Building an Agenda for Media and Communication Research in Africa

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Abstract

This article lays down a number of points that need to be reflected upon in building a research agenda for media and communication research in Africa. It resurrects some old questions about the identity of the field. It is argued that scholars contemplating the agenda for researching the media in Africa need to re-examine some of the global and historical currents that gave the field its present shape. Drawing attention to the ideas of scholars who have proposed substantive lines of research for the agenda envisaged, this discussion adds another dimension to those ideas by spotlighting the nature, shapers and motivations of the research agenda as well as the pertinent issues.

Keywords: Africa, media, communication, journalism, research

Introduction

For an area of scholarship that seems to be perpetually in flux, with technology constantly reshaping media and the way we use them to communicate, it is imperative that we regularly revisit the research agenda of the field. This discussion offers and briefly elaborates some points to ponder. An old debate about the identity of the field among disciplines is resuscitated if only to keep the historical and global contexts in view.

The dual field of media and communication has certainly found its footing in Africa, and a significant measure of its growth has happened over the last three decades. As the number of African communication scholars has grown so has the scope of African scholarship in the field. These scholars have been groomed under varying academic traditions and have injected diverse perspectives into the field. Evidently, though these developments need to be studied systematically, the body of work on journalism, media and communication in Africa and about the continent appears to be expanding. Much of it is produced by African scholars.

Similarly, enrolments in journalism, media and communication programmes in tertiary education institutions have also grown markedly. In some institutions admission into these programmes is remarkably competitive. It is important to note too that there are enormous variations in the level of facilitation or distribution of resources among these institutions in Africa. The pattern generally follows the relative wealth of countries, which in turn influences research productivity in media and communication as in all areas of academe.

In policy and advocacy or activist circles too, the media and communication have gained wide recognition as pillars of public life on the continent. No explanation of de-

mocratisation is complete without accounting for the role of the media in this process. Open media and communication may not be sufficient conditions for the sustenance of democracy, but as institutions they are necessary for that purpose due to their wide-ranging contributions in the political, technological, economic and cultural domains (Ogundimu 2002). As the media development concept and movement gain ground, there is going to be greater pressure to use rigorous research to demonstrate and justify to policy makers and the political class the intrinsic value of the media.

Meantime, the very notion of an agenda assumes the existence, or at least the possibility, of consensus on the substance, type and parameters of media and communication research to be pursued by scholars working in and on Africa. One would expect such an agenda to be coherent, extensive and exemplary of the continent's communicative diversity as well as the multiple strands of the field. Whether an agenda of this kind is even a practical thing to conceive remains an open matter.

Media and Communication as Scholarship

We cannot engage the issue of a research agenda for media and communication research in Africa without, for starters, reflecting more universally on the character of our field among disciplines. The question of the identity of communication as a discipline has been at the heart of the historical and global development of this field. To put Africa's own research agenda in perspective, it helps to bring back into focus the earlier seminal debate about the identity of communication as a field for research and scholarship.

There is therefore a lot of value in reprising the original debate that raged in the 1980s concerning what exactly communication scholarship was all about. At that time, the lifting of the lid on the "ferment in the field" of communication occurred amidst lingering questions over the legitimacy of communication as a scholarly activity. What makes those historical concerns pertinent to our context is that the fledgling discipline of communication in some African countries was at that nascent stage heavily influenced by the socio-behavioural tradition that dominated American communication research, for example. The legacies of that influence are still clear and present in much of the media and communication research and scholarship going on in Africa to date (Banda 2008).

Among the critics of the so-called dominant paradigm then, Tunstall's (1983) reservations about American communication research exemplified the key concerns about this process of ferment. The essence of his critique can give African communication scholars good grounds for reflection. I will return to his critique shortly.

For the moment, I wish to suggest that Africa's research agenda for the field of media and communication would have to be situated in a clear notion of the institution of scholarship. As I understand it, scholarship is conducted through relatively organized systems of knowledge. Conventionally, every system of knowledge has been characterized in terms of specific features that qualify it as either a 'discipline' or a 'field' of study. The approach that Biglan (1973: 202) used to distinguish the features of systems of knowledge is worth considering. He characterized systems of knowledge basing on their subject matter as defined by "the degree to which a paradigm exists," "the degree of concern with application", and "concern with life systems". These particular definitions may undoubtedly be contested and may be culture-specific, but they should prompt media and communication scholars in Africa to think seriously about the grounds on

which the academic legitimacy of their scholarship and research rest and is to be judged and defended.

Criticism of the Field

Let me return to Tunstall (1983). From the several issues he raised, I will single out a few for closer attention because of their potential to resonate with contemporary African media and communication scholars. *First*, he advanced a philosophy of communication as an interdisciplinary system of knowledge. Epistemologically, he saw communication back then as a stunted or struggling area of academic research and scholarship. As a sociologist in the classical mould, he expected communication to be a stable, coherent, and predictable system of knowledge. The basis of his frustration with U.S. communication research, in particular, was the absence of a minimum set of terms of reference from which all those engaged in the area could draw guidance for their work.

Second, Tunstall (1983) argued that U.S. communication research suffered from fragmentation because it was based on an integration of journalism and social psychology, two areas of practice and theory that he deemed academically incompatible. He found 'media' and 'communication' especially unwieldy as areas of scholarship because, conceptually, the definitions of these terms led into many divergent directions. As far he was concerned, this marked communication out as a system of knowledge without focus.

Third, Tunstall (1983) was worried about the low quality of research in communication and media studies at the time. He suggested that this was the reason many good researchers, presumably from the social sciences, made only stop-gap appearances in communication before moving on to more established areas of research.

Lastly, for Tunstall (1983) the question of quality was allied with that of methodology. He took American communication researchers to task over their fondness for the survey. He believed that their attraction to this method was based on a misunderstanding of Paul Lazarsfeld's basic motivations for the survey. In his opinion, Lazarsfeld was not interested in communication or the mass media. He was driven by other reasons including the fact that communication and media phenomena were considered uniquely amenable to the survey.

Response to the Criticism

Contemporary African media and communication scholars would have responded to Tunstall (1983) then in more or less the same terms as they would have done today. If we accept, as he did, that communication is an interdisciplinary system of knowledge, then it would be contradictory to dismiss, the way he did, its organizing principle of theoretical pluralism (Miller 1983) and critical eclecticism (Halloran 1983). By the very nature of communication, we expect scholars to bring a variety of perspectives to bear on the interpretation of its phenomena.

The issue of quality in communication research is a valid issue, but so is it in all fields and disciplines. Scholars from disparate academic backgrounds from to time to time do cross into media and communication research and have encountered valuable insights that they have found worth following up. Tracing the history of communication, Schramm (1983: 8-9) noted that many such scholars came with "their own disciplinary

maps." Whereas such scholars originally tended to come in to examine their own disciplines using communication as a "central variable", nowadays scholars investigating communication in its own right tower over this area.

What makes communication a vibrant system of knowledge is the dynamism generated by those constant "agonies of definition, theory, method, relevance, finance, and integrity" that Turnstall (1983: 92) deplored. All disciplines and fields have their share of these agonies. So it was immaterial to argue, as Tunstall (1983) did, that communication simply had too many of them. The whole purpose of scholarship is precisely to untangle those very agonies.

The apparent lack of focus has been acknowledged by various analysts including Schramm (1983: 14) who first asked of communication: "But has it produced a central, interrelated body of theory on which the practitioners of a discipline can build and unify their thinking?" His own reply at the time was unflattering: "I am afraid that it has not".

To be sure, contemporary research has proceeded along fairly common themes and frameworks of analysis that have aided in understanding various aspects of how communication and the media work. What appears to be bothering some observers is the multiplicity of themes and frameworks. Going by the intensity of lively debate taking place, the variety we are confronted with is after all a good problem to have.

Yet various attempts have been made over the years to impose some kind of structure on our ways of knowing how communication and media function at different levels as well as in different contexts. Paradigms, theories and concepts are proposed and challenged as rapidly as they are floated. In Africa we ought to respond to universal concerns without necessarily seeking and forcing universal or paradigmatic explanations on communication and media phenomena.

Contemporary African scholars are studying communication and the media motivated by an interest in basic questions revolving around culture, structure and process at micro and macro levels. In fact, even the focus on policy that Tunstall (1983) recommended for American communication research would not be constructive without examining underlying issues of the cultures, structures and processes of communication and media.

Systems of knowledge evolve with time. Knowledge cannot be bound in time and space. Its value resides in its cumulative impact and malleability. This leads us back to the debate about the position that communication, as a system of knowledge, occupies in the institution of scholarship. As posited earlier, systems of knowledge have conventionally been defined in terms of their subject matter, with the ultimate goal of positioning them as either restrictive disciplines or open fields of inquiry.

Status of Communication as a Discipline

When we look at the commonly applied descriptions of scholarly disciplines, we see certain recurrent concepts. According to Donald's (1995: 7) extrapolation, disciplines are understood as having: "defining modes of inquiry and conceptual structures"; "a specialized body of knowledge or theory with a reasonably logical taxonomy so that gaps in accepted knowledge can be recognized"; and "techniques for theory testing and revision and a sense of sequence, which enables scholars to predict where they should look next". Disciplines, Donald (1995: 7) further points out, "are defined epistemologically by their distinctive sets of concepts, the logical structure of propositions, the truth

criteria by which propositions are assessed, and the methodology employed to produce the propositions".

When we plot these criteria on a continuum, we can locate every system of knowledge at a particular point. On the other hand, whereas formalistic disciplines can no doubt aid in structuring access to the content and methods of a particular system of knowledge, they can also cause a regimental effect on knowledge. In the African context, this implies that our approach to the study of communication and media could become exclusive rather than inclusive of the diverse communication and media forms we have on the continent, top-down rather than lateral and prescriptive rather than creative. Cohen, Barton, and Fast (2000) are aware of the positive and negative sides of casting systems of knowledge as disciplines. They also recognize the uneasiness arising from what some view as communication's lack of a clear and firm identity as a system of knowledge.

An African View of Communication

I suggest that African media and communication scholars need to take up or re-engage and contextualize the debate about the identity of this field as prior reflection on the research agenda they envision. Drawing on John Dewey, Carey (1989) identified the "transmission" view and the "ritual" view as alternative conceptions of communication in Western thought. But what is the African perspective on communication? Do the Western alternatives capture what Africans believe communication to be? Do African scholars need to adjust the terms of the debate for it to be meaningful?

Okigbo and Pratt (1997: 12), employing the idea of an "Afrocentric" model, tackled this issue with the curricula and pedagogy of media education in mind. Berger (2002) also did just that in his insightful critique of the application of key Western concepts such as media, democracy, civil society and public sphere in Africa. He went on to offer alternative interpretations that he believed were more relevant under African realities. More work of this kind is essential as a basis for mapping and progressive elaboration of the agenda for media and communication research on the continent.

Likewise, Kupe (2004) identified five areas that scholars need to focus on in researching African media and communication contexts. These were: the institutional roles of journalism, the media and communication; the relationships among the media, development and democracy; media organizations, production, occupations and practices; media content and audiences; and the role of media and communication policies and regulations.

I take the cue from the ideas of the foregoing scholars but with a slightly different goal of adding another layer to the discussion. I look at the research agenda in four dimensions presented in the form of points for reflection.

Nature of the Agenda

To some the field of communication is notoriously eclectic but to others its strength and vitality lie therein. Clearly, the complex relationships among the media, development and democracy cannot be fully deconstructed through an instinctive devotion to particular methodologies such as the survey. This is one tendency that Tunstall (1983) criticized earlier U.S. researchers for.

Media and communication phenomena are by definition multi-faceted, impacted by a host of influences originating in the political, technological, economic and cultural spheres. The media and communication do have material effects of their own on these domains as well. An African agenda would have to reflect the universal eclectic character of the field in terms of methods employed and subjects addressed. That said, I would specifically recommend that researchers do more to harness the power of ethnographic methods given the mosaic that Africa's cultural milieu is. This condition relates to the core of the region's communicative complexity.

By and large the media and communication are seriously under-researched compared to other social issues and aspects of public life in Africa. While there are variations among countries, there are severe shortages of systematic basic research about media institutions in a way that would afford a deep understanding of media organizations, production, occupations, and practices on a country by country basis. Too much research is exploratory and too broad in focus.

On initial inspection, it might sound inconsistent to push for country-specific research and to make a simultaneous case for comparative work. But the more we know about individual countries the more productive comparisons among them would be. This also points to the necessity for researchers in and on Africa to regularly and frequently confer among themselves on research issues. This would lead to a more programmatic approach to research, which would in turn yield many other positives: better understanding of commonalities; clearer appreciation of differences that really make a difference; wider diffusion of essential research skills; deeper infiltration of researched knowledge into curricula and day-to-day coursework; and certain growth in the body of knowledge about African media and communication institutions.

Shapers of the Agenda

Scholars tend to frown upon let alone resist research agendas determined by forces outside the academy. However, with public subsidies for higher education and research as a whole either shrinking, constant, or not increasing at the appropriate rate, scholars have little choice but to look to non-profit foreign donor agencies, international bodies, non-governmental organizations, industry or the private sector, and statutory public bodies for money to fund their research projects.

The conditions and sometimes outright excess baggage that come with this money are well-known. More often than not, the influences occasioned by these external research sponsors manifest in subtle ways. But there are also numerous examples of external research support based on mutual collaboration and on interests determined entirely or to the larger extent by the recipients.

Motivations Behind the Agenda

Obviously the matter of who shapes, or who should set, the agenda for media and communication research in Africa deserves to be pondered earnestly. But so are the motivations that drive the agenda. Too often the needs and interests of research users do not get factored into the equation. Potential research users especially in the industry invariably complain that research conducted in the academy is irrelevant. Similar grievances can

also be heard from policy makers. This problem does not apply exclusively to media and communication researchers. It extends across researchers in all disciplines.

One of the recurrent themes in these debates is that researchers should be sensitive to the needs of individuals and industries that might use their research. Politicians in particular are increasingly demanding that researchers be responsive to prescribed public goals. This is not merely a matter of value for money. Politicians and policy makers are demanding that publicly funded research should answer to national objectives such as the millennium development goals and poverty reduction strategies. To the extent that media and communication researchers can demonstrate ways their work can effectively improve the performance of these institutions, however that performance is conceptualized and measured, the field will gain more respect among those we expect to apply its accumulated knowledge.

While it is necessary to maintain a respectable distance from the industry and the policy bureaucracy to ensure scholarly autonomy, some scholars have gone overboard by distrusting these institutions on impulse and suspecting their motives with ideological zeal. Critical engagement would be preferable as it would provide a sound foundation for reciprocal appreciation of each other's roles.

Issues on the Agenda

The programmatic approach to research brought up earlier demands a high degree of selectivity. This implies that those who elect to follow this approach must think systematically through their choices. They would have to do a comprehensive assessment of national development and policy goals, issues of public interest, and critical issues concerning the media and communication. On these premises they would determine which elements are in dire need of research to improve the knowledge base for practitioners, educators, students and policy makers.

There are those who contend that the question of the disciplinary identity of the dual field of media and communication is beside the point. The jury is surely still out on this issue and it will continue to inspire animated discourse.

Conclusion

This discussion was intended to bring back into focus some of the key issues pertinent to the building of an agenda for media and communication research in Africa. These issues were addressed as points for reflection. The evolution of this field of study and research in Africa cannot be divorced from the global and historical debates about the position of the field as an area of intellectual inquiry. For that reason it was vital to hack back to those discussions of more than two decades ago about the academic legitimacy of communication research. As it turns out, many of those issues still ring familiar today. The question of the character of scholarship in media and communication is as relevant to Africa today as it was to researchers in the West decades ago. This discussion is an addition to what ought to be an ongoing conversation.

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