

American Communication Theories and African Communication Research: Need for a Philosophy of African Communication

by Dr. Charles Okigbo*

Abstract

This paper argues the case for a philosophy of communication in Africa so as to give meaning and direction of African communication research. Observing that philosophy as an activity is not alien to Africa, the author contends that it is the absence of a philosophy of communication in Africa that accounts for the lack of theoretical orientation in African communication research. He reviews the major American mass communication theories, and demonstrates that each of them is based on some American philosophy or world view. He then argues that any appropriate philosophy of mass communication in Africa must originate from African philosophy, defined in a fairly broad manner.

Résumé

Cet article préconise une philosophie de la communication en Afrique afin de donner sens et direction à la recherche en matière de communication sur le continent. En faisant remarquer que la philosophie en tant qu'activité n'est pas étrangère à l'Afrique, l'auteur soutient que c'est l'absence d'une philosophie de la communication qui explique le manque d'orientation théorique de la recherche en communication en Afrique. Il passe en revue les grandes théories américaines sur la communication de masse et démontre que chacune d'elles est basée sur une philosophie ou une vision du monde américaine. Il affirme, dès lors qu'une philosophie appropriée de la communication de masse en Afrique doit avoir son origine dans la philosophie africaine, définie de manière assez générale.

*Dr. Charles Okigbo is a Lecturer of the Department of Mass Communication, University of Nigeria, Nsukka, Nigeria.

Introduction

Mass communication as an academic discipline is a new comer in African Higher education, which itself is not yet fully developed. Today, even after more than three decades of teaching mass communication and journalism in African institutions of higher learning, the discipline has not made the mark expected of it.¹ African communication scholars have not yet developed authentic theories of African communication, nor has a veritable research tradition been established as a means of dealing with the myriad of social communication problems prevailing on the sprawling continent.

The ferment in the communication field which is evident in American and European communication scholarship has not been felt in Africa.² The African communication environment is still very dormant and tranquil because of the social and political climates that are primarily anti-intellectual, and the dearth of trained communication scholars with active interest in expanding the horizons of knowledge and inquiry in the field.

Communication scholarship is supposed to contribute to the development of theory, as a result of research in the field. This tripartite relationship is evident in American communication scholarship, which contributes copiously through research, to theory development. One century of American communication scholarship has given rise to numerous research studies, the results of which have contributed to the formulation of such communication theories as gate-keeping, agenda-setting, uses and gratification and media imperialism.

The experience in Africa, so far, has shown that three decades of communication education have not resulted in many research studies. More unfortunately, no theories have been developed to assist in scholarly explication of the African communication context. This is the direct antithesis of the American situation where communication scholarship led to numerous research efforts, the results of which are the many theories in the books now. Such theories are now providing the framework for further research, giving rise to a generative cycle that promises even greater developments in the field.

If there is any lesson to learn from communication scholarship, it is that "no condition is permanent". The ferment in American communication today was not always as volatile or active. For instance, in the Spring of 1959 issue of *Public Opinion Quarterly*, Bernard Berelson caused a big stir with his categorical statement

that communication research was "withering away."³ To this serious indictment, Wilbur Schramm replied that the corpse of communication research seemed extraordinarily lively⁴, and David Reisman wondered how the field could be anything but active when creative researchers were obtaining exciting results from even small-scale investigations.⁵

Since Berelson's 1959 indictment, communication research has advanced further, belying the charge that it was withering. This is because communication is an essential human function. As Schramm noted, "wherever communication is, we can look for a social relationship of some kind; wherever there is a social relationship, we can expect to find a communication relationship."⁶ This is what he calls a unique perspective of communication, to stress the point that communication is always a part of something and presents a relationship not only between individuals, but also between relationships. Not surprisingly a wide variety of scholars are studying a bewildering variety of social problems from a communication perspective. Some of these are social change, organizational climate, politics, business relations, intercultural and international affairs, youth and society, health care, educational technology, agricultural communication and development communication.

From the results of research in these areas, the conceptual pieces that can be collated to form definitive communication theories abound. In fact, in some cases, such theories have been formulated. Ironically, this creative ferment in American scholarship has not yet been introduced in African communication scholarship and so even though social problems approachable from a communication perspective abound, there are no concerted efforts at formulating theoretical propositions for their solutions.

1. African Communication Philosophy

One important reason for this malaise is the general absence of a philosophy of African communication. In spite of the old age of African civilization, a culture of intellectualism and philosophical scholarships has not yet been nurtured to a high degree. There is no doubt Africa has a rich philosophical tradition, especially when we understand philosophy as an activity that is done and not something read or watched. It is a misconception to think of philosophy as "a series of difficult-to-read opinions" rather than as an activity or series of activities aimed at answering primordial questions (or questions about the first principle in living).⁷ The questions are often asked about the nature of our responsibilities,

in society, our ideas of God, death, duty, altruism, militarism, etc. In Sparshott's view, philosophy is "the activity in which a man becomes and remains problematical to himself."⁸ There is therefore much to philosophize about in African communication.

Africans engage in philosophical discourses and "philosophy" as an academic discipline is taught in most African universities. In this examination of philosophy among an African group, Nwala observed that philosophy, as both a mode of thinking and a way of life is evident in the people's civilization and culture.⁹ The expectation for an African communication philosophy is therefore not misplaced.

In fact, in a recent study of African philosophy, Onyewuenyi adduced a strong argument to show that Greek philosophy, which is often thought to be the earliest form of formal philosophy, undeniably originated in Africa. In his words, "what is called 'Greek philosophy should be regarded as 'stolen' from Africa . . . Anybody who knows the history of the Greeks, that they were under African rule for many centuries, and were educated in all disciplines of knowledge by African teachers, will not find this difficult to see."¹⁰ These points are corroborated by James, who argues that North Africans (the Egyptians) were the authors of Greek philosophy.¹¹

A philosophy of African communication, when it is fully articulated, developed and nurtured, will contribute immensely in improving our thinking and activities concerning our important daily problems. After all, what is a philosophy if it does not impact significantly on people's lives. As Wittgenstein queried: "what is the use of studying philosophy if all it does for you is to enable you to talk with some plausibility about some obstruse questions of logic, etc., and if it does not improve your thinking about the important questions of everyday life."¹²

Philosophy is important not only because of the subject matter (essential problems of daily living) but also for the method, which according to Russel is akin to science in that both appeal to "human reason rather than to authority, whether that of tradition or that of revelation."¹³ This is the point which Breed explained by arguing that if necessity is the mother of invention, philosophy is the mother of science.¹⁴

A philosophy of African communication, therefore, is necessary for systematic investigation of communication phenomena and situations in Africa. Without this important element, African communication research will continue to be mostly like shots in the dark. Sometimes we might hit the bull's eye, but we cannot know even when we do.

Review of American Communication Theories

American communication scholarship has developed a handful of concepts and research strategies, which having been examined critically and empirically, are now generally accepted as theories. Their acceptance as theories does not exempt them from continuous scrutiny for refinement or rejection. One common feature of these theories is that because they pertain to social behaviour, it is not possible to specify all the extant conditions under which they obtain.

Gate-Keeping

One of the earliest communication theories is the gate-keeping theory which is useful in attempts to explain the patterns of decision-making in the newsroom, especially with respect to why some news stories are published or broadcast, while others are rejected by the people who keep the gates of the press. The pioneering efforts in gate-keeping research examined the news selection practices of wire editors to determine the guiding principles in their selection and rejection of news stories.

David Manning White studied one telegraph editor (Mr. Gates) and concluded that the editor's perception of fitness and appropriateness is the guiding principle in news selection and rejection.¹⁵ In a later replication, Snider reported that Mr. Gates still picked only those stories he liked and felt his readers wanted.¹⁶

The news selection process is not always idiosyncratic, as sometimes extra-news and extra-personal values are taken into consideration in deciding whether to publish or reject a particular news story. For instance, it has been found that news operations during crisis situations are different from the normal practice in non-crisis situations.¹⁷ In normal operations, newsmen are usually the sole keepers of the news gates, but in crisis situations, an emergent group that includes police, fire, hospital and weather bureau personnel share the gate-keeping with journalists.

The American gate-keeping theory is obviously informed by the larger social philosophy of liberation.¹⁸ In normal situations, gate-keepers select those news stories they believe that their audiences want. As few controls or restrictions as possible are allowed in keeping the news gates. Even in crisis situations, the belief in liberalism is evident in the practice of allowing more than one group to control the gates. In essence, therefore, the social philosophy has guided the theory which was derived from research. Because of the paucity of research in African gate-

keeping processes, we do not yet know how applicable this theory can be in African contexts. Since the American gate-keeping model is informed by the American social philosophy of liberalism, it is likely that an African gate-keeping model will be based on an African social philosophy. There is a pressing need to identify the news selection factors that guide African gate-keepers because these will help greatly in our understanding of the nature of African communication.

Agenda Setting

Another important mass communication theory is agenda setting. Whereas gate-keeping is concerned about news selection processes and criteria, agenda setting is a media-effects theory that seeks to explain the impact of the media on audiences cognition. The foundation for this theory is found in Bernard Cohen's immortal statement that the media might not be successful in telling us what to think, but are stunningly successful in telling us what to think *about*.¹⁹

In performing their gate-keeping functions, journalists play an important part in shaping social reality for their audiences, because not only do media audiences learn about given issues covered by the media, but they also take a cue from the media, as to how much weight to attach to these issues based on the nature of coverage they are given by journalists.

In political communication, for instance, it has been found that voters usually perceive issues of the campaign to the actual contents of the mass media during a campaign. The voters usually share the media's composite definition of what the important issues are, as a consequence of which the media are said to set the agenda for the audience and voters.²⁰

Though it is generally believed that the media set the agenda for the audiences, this pattern has not always been found in research.²¹ It is not inconceivable that the public (or some section of it) sets the agenda for the media, which take a cue from the concerns and interests of their audiences or publics. Nor is it unimaginable that both the media and the audience have a common independent agent that sets the agenda for them.

The theory of agenda-setting seems to be based on the American social philosophy of nationalism, which explains human behaviour as resulting from logical and thought-out deliberations based on reason.

Audience and media agenda are not set in a mystical manner, but often follow a rational pattern that is understandable through

reasoning. An extreme application of rationalism will lead to absurd rationalization of all agenda-setting research outcomes. However, a judicious application of the philosophy will only make scholars subject results to the dictates of reason, and attribute media uses and effects to natural rather than unobservable or unmeasurable results. This is the essence of rationalism, which according to Lecky predisposes men "to attribute all kinds of phenomena to natural rather than miraculous causes."²²

The ultimate result of most agenda-setting research is the determination of media-effects, except when the examination is reversed to show how the people set the agenda for the media. Whatever the direction of the particular investigation, the ultimate recourse is to reason, which suggests that in Africa, it may be more relevant to determine how the media set the agenda for government action rather than how they determine the audience's cognition.²³

Knowledge-Gap Hypothesis

If agenda-setting theory is informed by rationalism, the knowledge gap hypothesis seems to have benefited immensely from the American political philosophy of realism. The knowledge-gap approach is still largely called an hypothesis, though this does not imply that the concepts are less methodically worked out. The knowledge-gap hypothesis posits that as the infusion of mass media information into a community increases, the segments of this community with higher socio-economic status tend to acquire the new information at a faster rate than the lower status segments, so that the net effect is an increasing gap in knowledge between these segments.²⁴

The hypothesis seeks to explain the differences in the rates of knowledge acquisition with reference to socio-economic status, especially the educational level. The two chief principles can be stated thus:

1. Overtime, acquisition of knowledge of a heavily publicised topic will proceed at a faster rate among better-educated persons than among those with less education; and
2. at any given time, there should be a higher correlation between acquisition of knowledge and education for topics highly publicised in the media than for topics less highly publicised.²⁵

Knowledge-gap has been given different interpretations by different scholars. Gaziano has identified four different interpretations, ²⁶ and some studies have failed to validate the

claim that gaps in knowledge widen.²⁷ Reformulations of the original hypothesis to specify under what conditions gaps occur and widen have not been entirely successful. Genova and Greenberg would like to replace education with interest,²⁸ while Ettema and Kline suggest that the focal variable should be motivation.²⁹ Media dependency has also been suggested as one of the factors that affect the net result of knowledge gaps.³⁰ Some of the commonest variables found to affect the gaps in knowledge are the types of topic, geographical scope, definitions of knowledge, method of data collection and even the type of media studied.

Knowledge-gap hypothesis has benefited more from realism than any other philosophy. Realistic philosophy is so close to common sense, many think they are the same, but it is incorrect to accept that realistic philosophy is nothing but common sense. Many people observe at their first acquaintanceship with knowledge gap that it is just common sense. The ideas may make a lot of (common) sense, but it is the application of realistic thought that "precisely formulates the principles, analyzes their component concepts, and examines them in the light of the (available) evidence."³¹ This is the kernel of realism.

At an ordinary level of discourse, the knowledge-gap hypothesis seems to address the twin issue of knowledge acquisition and social-economic status, especially educational attainment. At a higher level, however, the focus is actually on the philosophical significance of communication as a necessary element in knowledge or education (epistemology), for as Urban has argued, all knowledge presupposes discourse or communication, and any theory of knowledge involves or includes the question of the necessary conditions of meaningful or intelligible discourse". He noted with finality that "communication, and therefore knowledge itself presupposes realism."³² Realism as a philosophy is most evident in the principles of the knowledge gap hypothesis, and of the three branches of realism (metaphysics, epistemology and ethics) epistemology is the most relevant.

Uses and Gratification

Human communication as goal-directed behaviour often has the ultimate objective of influencing people in a desired direction. Not surprisingly, early communication research was mostly concerned about direct effects of communication.³³ The discovery that the audiences of communication are active participants rather than passive receptors has led scholars to now ask what people do with the media, rather than what the media do to people. This new

strategy is at the root of the uses and gratification theory.

According to Blumler, the theory came most prominently to the fore at a time of widespread disappointment with the results of research designed to measure the short-term effects of media campaigns.³⁴ The theory posits that audience members are motivated in their selection of particular media and content types by identifiable social and personal needs. Using these media, therefore, leads to the gratification of these needs.

Critics say this approach is not a theory at all. According to Elliot, the popularity of uses and gratification theory "should not obscure the fact that it is basically a very atheoretical approach."³⁵ Other critics think it is only an accounting system, rather than a theory for research.³⁶ Swanson takes exception to these criticisms, and describes uses and gratification as the "new mass communication paradigm (which) has become the most popular and important approach to mass communication research."³⁷

The social philosophy closest to the principles of uses and gratification is pragmatism. Uses and gratification is a dynamic theory that does not see the audience as passively waiting to be sedated or ignited by the media, but rather as dynamically selecting specific media and particular contents for definite uses in order to derive some gratifications. According to Ayer, "one of the main features of pragmatism, which comes out not only in Peirce, but also in William James, and John Dewey and their followers, is that it is a *dynamic* philosophy."³⁸ It is only appropriate, therefore, that a dynamic philosophy is the basis for a dynamic communication theory.

True to its philosophical origin, uses and gratification theory does not fastidiously specify the specific uses to which people put the media, nor does it enumerate all the gratifications derivable from the uses. This is a reflection of the undogmatic nature of its progenitor, pragmatism, which according to James "has no prejudices whatever, no obstructive dogmas, no rigid canons... Her only test of probable truth is what works best in the way of leading us . . ."³⁹ Whatever meaningful results that are derived as motivations for, and gratifications from media use are acceptable without prejudice.

Social and Communication Philosophy

The foregoing has attempted to interpret each of the four commonest communication theories from a philosophical perspective. Thus, an attempt was made to show how rationalism informed agenda-setting, liberalism provided the foundation for

gate-keeping, realism is the base for knowledge-gap, and pragmatism provided the framework for uses and gratification. It is not inconceivable that one theory could benefit from more than one philosophy, or vice-versa. The utility of this analysis is not in the mathematical matching of theories and philosophies, but rather in heuristically showing how theory and research have benefited from philosophy.

Research in African communication has so far not benefited from the great heights attained by American communication scholars. Most research efforts in African communication are episodic, casual, serendipitous and non-systematic. Most tragically, these efforts are not informed by any identifiable philosophies, be they indigenous or foreign.

African communication scholars have at one time or another conducted research in folk or traditional media, rural communication, media use among urban poor, agricultural journalism, political communication and press history. Long years of research in these areas have failed to provide a body of knowledge that could form the foundation for some theories of African communication. One possible reason for this poor performance is the dismal absence of a philosophy (or some philosophies) of African communication, to inform the research efforts, so that research results can crystallize into a body of theory or bodies of theories.

Philosophy should not be an obtuse subject, fit for only classroom study. It should permeate all significant human endeavours and should inform discussions and research in both academic disciplines and the professions. Its usefulness in social communication is undeniable. It should form the basis of all research efforts, so that theoretical concepts can be subjected to the most exerting examinations, analyses, and refinement.

In the absence of clearly thought-out philosophical principles to serve as the framework for research in African communication, the field will not record significant progress in any direction, and thus the plague of serendipitous and unsystematic research not informed by identifiable theories will continue to obtain.

It is not imperative that some philosophical stance (realism or pragmatism) should be chosen as a peg on which to hang research efforts, before actual investigations are undertaken. What is needed, however, is the ability to identify and analyse or utilize the common strand among some research areas and then relate this strand to a specific philosophy that seems to inform it. In this sense, instead of individual and disparate researches with little commonality, interrelationships should be identified and stressed, to the benefit

of scholarship in the discipline.

What would a philosophy of African communication look like, when it emerges? Just as American communication does not have only one philosophy, its African counterpart should not be expected to have only one philosophy. The differences in the nature and character of American and African communication suggest that American philosophies will probably not obtain in exact forms in Africa.

Any philosophy of African communication must originate from African philosophy, which according to Okolo is essentially "a critical thinking of the African and his experience of reality."⁴⁰ Similarly, Anyanwu defines this philosophy as that "which concerns itself with the way in which African peoples of the past and the present make sense of their existence, of their destiny and of the world in which they live."⁴¹

A philosophy of African communication will consist of critical examination of communication in Africa with a view to determining its forms, structure, functions and the implications of its presence or absence in the context of African experience. An important part is the role of communication in the African's interpretation of his world view. If we can have philosophies of African languages, African religion, African history and African education,⁴² it follows that we must have a philosophy of African communication, for this is the necessary tool for any attempt at expressing any of the departmental philosophies. What would each of these philosophies be if we could not "communicate" them to ourselves and others?

Conclusion

The burden of this paper has been a description of some American communication theories to show how each is informed by a definite philosophy, which serves as a unifying factor for research in the area. The absence of theory-based research in African communication is attributed to the under-development of a philosophy of African communication. Such a philosophy was shown to be not only possible, but also urgently needed now. Broadly, such a philosophy will lead to sharper examinations of the forms and functions of African communication. The particular nomenclature for such a philosophy (rationalism or realism) is deliberately omitted at this stage.

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