

# Developments of African Professional Communication within the Context of the Global Community

Levi Obonyo

## ABSTRACT

The study of communication is new in Africa in many ways. The departments of communication in the universities are young and in some cases only forming; the libraries are sparsely stocked; the journals in the field in the continent are few and far apart; most of the faculty members are yet to season in the field but that problem is compounded in that most of the qualified individuals do not stay in the academy long enough to contribute to it. But these are not the only challenges that the field faces in the continent. The programs are poorly funded and the field is yet to be sufficiently anchored in a definitive philosophy or even tradition. These are challenges that the study of communication will need to overcome for the field in Africa to grow and contribute to the global area. As it sits now, there is no clear indication that the discipline of communication is maturing in the continent thus calling for collective attention from emerging scholars in order to make a difference. That is the difference that those in the field need to start making now.

.....

*Key words:* Communication Discipline, Communication Philosophy, Communication Theory, Communication Research, African Journalism

## Introduction

Wilbur Schramm (1983), considered by many as the father of the study of communication, noted more than half a century ago at the beginning of the study that he did not contemplate communication becoming a discipline but rather remaining a field. This paper entertains the question of whether the notion Schramm had remains relevant today, not just as the study of communication takes root in Africa, but even within the global context. As far as Schramm was concerned, communication was “one of the great crossroads where many pass but few tarry. Scholars come into it from their own disciplines, bringing valuable tools and

insights, and later go back, like Lasswell, to the more central concerns of their disciplines” (Schramm, 1983, p. 8). It needs little belaboring that the field of communication emerged from a variety of disciplinary backgrounds in the post Second World War.

### **Early Fathers and the State of the Field**

The behavioral scientist, Bernard Berelson, who, in 1959 lit a firestorm by musing aloud that “as for communication research, the state is withering away”, suggested that at least four people had made critical contribution to the field. He noted that: “In my view, the major lines of inquiry have been the political approach, represented by Lasswell; the sample survey approach, represented by Lazarsfeld; the small groups approach, represented by Lewin; and the experimental approach, represented by Hovland” (Berelson, 1959: p. 1). These four pioneers all came from different disciplines: Lasswell from political science, Lazarsfeld, from social psychology/sociology, Lewin and Hovland from experimental psychology/social psychology. Due to the disparate origins of the field, too often there has been little agreement. In response to Berelson’s article, Schramm wondered about the place of other contributors including himself. Many more would later add to the field to make it what it is today - a rich medley of traditions that applies a variety of tools to address social concerns. But even today, there is little concurrence on whether communication is a field or a discipline, even with years and scores of communication professionals who have devoted their lives to its study.

But why should it be of concern whether communication is a field or a discipline, and what kind of field or discipline? Simple. The response has implications on the way the study is examined, and the way the study will be looked at from outside by stakeholders and other agencies including the state and the increasingly significant world of corporate investors. Further, it has implications in the development of the tools to apply in addressing social issues, and in the seriousness with which the solutions developed will be appropriated by the wider community. In the academy itself, whether it is a field or a discipline has implications

in terms of the resources that it will attract in the students that will join it, and in the positioning of the field or discipline against other fields and disciplines. Craig (2003, p. 4) has argued that “Communication studies has acquired many of the institutional – professional trappings of an academic discipline but as an intellectual tradition it remains radically heterogeneous and largely derivative”. But what is it really today, globally? And what is it really today in Africa? In our exploration in this section, we reference particularly East Africa.

### **Disciplinarity and the Emergence of Communication Studies in Africa**

The dominant form a study takes is influenced by a variety of factors. Among these factors, as Craig ably elaborates, include the intellectual tradition, and probably the place we assign the intellectual enterprise in a country; the social institutions in the country and socio-cultural factors. Some of these questions informed the evolution of normative theories (Siebert, Peterson & Schramm , 1956). These included the exploration of the obtaining philosophy of the time and how these related to the understanding of the nature of man, the prevailing epistemological questions, and the predominant worldview. These perceptions invariably influence the organizational structure, and particularly the governance structure in a country. In the case of Siebert et al., this helped in laying the foundation of their thinking in the now somewhat dated but the starting point of understanding normative theories. We have to return to these considerations in exploring the state of the field of communication. The development of this field in Africa, cannot be divorced from these self same factors.

Hachten (1993) noted that development of media was alien to Africa and that media were a gift of the West to Africa. Similarly, it can be argued that communication was a gift of the West to the rest of the world. However, that has to be qualified that such a statement would only apply, and even then in a measured tone, in the sense of conceptualizing it from a theoretical standpoint, and not taking into account the traditional disciplines from which the field draws or even

the new areas of exploration. Ugboaja (1972) notes the centrality, and importance of oral media in African communication experience, demonstrating that communication may have been a gift to Africa in its form as a science but certainly not as a practice. Prior to the gathering of the pioneers in Chicago and in Iowa, the backgrounds from which communication has heavily drawn, the study had already had a rich evolutionary history in Europe. It is from these that our associating the early tradition with Frankfurt school and other thinking centers emerge. And then the circumstances in the United States where these immigrants settled helped shape the formation of the new field. It is this context that informs the propaganda research, small group and persuasion studies.

We devote a moment to the question of where the field is today in terms of how it is coalescing and moving towards disciplinarity. Robert Craig and Heidi Muller's (2007) *Theorizing Communication* is a useful beginning. Craig and Muller discuss the question of whether the study of communication has grown beyond a field to a discipline. What is a discipline? Discipline is derived from Latin *disciplina* which refers to "any field of knowledge or learning" but can go beyond that to denote qualities of self-control and orderliness essential for mastering training or education. Disciplines are rooted in "doctrine". While doctrine is concerned with abstract theory, discipline focuses on the practice or exercise of the doctrine". Today, however, discipline covers both the theory and practice of a field. Craig (2003, pp. 2-3 quoting Shotter 1997, p. 42) defines discipline as "a conversational community with a tradition of argumentation" that participates along with other disciplines in a larger conversational community—the conversation of disciplines—with its own traditions of argumentation". Craig has argued that we cannot consider academic disciplines as fixed pillars but more as swaying reeds that "emerge, evolve, transform, and dissipate in the discourse of disciplines". Tony Becher captures this complexity when he points out that:

*[t]he concept of an academic discipline is not altogether straightforward....  
The answer [as to whether a given field of learning is a discipline] will*

*depend on the extent to which leading academic institutions recognize [it] in terms of their organizational structures...and also on the degree to which a freestanding international community has emerged, with its own professional associations and specialist journals.... Disciplines are thus in part identified by the existence of relevant departments; but it does not follow that every department represents a discipline. International currency is an important criterion, as is a general though not sharply-defined set of notions of academic credibility, intellectual substance, and appropriateness of subject matter (Becher, 1989, p. 19 in Craig, 2003, p. 6).*

We return to these concerns in a little while. A critical factor is that even disciplines that have emerged do sometimes lose some of their sheen. They ebb and flow with the times. Some have posited that the romantic-modernist literature disintegrated in the late twentieth century. The disintegration was influenced by the changes in technology that became the new conveyers of the modern narratives. Some of these technologies include electronic means of conveying messages, among them TV, tapes, and VCRs that have redefined how audiences acquire, process, store and retrieve data. Gerbner, Gross, Morgan and Signorelly (1986) noted that sitcoms and soaps had replaced grandmothers and aunties – at least in their role as new baby sitters and storytellers. Consequently, a new moral emerges with different characteristics and obviously with different consequences.

Another example could be the case of education as a field of study in Kenya. Not too long ago education as a field of study occupied such a place of pride in society that young people looked forward to joining the field. But how times have changed! Today students admitted to take education too often would opt for something else. But while they ebb and flow, what are the mortars that contribute to the edifice of the field? Craig (2003), just like Becher, suggests that, “Rhetorical resources for constructing and legitimizing disciplines can be found in contexts of intellectual, institutional, and sociocultural history”. The intellectual level considers predominant texts of society both past and present, the obtaining theoretical frameworks that are used to conceptualize

problems and analyze and seek solutions to those problems. Simply put, it is an analysis of how we problematize situations and walk to their solutions. Classic theories of communication, be they semiotics, structuralism, diffusion of innovation, propaganda among others, were rooted in classical texts. These classical texts served as springboards from which those theories arose. Taking the example of McLuhan's (1966) technological determinism concept, such texts ought not be necessarily written. They could be oral. Would such texts have existed in Africa? The answer is in the positive. Odhiambo (1991) noted Prof John Mbiti's exploration of the notion of time and surmises that

*African time was 'a composition of events which have occurred, those which are taking place now and those which are immediately to occur. What has not taken place or what has no likelihood of occurrence falls in the category of 'no time'. What is certain to occur, or what falls within the rhythm of natural phenomena, is in the category of potential time (p. 70). The question may therefore be posed: Is Africa a victim of this philosophy, of inane inability to project, to forecast? (Odhiambo, 1991, p. 21)*

Another text that exists largely in orality is that of ubuntuism. Mbiti sums it as "I am because you are and since you are therefore I am" (Mbiti, 1969, p. 141). Obviously our philosophizing and theorizing are informed by these texts among others.

The texts oral or not, according to Craig, is just one pillar; the second relates to an understanding of the kind of institutions that exist. The exploration here focusses on how society has organized and deployed its institutions. What emphasis, for example, has a society laid on universities and academic institutions as centers tasked with the responsibility of providing solutions to social challenges and problems? How are professions, and disciplines, organized; and what are the agencies that they relate with? How are they resourced among other concerns? In the West, veritable institutions of knowledge provided centers for incubating knowledge and thinking in communication. This

is true whether it is the University of Hawaii, Stanford or the University of Iowa. Lazarsfeld noted:

*The Payne Fund Studies started in the late twenties, investigated the effect of movies on children's morals, attitudes and behavior. Subsequently, the interest of Rockefeller Foundation in the cultural effects of radio as a mass medium led to the establishment of two more permanent institutions: the Princeton Office of Radio Research and the Institute of Educational Radio at Ohio State University. (Lazarsfeld, 1952-1953, p. 481).*

This paper while concerned with the situation in Africa, deliberately avoids dwelling too much on South Africa because doing so has the potential of distorting the African picture. We return to that point later. Across the continent, there is hardly a university center today that could be considered to pioneer communication studies in any of the study's branches whether corporate communication, media studies, communication for development, or intercultural studies among others. Obviously, the situation is different in South Africa as the emphasis at Rhodes University, Stellenbosh University and the University of Kwazulu Natal, among others, have set different paces. Similarly, African organizations, outside South Africa, are not famous for supporting academic research in universities or endowing chairs. Change is beginning to occur in some African institutions leading to the question as to why it has taken so long and whether there are cultural inhibitions that attend to it. May be it is simply because academics have not previously tried hard enough or if the commercial world is just waking up to the importance of such focus. Probably, the emerging interest in corporate social responsibility in today's Africa will make a difference.

And then, lastly, are the socio cultural contexts that relate to worldviews and belief systems that influence scholarship. For example, what premium do African nations attach to academic discourse and the findings from research institutions? In some societies, governments invest heavily in academic institutions and consider them as centers for

generating solutions to social problems. In others, mostly African, centers of knowledge are seen as unnecessary evils that harbor troublemakers. Take the case of Kenya, it was once a proud citadel of competing thoughts. Idi Amin's academic refugees found solace across the border in Nairobi where they engaged in unhindered debate. Those were days when novelist Ngugi wa Thiong'o, James David Rubadiri, Okot p'Bitek, Micere Mugo, Ali Mazrui, and Taban Lo Liyong among others converged in senior academic common rooms to explore ideas and have a duel of the mind. Then the country changed and such free flowing ideas were checked and dispersed, with some scholars being imprisoned and others fleeing to exile. Kenya is yet to recover from this criminalization of intellectualism. There is limited African policy engagement where deliberate effort is made towards investing in education and research as a contributory element to national development. Kenya is in the process of implementing its national development blue print christianized Vision 2030, a subset of which is the Big Four Agenda that the Uhuru Kenyatta administration is championing. Vision 2030 lists critical areas of investment, economic, social and political environments for the realization of national development but is silent on education or research.

Craig concludes that emerging disciplines have then to draw "from a complex mixture of institutional, intellectual, and cultural resources, and negotiates the tensions among these different sources of legitimacy in specific ways" (Craig, 2003, p. 3). Following this analysis, Craig argued that there are seven traditions or approaches in exploring the field of communication: the rhetorical tradition, semiotics, phenomenology, cybernetics, socio-psychology, socio-cultural and the critical tradition (Craig & Muller, 2007). We do not explore these in detail here save to note that, as observed earlier, communication studies is a field with no consensus. Absolute coherence is neither possible nor even desirable (Craig, 2003, p. 10).

In exploring the coming of age of the field of communication, Craig is arguing that:



*Communication studies has acquired many of the institutional-professional trappings of an academic discipline but as an intellectual tradition it remains radically heterogeneous and largely derivative. What mainly explains the field's disciplinary emergence is the significance of communication as a category of cultural practice, and it is by reconstructing its intellectual traditions around that category that the field can best hope not only to become more intellectually coherent and productive but more useful to society as well. Communication's specific character as a discipline can thus be understood in terms of its contributions to knowledge in certain intellectual traditions, its evolving institutional forms, and its relevance to "communication" as a sociocultural category of problems and practices, but the third of these factors—the sociocultural context of disciplinarity—has a primary role (Craig, 2003: 4).*

Nordenstreng (2004) has applied the analysis of socio-cultural environment as a useful tool in understanding the framing of the phases of the field of communication. He focuses on specific decades and explores the dominant influences during those epochs; what he called "the ferments". For instance, he notes that the 1950s were essentially formative years in the field with the pioneers focusing their attention, and drawing from their desperate backgrounds into what Schramm would characterize as communication. It is the force of Schramm as a communicator himself and his ability to attract resources to the field that then helped consolidate it into the field of communication. But this period also marked the birth of the International Association of Mass Communication Research which in 2012, and for the first time in its history, was held in Sub Saharan Africa. But the 1960s were a different era all together. In Africa, it was characterized by the emergence of former colonies from colonialism into independence. Elsewhere it was a time for reconstruction where nations that had just emerged from war were focusing their attention on how they could apply knowledge and technology into developing their societies. But there is another factor, particularly in the United States that informs the development in the field. The restless spirit in the United States of America itself may have

fueled the thinking. Martin Luther King Jr was not only leading the match to demand for greater civil liberties but the agitation for universal suffrage not just for people of color but minorities including women. As fate would have it in the turmoil of the decade, Martin Luther King Jr was assassinated. But apart from that the period also coincides with the coming to an end of the Vietnam experiment, and the campus riots among others. In Nordenstreng's estimation, it is the period when the left leads in the assault of the center and this influence is felt in the kind of problems that communication field deals with during this period including cultural and critical studies. It is no wonder that it is within this period that such studies as Gerbner's cultivation theory emerged.

The 1970s were marked by a consolidation of the field and a reaching out to what was happening in the rest of the world; in a sense, according to Nordenstreng, (1968) a period of correction of sorts with the right seeking to assert itself in some ways. The right seeks to take some of the grounds they had ceded. The decade closed with probably the biggest communication issue of that era, the demand for balanced information flow, and later the MacBride report. But probably the more exciting period for the field is in the 1980s. The decade was ushered in with a bang by Ted Turner's launch of the 24-hour news flow that probably announced the arrival of the age of information. From then, there is acceleration in the evolution of technology, the massification of the Internet would soon follow and with it a completely new world of communication problems and research subjects including methods. George Orwell should have been alive. The subsequent decades were not only building on the decades of the 80s but were also influenced by the acceleration of technology in this field.

Nordenstreng's is just one view. As is typical in this study, there is often no consensus in the approaches to be adopted. For example, Berelson had, in the decades of the 1950s used a framing based on the research traditions. Even then, Schramm was disputing that, and later Nordenstreng considering Berelson rather sympathetically would argue that the American tradition probably had too much activity and little light emerging from the period. He summarizes his metaphor thus:

*In short, my diagnosis of the patient is: 'Too much physical growth and too many toys to play with, too little intellectual growth and too few problems to think over'. Considering the total amount of research effort in the field of communications in the United States, it seems to me that simple thinking is poorly represented in relation to all kinds of sophisticated measurement. The field concentrates on being correct in the technical methods at the expense of being loose on the conceptual level: it is hyperscientific and therefore quasiscientific. The field lacks theory: a solid conceptual framework exact and broad enough to relate the empirical data to the body of accumulating knowledge (Nordenstreng, 1968: p. 208).*

When George Gerbner, then editor of the *Journal of Communication*, in 1983, convened a gathering of communication scholars to assess where the field was headed, Nordenstreng, has observed that the occasion served a useful function in pointing out, not a blending of thinking in the field, but the liveliness in the field, and the amount of work that was going on (Nordenstreng, 2004). A decade later, when the *Journal of Communication* convened a similar gathering, the outcome was not much different. While previously as Schramm had noted scholars came and contributed to the field and then withdrew back to their home disciplines, there were no resident scholars in communication, but at least the field has continued to mature, and as the 1993 conference demonstrated, there are resident scholars who have come into the field and have remained actively engaged, considering the field of communication as their home. It is worth noting that this is true not just of the West but of Africa as well.

That the field remains in a flux is best illustrated by the changes occurring in universities, sometimes seemingly with little coordination. Take for example my alma mater, Temple University. At the beginning of the decade of 2000 the variants of communication studies were offered through the School of Communication and Theater. But since then the school has been renamed, and renamed again. "Theater" was moved to the School of Arts, and later "Mass" was retired from Mass Media and Communication leaving Media and Communication instead. The

school of Journalism at Columbia University a while back also shook the world of journalism by suspending some of its activities in order to reexamine its orientation. The same story can be repeated for many other universities.

## **The Debate in Africa**

Back to Africa. The danger with generalizing Africa is that it is such a vast expanse of space that it is worthwhile sometimes just focusing on a piece rather than the whole of it. Africa is in many ways, a young old continent. On average, we are about just a half a century old as independent state – no older than the reign of Queen Elizabeth. Indeed, it is instructive that South Sudan, the youngest of them all is just getting off the independence block with all the challenges that go with it. How do some of the criteria used as a basis for building a discipline apply to Africa? “In order for a practical discipline to flourish, three factors must be present. First, it must address cultural practices that are regarded as both important and problematic. In other words, it must be socially relevant. Second, it must have something useful to say about those cultural practices. It must have intellectual content. It must offer access to intellectual resources, rooted in traditions of academic thought that can be productively applied to understand and reconstruct those important and problematic cultural practices. Third, it must find a place in academic institutions (Craig, 2003, p. 14).

But is this criteria wholesomely accepted in Africa? Just as there is no consensus in the West on some of these issues, there is hardly any consensus in Africa as well. Charles Okigbo has argued that

*The ferment in the communication field which is evident in American and European communication scholarship had not been felt in Africa. The African communication environment is still very dormant and tranquil because of the social and political climate that are primarily anti-intellectual, and the dearth of trained communications scholars with active interest in expanding the horizon of knowledge and inquiry in the field (Okigbo, 1987: p. 19).*

Granted, Okigbo, writing in 1987 is somewhat dated today. But his countryman James (1990) seemed to concur. Okigbo, unlike Berelson three decades earlier, was not writing the obituary of the field, but issuing a call to arms. But for the field to progress, he underscored three essentials: scholarship, research and theory development.

On the first pillar, he does concur with Craig. But what Okigbo refers to in research is probably what Nordenstreng would consider as hyperscientism – too much activity without movement. However, his focus of research is different as he calls for solutions to social problems. Nordenstreng is not critical of science as such but rather simply asking: what kind of science? On this he probably would agree with Okigbo, for Okigbo says that “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 social communication problems prevailing on the sprawling continent” (Okigbo, 1987, p. 10). On the question of an African theory, Guy Berger dissents asking why an African theory? To which Okigbo would probably respond: “the discipline has not made the mark expected of it”. Then Okigbo offers an answer, that the reasons for the malaise in communication in Africa is because of “lack of African communication philosophy?” Okigbo explores African philosophy in great detail. He concludes that an African philosophy of communication has not yet emerged. Obviously in the more recent past, there have been some debates on the place of ubuntuism in African communication from people such as Fourie (2006), Ramose (2002), Blakenberg (1999), Christians (2004) and others. It is safe to frame Okigbo’s philosophy within the wider socio-cultural factors in Craig.

Okigbo’s concerns are not isolated. Other scholars such as James (1990), and Murphy & Scotton (1987) among others agree with him on, what are the African challenges institutionally, intellectually and socio-culturally? Starting with institutional concerns, Okigbo notes that “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” (Okigbo, 1987, p. 10). Three decades later, the concerns raised by Okigbo remain valid. But what should have been the mark to indicate that some activities were going on? Sybil James argues that Mass media should contribute to national development, “facilitate the use of traditional media as opposed to their theorizing about the virtue of these media as channels of communication” (James, 1990, p. 5). They should influence government policy and bring people and government closer; communication should help identify, plan and execute development projects. There is both agreement and disagreement between James and Okigbo. Both agree on research for social change. But while Okigbo would advocate theory development as well, James would not focus on that.

In exploring the institutionalization of the field further, we limit ourselves in this discussion to just two areas: academic institutions and how they are structured; and professional organizations both for academic and for practice, and lastly the respect the discipline draws from other institutions.

The problem with lumping Africa together is that too often it could lead to a distorted picture. There are some fine institutions which could lead one to think this is the situation across the continent. But there are also wide varieties. While the field of communication may be decades old in a country such as South Africa, in many African countries that is not the picture. Taking the case of Kenya to illustrate the point, the country has over seventy universities and university campuses both public and private. All these campuses offer some form of program in communication although majority of them are offering mainly media studies. Various tracks of communication studies have been offered. For example at Daystar University, over the last four decades, various tracks of communication have been offered including intercultural communication, media studies, development communication, corporate communication and now film studies. All the public universities are offering mainly media studies with the exception of the University of Nairobi that has, besides media studies, development communication

and corporate communication. The question that has to be explored is the health of most of these programs. Who are the faculty? What are the academic background of these faculty? What is the state of library collections? What are the physical infrastructure in place to support these programs?

In most of these institutions, the rationale for establishing these schools and departments of communication have been, largely, to attract students and contribute to the bottom line of the universities in light of the cost sharing regimes that were brought in by the World Bank in the decades of 1980 and 1990. Most of the departments have been set up by departments of linguistics and educational technology among others. That in itself is not the problem since, as we have noted, the genesis of the field is multidisciplinary. The problem is that the driving motive has not been to address existing theoretical or practical intellectual challenge but rather to provide for the economic rationalization of some departments. Once these departments start offering various tracks in communication studies, they do not engage in any critical and substantial exploration of the field or contribute to it in any meaningful theoretical way. Consequently, Africa has not produced career communication staff whose commitment is to the discipline, instead the staff have stayed in academic for the convenience and moved on to NGOs and other engagements whenever better offers have opened up.

The point here is that the departments and schools have mostly been set up haphazardly without having the field of communication in mind but with economic survival in mind. The departments have also been staffed by people whose commitment is not in the field so that they can make a critical contribution from a research and theory building point of view. There are isolated exceptions of course. Francis Kasoma (1996) of Zambia, in his short academic life, proposed the concept of Afri-ethics even though Fackson Banda (2009) has credibly questioned it. Again, in his short academic life Ugboaja focussed attention on oramedia. In the 1980s Traber and others argued in the 1980s for an alternative framing of journalism values. These efforts which would have been important for the health of the field have not been sustained. This

paper deliberately does not focus on South Africa where the Tomasellis have done important work at the University of Kwazulu Natal, and there has been important focus on media studies at Rhodes University with Guy Berger, Fackson Banda and later Herman Wasserman before he moved on, and Prof Arnold de Beer who made equally important contribution previously at the Potchefstroom University for Christian Higher Education before moving on. The reason for excluding South Africa is so as not to distort the picture. But there is another reason – South Africa has not been available to Africa. For decades, and the democratisation of South Africa has not changed the situation that much, what happened in South Africa has remained in South Africa and there has been little interaction between the rest of the continent and its largest economy. Guy Berger deliberately tried to change that. For many years, the Journalism program under Berger at Rhodes University tried to bring Africa on board in the Grahamstown indabas, but it is difficult to access the works of South African scholars in the rest of the continent. There has been no deliberate effort by South African publishers to market their publications in the continent.

Secondly, with respect to academic organization, there has been neither a body nor academic journals to sustain the field in the continent. In South Africa, SACCOM has been active for many decades hosting annual conferences and publishing journals. The African Council of Communication Education was once vibrant in Africa but has since receded to the corner of West Africa. While still based in Nairobi, ACCE published the journal *African Media Review* that contributed significantly to the conversation around communication in the continent. Today, there is no such towering body and no such journal. South Africa alone has *Ecquid Novi*, *Communication*, and *The Review* among others. The development of communication in the West owed its roots to such journals as *Journal of Communication*, and *Public Opinion Quarterly* among others. Africa must engage in conversations and contribute not just to the continental debate but to the global one as well. One would hope that the hosting of IAMCR in South Africa nearly a decade ago, and the possibility of the conference coming back to



Africa again in the next two years would have served to focus attention on communication work in the continent and revive interest in the discipline from Africa. East Africa now, as a start, has an association, the East African Communication Association and a journal to go with it.

Professionally communication related professions have made a strong foot print in the continent and beyond whether from an organized stand point, such as through organizations including Media Institute of Southern Africa, MISA or at an individual level. As media organizations the Media Institute of Southern Africa, MISA, is probably the most established. There are, across the continent, national unions of journalists with varying degrees of importance, and national media councils with varying degrees of significant contributions. Africa boasts some important media houses that are publishing professionally. The Nation Media Group in Kenya is one such example that could hold its own anywhere just as would the Star or the Sowetan. But we have also had individual journalists that have demonstrated great courage and leadership from across the continent and Barrat and Berger (2007) have immortalized some of them.

The other professions, i.e. corporate communication and development communication have not yet made similar footprints to explore. The Public Relations profession in Kenya is making deliberate efforts to professionalize the trade and efforts are underway to anchor this development in law. Equally, in terms of curriculum development, there is still too much reflection of western models. It is surprising how in many African universities students have to answer questions relating to First Amendment and American founding fathers of journalism instead of the roles that African pioneers played and continue to play.

James argued that “The important task for African journalists and journalism educators is to find the meeting point between advocacy journalism for Third World development, the national communication ethos and the canons of Western journalism, which must still be regarded as useful points of reference and departure” (James, 1990, p. 6). This is a continuing debate. Unlike James there are many who are less

inclined towards advocacy journalism. The important thing however is the opportunity to debate just what kind of journalism should Africa adopt and why that is important.

What then are the challenges of African communication education? The first is the still strong dependence on western models and western textbooks. Ansah, Kasoma and Traber did propose new approaches and alternatives but they remained just that proposals (Rowlands & Lewin, 1985). Secondly, “training of journalists and other communication specialists has not always contributed to a new communication ethos because it is often simply a transfer of professional education in Western nations with a very different set of presuppositions”. Most of the textbooks, reference materials, educational methods and communication ethics are still based on public philosophies that differ from those in most African countries (James, 1990, p. 6). Journalism today is being learnt in formal classroom settings by students with varying levels of competence in the official language of communication, and whose primary concern is job opportunity. For some, it is the apparent prestige and glamour of the profession (James, 1990, p. 10). But this is not where journalism began in Africa. That history is one of activism, risk taking, and a public cause. The argument is not for statism and being stuck in the 1960’s glory. But can journalism be, for most journalists, of a higher calling than just job opportunity? In every part of the continent, there are journalists like Nigerian Dele Giwa, who have given their all to the course of the profession. For the academy, the task is to record these contributions and place them in a wider canvas.

What is the role of communication in Africa? Lewis Odhiambo explored two ends of the continuum. On the one was the social responsibility self regulating approach advocated by Kenya’s famed editor Hilary Ngweno. On the other was the developmental model embedded in government structure championed by Kwameh Nkurumah. Odhiambo notes that most African countries explicitly stated that it was the role of the mass media to create national unity and foster development. To this end, they nationalized many electronic media houses as Bourgault (1995) has documented. Odhiambo notes that journalists “suddenly became

civil servants and government spokespeople” (Odhiambo, 1991, p. 23). “Nkrumah believed that a journalist should have high ideals, be a political activist and party member, and ‘His newspaper a collective organizer, a collective instrument of mobilization and a collective educator, a weapon first and foremost for the overthrow of colonialism and imperialism and assists total African independence and unity”. Ng’weno and Nkrumah’s arguments remain the two most powerful inspirations and justifications for African’s mass media policy. They also provide the utilitarian underpinnings of development journalism as an occupational self-perception and a theory of the press” (Odhiambo, 1991, p. 24). Media scholarship must make a critical contribution in this area whether it is in South African emerging democracy, Kenya’s evolving search for identity or in Ghana’s incipient democracy.

## **Conclusion**

We conclude with an exploration of the situation in Africa today. The world today is said to be less poorer than it was a decade ago. This is good news for Africa even if poverty is not going down as fast in Nigeria. The decline in poverty has got implication for access to education and the expansion of civil rights. Child mortality rate is going down. Africa still has malaria, but the rate of HIV Aids infection is declining. Adoption of technology in Africa is amazing. The digital broadcasting platform means that even Africa has the whole world at her fingertip, but at a cost. The implication of course is that the information gap will increase. Minerals are popping up across the continent: oil, coal and natural gas in Kenya Uganda and Tanzania alone. There is some soberness returning to such countries as Rwanda, Liberia, and Ghana’s democracy is getting better established. Old habits die hard in Eriteria, in Zimbabwe and in both Sudan and South Sudan. New Media legislation in South Africa is something to watch just as is Boko Haram and Al Shabab in West and East Africa respectively. And what is the implication of all this for communication studies? This is the challenge that African communication programs and communication institutions must address itself to.

## REFERENCES :

- Banda, F. (2009). Kasoma's Afriethics: A reappraisal. *The International Communication Gazette*. 71 (4), 227-242.
- Barrat, E., & Berger, G. (Eds.). (2007). *50 years of journalism: African media since Ghana's independence*. Johannesburg: The African Editor's Forum.
- Bauer, R. A. (1959). The state of communication research: Comment. *Public Opinion Quarterly*. 23 (1): 14.
- Berelson, B. (Spring, 1959). The state of communication research. *Public Opinion Quarterly*. 23 (1): 1-6.
- Berger, G. (2002). Theorizing the media – democracy relationships in southern Africa. *International Communication Gazette*. 64 (1): 21–45.
- Blankenberg, N. (1999). In search of a real freedom: *Ubuntu* and the media. *Critical Arts* 13 (2): 42–65.
- Bourgault, L. M. (1995). *Mass media in sub-saharan Africa*. Bloomington: Indiana University press
- Christians, C.G. (2004). *Ubuntu* and communitarianism in media ethics. *Ecquid Novi* 25 (2): 235–256.
- Craig, R. T. (November 21, 2003). *Discursive origins of a communication discipline*. Paper presented at the annual Convention of the National Communication Association, Miami Beach, FL.
- Craig, R. T., & Muller, H. L. (Eds.) (2007). *Theorizing communication: Readings across traditions*. NY: Sage.
- Fourie, P. J. (2006). *Moral philosophy as a threat to freedom of expression: From Christian-nationalism to ubuntuism as a normative framework for media regulation and practice in South Africa*. Paper presented at the International Association for Mass Communication Research, the American University, Cairo, Egypt.

- Gerbner, G., Gross, M., Morgan, L. & Signorielli, N. (1986). Living with television: The dynamics of the cultivation process. In Bryant J, Zillman D, eds. *Perspectives on Media Effects*. Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates: 17–40
- Hachten, W. (1993). *The growth of media in the Third World: African failures, Asian successes*. Ames: Iowa State University Press.
- James, S. (1990). Development of indigenous journalism and broadcast formats: Curricular implications for communication studies in Africa. *African Media Review*. 4 (1), 1-14.
- Kasoma, F.P. (1996). The Foundations of African Ethics (Afriethics) and the Professional Practice of Journalism: The Case of Society-Centered Media Morality. *Africa Media Review*. 10 (3), 93–116.
- Katz, E. (1959). Mass communication research and the study of popular culture: An editorial note on a possible future for this journal. *Departmental Papers (ASC)*, 1-6.
- Lazarsfeld, P. F. (1952-1953). The prognosis for international communication research. *Public Opinion Quarterly*. 16 (4): 481-490.
- Mbiti, J.S. (1969). *African religions and philosophy*. Oxford: Heinemann.
- McLuhan, M. (1966). *The Gutenberg galaxy*. Toronto: University of Toronto.
- Murphy, S. M., & Scotton, J. F. (1987). Dependency and journalism education in Africa: Are there alternative models? *Africa Media Review*. 1 (3), 11-35
- Nordenstreng, K. (2004). Ferment in the field: Notes on the evolution of the communication studies and its disciplinary nature. *The Public*. (3), 5-18.
- Nordenstreng, K. (1968). Communication research in the United States: A critical perspective. *Gazette*. XIV(3), 207-216.
- Nyamnjoh, F.B. (2006). Re-thinking communication research and development in Africa. In Paul Tiyambe Zeleza (ed.). *The Study*

*of Africa: Disciplinary and Interdisciplinary Encounters* (Vol.1).  
Dakar: CODESRIA: 393-416.

Odhiambo, L. (1991). Development journalism in Africa: Capitulation of the fourth estate. *Africa Media Review*. 5 (2), 17-30

Okigbo, C. (1987). American communication theories and African communication research: Need for a philosophy of African Communication. *African Media Review*. 1 (2), 18-31.

Ramose, M.B. (2002). The philosophy of ubuntu and ubuntu as a philosophy. In P.H. Coetzee and A.P.J. Roux (eds.). *Philosophy from Africa*. (2nd Ed.). Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Rowlands, D. Lewin, H. (1985). *Reporting Africa: A manual for reporters in Africa*. Harare, Zimbabwe: Thomson Foundation.

Schramm, W. (1983). The unique perspective of communication: A retrospective view. *Journal of Communication*. 33, 6–17.

Siebert, F. S., Peterson, T., & Schramm, W. (1956). *Four theories of the press*. Chicago: University of Illinois press.

Ugboaja, F. O. (1972). Traditional - urban media model: Stocktaking for African Development. *Gazette*. 18 (2): 76-96.

---

## BIO

**L**evi Obonyo (PhD, Temple University) is the Dean of the School of Communication at Daystar University in Nairobi Kenya. He is the co-author of *Journalists and the rule of law*. His study interests include history of African media and media policy and regulation.