African Communication: Problems and Prospects

by Michael Traber*

Abstract

This article sketches a broad overview of the problems and prospects of Africa communication. Beginning with Africa's economic handicaps which limit its potential to fully exploit the new array of modern communication technologies, it argues that it is class politics which excludes the mass of the African people from communication channels that constitutes the major impediment to communication in Africa. The remedy to this problem is, therefore, to be found in a communication strategy that accords due respect to African cultural traditions in which respect for truth, equality, social justice and the super-natural are the cardinal principles.

*Dr. Michael Traber is editor of *Media Development*,a journal of the World Association for Christian Communication, based in London.

Communication Africaine: Problèmes et perspectives d'avenir

Résumé

Cette article esquisse un large survol des problemes et pers-
pectives de la communication africaine. Commençant par les
handicaps de l'économie africaine qui limitent son potentiel
d'exploiter de façon exhaustive la technologie moderne en
matière de communications et soutient que c'est la politique
de classes qui écarta les masses de la population africaine du
monde de la communication, qui constitue le plus grand
obstacle à la communication en Afrique. La solution à ce
problème sera donc dans la formulation d'une stratégie de
communication qui accorde le dû respect aux traditions
culturelles africaines dans lesquels le respect pour la vérité,
l'égalité, la justice sociale et le supernatural sont des principes
cardinaux.

Introduction

Communication, we know, does not exist in a vacuum. It is part of a total life environment. it is conditioned by a country's economy, technological infrastructure, politics, socio-cultural traditions and goals, and its basic vision of society, or ideology. All this affects the media in a direct way. They, in turn, can have some effect on these conditions, at least by creating awareness. In addition, conditions are changing, often fast, and, alas, not always for the better.

This article attempts to sketch a very broad overview of the problems and prospects of African communication. The observations made in it are based on practical experience, and, in part, on reports about communication in Africa. But they are in no way complete. Rather, they want to identify certain trends which seem to be emerging. Conclusions which can be drawn from them are, therefore, necessarily provisional and tentative.

Communication and the Economy

Let us start with the gloomy part of the picture. One indicator of a country's economy, and, particularly, its foreign exchange earnings, is the bulkiness of its newspapers. All over Africa, the papers have become thinner. The main reason, of course, is scarcity of newsprint and, as in the case of Zimbabwe, this is inspite of the fact that news print is manufactured locally. Other countries are much worse off.

The situation is even more critical in book publishing, which relies on imported paper (and imported ink, chemicals, films and plates). Book publishing in some African countries is now grinding to a halt with tragic consequences for school children and students. In others, like Zimbabwe, it is severely restricted.

There are other scarcities which affect communication. The photographer finds it difficult to buy films; the family with a transistor radio cannot always obtain batteries, or finds them too expensive; telephones (where they exist) are not working as they should, in spite of the fact that we are often told that the newest and best equipment is on its way. Electrification pro-

grammes in rural areas are being scrapped, which means that rural Africa, some 70 per cent of the continent, will be deprived for a long time to come of television, VCRs good reading-lights and, perhaps worst of all, the telephone. A recent survey in Francophone Africa showed how long it takes for a letter to arrive in a fairly remote rural area: up to six weeks. Respondents were almost unanimous that they would not send a parcel by post (Consultation de Kinshasha 1988). Finally, transport problems bedevil most news organizations and communication work in general.

What are the consequences of these and other economic constraints on the mass media and communication in Africa? They may not be as serious as drought, starvation and war. One can survive happily without a newspaper, books and even a radio, let alone television. But the long term effects are serious.

News is an important aspect of a country's political culture. News is both nationally and internationally part of the political process. It is unlikely that a great deal of money will be invested in news gathering, newspaper publishing, etc., in the next few years. What can be done, at very little cost, is to improve the quality of news and its presentation.

The significance of radio is obvious in times of economic constraints. It is a comparatively inexpensive medium, as well for those who buy radio sets and batteries. Tanzania's policy of subsidizing locally manufactured radio sets seems to be a wise one. Radio, more than any other media, will guarantee that the flow of news is maintained among the majority of the people.

The cost and availability of paper and newsprint is a problem which defies easy solutions. But in the long run it must be solved. A recent study by Joerg Becker (1984) has shown that paper manufacturing, which presupposes soft wood afforestation is cheaper than most people realize, provided the cartel of the newspaper industry can be broken. If paper continues to become scarcer and dearer, the consequences on millions of

89

school children will be drastic, and the quality of life of the reading public will suffer.

If there is no significant expansion of the print media in the near future, the question arises what, apart from radio, are the alternatives? Desktop publishing with small print-runs (rather than keeping capital locked up in stock) may be part of the answer. More radically, however, there could emerge a 'small media' culture. Experiences of anti-apartheid groups in South Africa have shown how effective these participatory media can be, how they contribute to a new cultural self-awareness, and to an emancipatory popular cultural struggle (WACC 1985).

Communication and Technology

Imagine a country in which virtually every home had a telephone and people could directly dial any other home in the country, and every call would be free of charge! What a sense of security and community it would give us. An Indian space scientist told me this was technologically feasible, with battery powered telephone sets, and a system of terrestrial relay-stations which are connected to a satellite. But it would be difficult and expensive for the PTT to monitor and bill the calls; so it would only make sense if all calls were free.

If this example is true, it certainly shows how technology could improve the quality of life. But for the moment, technology is still a source of serious constraints on the media. We have already seen how the cost of communication technology continues to impede communication development in Africa. From a technological perspective the gap between the media rich and media poor is now so wide that it cannot be bridged for a long time to come. The city of Tokyo alone has as many telephones as the whole continent of Africa (Tracey 1988:13).

Part of the problem is the transnational corporations which have a virtual monolopy over much of the technological infrastructure, especially telecommunication. It is difficult to see why this monopoly cannot be broken, because there is enough scientific know-how in Africa, and certainly in the Non-Aligned

Movement, to start manufacturing telecommunication equipment.

Another problem is policy, particularly in the field of telecommunication which, because of its very nature, can only be developed sub-regionally, rather than nationally, in most parts of Africa. At least some technological problems could be solved if clear policy choices were made. As mentioned, there is the possibility of appropriate technologies in newsprint manufacturing and in desktop publishing.

Another area which should receive high priority is the humble telephone. It can be used for more than talking to each other. The telephone is now the linchpin in telecommunication technology. A well functioning telephone system is a precondition for many other communication technologies, like electronic mail, online communication by computer and telefax. They allow for very fast and very cheap communication which is rapidly replacing the more expensive telex. They are becoming the main technical infrastructure of news and information gathering for the media, business, government and no-governmental organizations (NGOs). Yet these technologies all depend on a reliable telephone system. And if it cannot be secured in the foreseable future, a whole new generation of communication technology will by-pass Africa.

Communication and Politics

A lot of decisions in communication and communication technologies are political because there is a lot of political use in, and misuse of, the media. When General Jaruzelski of Poland banned the Solidarity trade union, he began by having the telephone lines of all its activists cut. And it worked. Solidarity was caught unaware/and was in disarray. General Amin ruled for some time by radio. Uganda radio announced daily where and when army officers and civil servants had to meet, and indeed what they had to do. The people risked their lives if they did not listen to radio to know, for example, which roads had been closed and where a curfew had been imposed. It was tyranny by radio.

The Harare symposium on communication and People's Power in July 1987 had a great deal to say about the political implications of communication in Africa (Sakala 1988). In a simplified way, the problem boils down to one essential point: the lust for power. Most journalists in Africa (and elsewhere) are displaced or misplaced politicians. Though unelected, they love to act as power brokers. They love to pitch one politician against another. They love to uncover little conspiracies on the faintest of evidence. One reward for hard work, they say, is a sense of power, and setting the public agenda on what people might talk about.

The African press, both print and broadcast, is too political in its obsession with the speeches and ceremonials of government ministers. Whose favours are journalists trying to win? Is there a job that needs protection, or is there a promotion pending?

The problem of self-censorship is real and serious, for both personal and political reasons. There is no editorial office in the world which does not practise it. But there is too much self-censorship in Africa, to the detriment of both the government and the people.

On the other hand, the African press and broadcasting are not political enough in the sense that pertains to the common good and welfare of all the people, especially the poor, powerless and marginalized. Why is the press in Africa, and elsewhere, so disinterested in the plight of the common people? Why have the stories on drought and hunger in the last few years come from foreign correspondents rather than from African television? Why do African journalists, proud of their village background, not become the champions of the rural population, explaining their problems and aspirations? Why not shorten the ministers' speeches to the bare minimum and gain space and time for the stories of the people? Nothing could be of greater service to those same ministers and the country's government.

Those journalists who dream of media power may be disappointed when they read the findings of research. The power of

the mass media is much less than was once assumed. The present view is that the established mass media generally confirm and support the political status quo. But there can also be an alternative press, often called advocacy press, which questions the status quo, challenges the political power on the issues and problems of the people. The church had rendered sterling service to many African countries by supporting, and identifying with the advocacy press.

Sadly, however, many of these alternative newspapers and magazines have been closed down in the last few years, and hardly any new ones have emerged. Nor have those which have survived developed into genuine people's newspapers, which would dispense with the 'advocate' so that the people's voice can be heard in a direct way. We could all learn a lesson from our friends in South Africa who have pioneered the idea of truly democratic and participatory newspapers (Lowe 1983).

Communication and African Culture

Communication is part of culture because it uses visual and sound symbols which are cultural constructs. Communication is not only an important aspect of culture but, some say, it is culture in process. That also includes the media which are now being studied in courses on popular culture.

If one were to subject African newspapers to a scrutiny of how rooted they are in African values and traditions, the likely outcome would be that they are foreign bodies in the cultural fabric of Africa. Let me explain. Children in Africa are brought up to tell the truth always. There is also provision for occasions when the truth may be withheld. But if children are caught lying, it's a serious matter and they are punished. Honesty and truthfulness are highly valued African virtues, and telling lies is utterly despicable. Now consider the half truths, misinformation, disinformation and lies contained in our press. That is not only wrong in itself, but in Africa it is culturally alienating (Gelfand 1974).

Take two other highly placed values: a sense of humour and respect for the transcendental. A genuinely African newspaper should produce lots of smiles on the lips of its readers, even

93

laughs. That would be in the best tradition of African story telling. The supernatural or religious reality is taken very seriously by the people of Africa. Religion matters and plays an important role in the daily lives of most people. But how is the world of religion treated in our media? It hardly matters, apart from some sensational and bizarre stories.

Radio, it would seem, has done much better than the press in reflecting African cultural values. For obvious reasons: it is oral, its language is often the vernacular, and it is strong on both traditional and modern African music. Yet a great deal more could and should be done, and this at very little cost. Radio could become a cultural force of its own, which is modern but which draws on the rich traditions of oral popular culture.

So far I have hardly mentioned television—certainly not as a favoured policy option, because I believe that only a few African countries can really afford TV. But as television is with us, let's make the best of it. The latest UNESCO survey on programming in Africa dates was in 1983. It shows that 40 per cent of all African TV programmes were imported, and that about half of them came from the United States of America. There were of course wide differences from country to country (Tracey 1988: 11).

The most universally watched TV programme in Africa as well as elsewhere is *Dallas*. The former French Minister of Culture, Jack Lang, identified *Dallas* as a threat to the national culture of France and called for a crusade against financial and intellectual imperialism that no longer grabs territory, or rarely, but grabs consciousness, ways of thinking and ways of living (Tracey 1988:16—17).

Is *Dallas* a threat to, say, Zimbabwean culture? Probably not, because cultures are more deep-rooted and more resilient than to be seriously affected by imported TV programmes. In Zimbabwe, locally produced programmes such as *The Muka-dhota Family* had much higher ratings some years ago than *Dallas, Dynasty* or *Falcon Crest.* And this is the story from everywhere. locally produced drama programmes or soap

operas are more popular than imported ones. People only watch foreign programmes because there is nothing better to watch.

Which brings me to another point: the great and varied African tradition of story telling should be harnessed by the media, particularly by television. Both form and content of African stories transcend national boundaries. Similar stories are told in whole sub-regions. There is no reason why drama productions in English, made for the Voice of Kenya cannot be shown on Zambian screens and enjoyed greatly. The same holds true for Francophone African productions. The ideal would be co-productions of drama series and documentaries, which are jointly planned. Taken as a whole, African television is much richer than most people think. In a few years time, there will, objectively speaking, be no need to import non-African entertainment programmes, provided that co-operation between TV production centre is firmly established.

The other aspect in this discussion is training, which is considered a matter of course, and of high priority. Television co-production, like joint publishing, requires a great deal of expertise that must be learned. So do small media and participatory group media. But training, meaning skills development, must move a step further. It must become communication education, informing us not only about techniques but about the why and what for of African media. In brief, media training must be combined with issue—orientated communication studies. In the present upsurge of anthropological studies on communication, Africa could provide a lead on how communication could be treated as a popular culture for, traditionally, the separation between elite and popular culture is alien to Africa. It is all truly a people's culture. At least until recently.

Communication and Ideology

Jack Lang, whom I quoted, echoed Karl Marx who wrote that The ideas of the ruling class are, in every epoch, the ruling ideas...The class which has the means of production...has control, at the same time, over the means of mental production...so that the ideas of those who lack the means of mental production are subject to it (in Bond-Stewart 1986:16).

There is some truth in this statement, but it is too simplistic. It assumes that 'control over the means of mental (cultural) production' is necessary for people's communication to happen. There are, of course, other possibilities. There are examples in Africa of genuinely rural newspapers, in which the people own the content, i.e. have effective control, yet the legal owner is the ruling class.

What is more worrying is the myth or the ideology of schooling or 'education' and its effects on communication. Education in Africa is rated so highly that it is almost a synonym for competence, which is certainly not true for communication. This myth has had the effect that so-called uneducated people feel that they have little or nothing to contribute.

They feel excluded from the media, which mainly talk about the powerful, the wealthy and stars who have achieved fame in sports, entertainment or beauty. If you are uneducated in Africa, you simply have no chance.

Who then are these 'uneducated' people? They are the old men and women who embody the wisdom of the continent. They are the manual labourers, mainly farmers, who make the continent tick. They are the millions of women, without whose dynamism we would all be lost. And they are the youngsters many of whom have fairly clear ideas about the Africa they want. These are the people who virtually have no voice in the public sphere, yet who should be the communicators *par excellence*. Their exclusion is not only the fault of the media, but primarily of an ideology which believes that only so-called educated people count in the public sphere and public affairs.

Where, then, are the journalists and communicators who seek the wisdom of the old, consult the farmers on their experiences, allow the women to speak their minds and who do not dismiss youngsters as immature? We would be interested in any examples of this. Alternatively, and in addition, Africa will have to develop new and inexpensive media which the ordinary people can consider their own.

Conclusion

There is another ideological point. Some might wonder what this overview of problems and prospects of African communication has to do with one of the capital Cs in WACC, namely, the one which stands for Christian. My answer is simple: all of the issues have a great deal to do with 'the coming of the Kingdom', which is what the Good News of Jesus is all about. The values we have been concerned with are, in fact, the values of the Kingdom. like truth, equality, social justice and responsibility, solidarity, peace and love plus, of course, participation.

I shall conclude with the final paragraph of the section entitled 'Communication is participatory' from WACC's *Christian Principles of Communication':*

Participatory communication may challenge the authoritarian structures in society, in the churches and in the media, while democratic new areas of life. It may also challenge some of the 'professional rules' of the media, whereby the powerful, rich and glamorous occupy centre stage to the exclusion of ordinary men, women and children. Participatory communication, finally, can give people a new sense of human dignity, a new experience of community, and the enjoyment of a fuller life.

References

Bond-Steward, Kathy (1986). *Communication,* Gweru: Mambo Press.

Consultation de Kinshasha (1988). 'L'information et la communication dans les englises francophones d'Afrique'. Avril.

Gelfand, Michael (1974). *The Genuine Shona,* Gweru: Mambo Press.

Lowe, Kathy (1983). 'Opening Eyes and Ears'. In W.C.C., *Fighting Apartheid from the Grassroots* Geneva: W.C.C.

Sakala, R.(ed.) (1988). *People's Power in Africa,* Lusaka, Multimedia, Zambia.

Tracey, Michael (1988). 'Popular Culture and the Economics of Television'. *Intermedia,* London: IIC, March.

W.A.C.C. (1984). 'Solution to Third World Shortages May be Found in Non-Wood Fobres'. London: W.A.C.C., September.