WESTERN PARADIGMS AFRICAN MEDIA experiences

Wallace Chuma

Journalism training and journalism practice in Africa, as we know them today, are products of the continent's encounter with Europe. The earliest newspapers on the continent, from the Cape Colony to Egypt, were colonial projects.

Journalism practice at these newspapers was all about promoting the ideals and interests of the white settlers and European culture. Local African communities were not considered as audiences.

In cases where colonial authorities eventually allowed the development of an African press – that is newspapers or radio that targeted African audiences –Western models of journalism and stereotypes of Africans were encouraged and perpetuated.

The subjects were almost always about tribal lifestyles including sport and entertainment. Coverage of serious political and cultural affairs was discouraged. And news was mostly in English.

Popular white-owned, black-targeted magazines such as *Drum* in South Africa, for example, were designed to operate within the framework of the colonialist's definition of African life. And when such media began to breach such frameworks, as *Drum* did during the 1950s, the colonial state usually reacted with force.

Just as the media products on the continent emerged as part of the colonial project, media training was also consistent with the similar goal.

Journalism training in Africa, where it existed prior to independence, was started mostly by colonial authorities and Christian missionaries. In cases where no formal training was available, as was the case in Zimbabwe, in-house cadetships were offered, while senior editors were mostly trained in the metropole.

At independence, 90% of editors at the state-owned Zimbabwean Newspaper Group or Zimpapers, had been imported from the UK and some from a few other countries such as South Africa.

When eventually formal training was launched at independence, the bulk of the funding came from Western non-governmental organisations and Unesco, while the curricula was predominantly inspired by conventional Western norms of journalism (Nyahunzvi, 1996).

Post-independence Africa

Post-independence Africa – and indeed much of the formerly colonised global South – has remained intellectually dependent on the North for explanatory frameworks for a range of disciplines and fields of study in academe, media and journalism studies being one of them.

As Thussu (2009: 14-15) argues with respect to India, "media and communication research was profoundly influenced by the Western or, more specifically, American tradition of mass communication research, given its prominence during the Cold War".

As in the case of Africa, the Indian case was characterised by "a dependency relationship in the field of research, evident in the import of text books, journals, citations employment of experts and the funding, planning and execution of research.

Mano (2009) depicts a scenario in post-independence Africa where Western aid and "expertise" resulted in cases where local media training schools adopted, lock stock and barrel, Western syllabi.

He refers to a case where a Nigerian university adopted the entire media and journalism curriculum from the Jackson College of Journalism in the US.

In Zimbabwe, the University of Zimbabwe's first postgraduate media studies qualification was based largely on the University of Oslo's programme. The University of Oslo also offered training opportunities for UZ staff and students.

notes on fraught classroom encounters

Problem areas

The Media-Democracy Debate

A ubiquitous subject in most media and journalism training curricula in Africa and globally is the assumed role of media in democracy and democratisation. There is consensus in media scholarship that in the best conditions the media are key institutions in the sustenance of democratic life in both established and fledgling democracies. From practically-oriented training modules in investigative journalism to theory-based media studies courses, the perceived key role of the media in democracy is a dominant factor.

What is noticeable, at least with regard to media training institutions in Southern Africa, is that most of the literature on the role of the media in democracy is based on experiences within the liberal democracies of the West. In Anglophone Africa, the predominant literature comes from the English-speaking parts of the West, especially the UK, US and Australia (key names include James Curran, Peter Golding, Graham Murdock, Robert McChesney, all based in the West).

There is a tendency in African media training institutions to apply such experiences and debates about such experiences to African contexts as given templates. Western paradigms are presented as standard, one-size-fits-all, and African situations are analysed from the perspective of how they fit into the existing models.

For example, Habermas's notion of the public sphere is presented as an ideal that applies across contexts and histories, hence students are often asked to analyse the extent to which specific African media and media systems conform to that notion of the public sphere.

The public sphere is undoubtedly one of the foremost applied analytic categories in research on Western media systems and practices, especially with respect to how the media can enrich or impoverish democracy.

The model has its genesis in the West, and arguably captures the situation there best. When applied to South Africa, or to Zambia, it is important that caution is exercised.

"Democratic" systems that emerged after the demise of colonialism and apartheid in Africa are complex in that they contain both anachronisms of the *ancien regimes* as well as "modern", liberal ideals of the present. In some cases, such as Zimbabwe, the uneasy marriage of the past and the present culminated in a bizarre model of "liberal" democracy where elections are routinely held on time (never mind the announcement of results), but the authoritarian state ensures the nominal freedoms that citizens enjoy only exist within the bounds of what is "acceptable".

Related to the issue of the evolution of democracy in Africa is the issue of citizenship. At the core of the Habermasian public sphere is an active and informed citizenry engaged in critical-rational debate.

What does active and informed citizenship entail in Africa? In addressing such questions and therefore interrogating the applicability of the model locally, issues around material access to what one might call "tools of life" – the resources we need to live and to participate, such as food, shelter, clothing and information – will need to be confronted.

> IN ANGLOPHONE AFRICA, THE ANGLO-SAXON CHARACTER OF MEDIA TRAINING IS ILLUSTRATED MOST PROMINENTLY BY THE UNCONTESTED, TAKEN-FOR-GRANTED USE OF ENGLISH. THE IMPRESSION IS CREATED THAT JOURNALISM TEACHING (AND CONSEQUENTLY PRACTICE) IS ESSENTIALLY AN ENGLISH LANGUAGE AFFAIR. WHICH EXPLAINS WHY, FOR EXAMPLE, MEDIA TRAINING INSTITUTIONS IN AFRICA WILL NOT ENROL STUDENTS WITH POOR GRADES IN ENGLISH. SO CONNECTED IS ENGLISH TO JOURNALISM TRAINING THAT SEVERAL MEDIA AND JOURNALISM STUDIES DEPARTMENTS IN AFRICA EMERGED AS OFFSHOOTS OF ENGLISH DEPARTMENTS. THE TRANSITION WAS DEEMED TO BE SMOOTHER! THE EFFECT OF MAINSTREAMING ENGLISH AS THE LANGUAGE OF JOURNALISM INSTRUCTION HAS BEEN TO MARGINALISE THE DEVELOPMENT OF LOCAL AFRICAN LANGUAGES AS MEDIA LANGUAGES.

We also need to look at what forms of participation are necessary – in that they make a difference – and those that are probably not.

The model of the public sphere may well be used in our attempt to understand the potential of African media systems to enhance democracy, but the starting point in our teaching should not be the analytic model, rather it should be the way in which our political and media systems are structured, how they speak to each other, and to local civil society. It is not helpful, for example, to simply argue – as we have heard and read *ad nauseam* – that the public sphere is negated in Africa because of prevailing conditions, whatever they are.

Radical and Liberal Pluralist Traditions

The radical/critical and liberal pluralist traditions (and their competing approaches to the role of the media in public life) have dominated the academy in the West, much as they have also dominated media and journalism teaching in Africa.

Political economy of communication or its "critical" variant, best describes the crisis of mediating democracy in a liberal capitalist economy where corporate power often rides roughshod over the state and civil society. It also describes scenarios where public consultation in policymaking is limited largely to the elite (Friedman 2006).

African political economy of the media should be modified to take into account the nature of the African postcolonial state and its relationship with citizens, capital and civil society.

For example, where the state in the West tends to cede significant leverage to organised business interests, the African state, with a few exceptions such as South Africa, remains a key and imposing player in media policymaking.

As a key player in the economy, the state often dictates policy directions and imperatives to business which often consists of local subsidiaries of international capital and a few local/indigenous firms (the majority of which are dependent on the state for their very survival).

The relative weakness of formal business and civil society formations enable the state to dominate the media, especially in areas of broadcasting, in most of Africa. The kind of state that political economists of communication and even oft-quoted leftist critics Gramsci and Althusser talk about is remarkably different from the state that exists in most of Africa today.

It is therefore important to theorise the state in Africa as the predominant player in media practice and policy, first, and then adapting those analytical elements of critical approaches which are relevant to modern day Africa.

It is also important to understand that African media are not as integrated into the rest of the global media as in other parts of the world. Therefore the trends of consolidation and commercialisation have taken a somewhat different trajectory here.

The five biggest global media conglomerates have generally tended to shy away from Africa, save for the brief Time Warner purchase of 20% of Midi TV (now HCI), owners of e.tv in South Africa.

African educators and learners have not yet begun to experience the collapse of quality newspapers as they fail to cope with the rising power of the Internet. In fact, newspapers are still big business in Africa.

At the same time, there are local trends of consolidation, especially in South Africa, where four big groups control most of the country's commercial media. South Africa is a very interesting case study because it combines elements of the First and Third World in terms of media structures.

The four big groups, Naspers, Avusa, Caxton and Independent Newspapers, in varying degrees, show horizontal and vertical integration trends that replicate the West. And yet media density in the country is still very low, especially with respect to the Internet and newspapers. This is hardly surprising, given that the country is one of the most unequal societies on earth.

Such structural inequalities manifest themselves even in classrooms when, within the same class, students have completely different media experiences and exposures because of their class and – to an extent – racial makeup.

Western paradigms which do not pay sufficient attention to such realities need to be domesticated if they are to be applied at all in media teaching and learning.

It's the Englishness, stupid!

In Anglophone Africa, the Anglo-Saxon character of media training is illustrated most prominently by the uncontested, taken-for-granted use of English as a medium of journalism instruction. The impression is created that journalism teaching (and consequently practice) is essentially an English language affair. Which explains why, for example, media training institutions in Africa will not enrol students with poor grades in English. So connected is English to journalism training that several media and journalism studies departments in Africa emerged as offshoots of English departments. The transition was deemed to be smoother!

The effect of mainstreaming English as the language of journalism instruction has been to marginalise the development of local African languages as media languages. With the exception of radio, African languages have a marginal presence in the media. In Zimbabwe, only two local language newspapers exist, almost three decades after the attainment of independence. And, to make matters worse, the two papers do not practice the "professional" model of informative and analytical journalism, but a sordid brand of tabloid journalism, creating the impression that local Shona and Ndebele languages are only good in newspapers when they describe the bizarre and the macabre.

There is little in mainstream journalism training in Africa that speaks to African ways of communicating. Take the hegemonic 5Ws and an H model of writing. This is consistent with Western ways of communication,

and steeped in Western culture.

In Shona culture, for example, it is not the shocking detail that you begin with when you communicate. You prepare the listener before dropping the bombshell.

In African folktales or stories – the climax does not come first. But when we write news, everything has to be contained in the first 40-50 words.

As a result, a daily newspaper published in Accra, Ghana can be easily mistaken for a Canadian paper, never mind the vast cultural differences. Even the naming of our papers… *Times*, *Guardian*, *Independent*, *Gazette*, is so very Anglo-Saxon.

Paul Greenway

Moving the centre?

African media and journalism educators need to relocate the African experience to the centre, rather than the periphery, of theorising on media. This entails a critical understanding of the dynamics of African citizens' experiences of the ordinary, of the nature of the postcolonial state and its role in public and private life, the nature of business and civil society. It entails an understanding of African history – before, during and after the colonial encounter.

African languages, as part of the African experience, also need to be shifted to the centre of learning, teaching and theorising on media and journalism. The same applies to African modes of self expression, storytelling, celebration – communication.

Doing this does not alienate those aspects of Western thought that are relevant to African media and social systems. A paradigm reconstruction is about mainstreaming the African experience, and borrowing relevant Western models, but only where necessary to enrich the learning and teaching process.

It is not about re-inventing the wheel, or de-linking, for that will be foolhardy. It is about charity beginning at home, and not next door.

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