

by Segun Ige

While we have received democracy through colonisation, and understood the freedom and liberties that it offers, Africa is yet to embrace the discipline that really is responsible for the articulation of these rights, freedoms and liberties. Rhetoric has always been the vehicle for the consolidation of democracy.

Most of the messages that are received in the South are deliberate constructs of media practitioners who are adept in rhetoric. Rhetoric in the US, for example, is studied alongside media and communication studies.

The usefulness of rhetoric is not limited to communicative acts; it is also a powerful tool for the enhancement and acceleration of democracy. Rhetoric lends the scientific basis for the interaction and the full participation of the public under deliberative democracy.

But do media and journalism curricula at tertiary level in Africa possess rhetorical components? Although Media and Journalism Studies as a discipline is concerned with the use of words and images for communication purposes, rhetoric does not really feature in the curriculum. The majority of African tertiary institutions are yet to realise the importance of rhetoric in media practice.

The African Association for Rhetoric was inaugurated at the University of KwaZulu-Natal Durban last year at a colloquium entitled *Rhetoric, Protests and the Economy*.

The association is being constituted into a body of scholars who have an interest in intersections of rhetoric with various other disciplines. An objective of the association is to promote dialogue in the public sphere with a view to enhancing democracy in Africa. It has as its mandate the creation of a forum for scholarly and intellectual debates. In an effort to subject emerging discourses around Aids in Africa to serious intellectual discussion, the association is organising a conference with the theme, Rhetoric in the time of Aids: African perspectives.

Africa has been badly affected by the Aids epidemic and, as a result, there have been several discourses produced by the disease. Some of them have been superficially treated, and

some policy statements and declarations have not received the required attention because of lack of expertise in interpreting such documents. As a result, it would appear that African states have been rather ambiguous about the Aids epidemic.

The conference will aim to examine media engagements with the public on the level of persuasion and behavior change. In other words, issues relating to the rhetorical packaging of the Aids media message, the presentation and the reception of media messages by the public and the consequent behaviour of the public.

Wayne Both (2004) has proposed the notion of "listening rhetoric". This includes "the whole range of communicative arts for reducing misunderstanding by paying full attention to opposing views".

Sadly enough, the integrity of the agency of the media has been called into question because of its perceived paradoxical role in the fight against Aids – message overload and mixed messaging.

Have the media constituted for themselves an intelligent audience for their enterprise? Do the African media possess the capacity to do so? What roles perhaps should the government play in facilitating this?

In comparison to the more technologically-advanced countries, Africa's media still require further development to be able to reach their potential audiences; and without presence, rhetoric cannot function.

How are media organisations going to address this problem? What (rhetorical) strategies do they have in place? What is the role that symbolic rhetoric plays in the media's rapport with the public vis-à-vis photojournalism and art? George Kelly (1963), a renowned psychologist, has advanced the theory of constructive alternativism, which holds that the introduction of a new set of beliefs and frame of reference will result in the construction of a new self and ultimately change one's behaviour.

The question that one may ask the African media at this time is: how are they contributing to the renewal of societies and the reconstruction of their values in ways that reinforce positive social behaviour, definition and reconstruction of social "selves"?

Has Aids caused the African media to consider the reconstruction of their own values and how they have responded to the challenge? How have the media helped the public in interpreting their world with Aids and how effective are the series of arrangements made by the media?

*Rhetoric in the time of Aids: African perspectives, will be held in July 2009 and will be co-hosted by the University of KwaZulu-Natal, the Durban Health Economic and Aids Research Division and the Centre for Public Participation.*

*How have the media helped the public in interpreting their world with Aids, and how are the media contributing to the renewal of societies and the reconstruction of their values in ways that reinforce positive social behaviour, definition and reconstruction of social "selves"?*

# Media messages under the microscope