of African oriented journals is formed by online journals such as the London-based *Journal of African Media Studies*, which started publishing in 2008, but also the African version of *Global Communication* has opened a platform for African media research. Also *Global Media Journal* (started in 2007), in its African edition – sponsored by Stellenbosch University, South Africa, has provided a platform for African research. Further, the *Nordic Journal of African Studies* frequently publishes texts on communication research.

African media researchers have thus been able to locate publication channels, although the old imbalances remain: South African research channels are quite predominant. Further, there is another danger embedded in the new development. Because of the "publish-or-perish" syndrome, many more African university departments have planned or even started journals of their own, often totally unaware of each other's plans. Establishing a credible academic platform is a challenge not only because of the demanding work of finding and evaluating suitable texts or of the technical part of printing. The creation of a reliable, well-functioning distribution system is a huge problem on a continent still suffering from a very weak South-South link.

Naturally, however, the main point is that African communication research does have a voice, and that voice no longer tells the same story as that told in the northern mainstream.

Notes

1. Alhassan has presented similar considerations in his article "The Canonic Economy of Communication and Culture: The Centrality of the Postcolonial Margins" (*Canadian Journal of Communication* 32(1), 103-18)
2. The launching issue of Tanzania-based *African Communication Research* (2008, Vol. 1, No 1) was devoted to grassroots and participatory communication.

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