Bridging Research and Expertise: Dominant West African Trends in Communication Studies

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ABSTRACT West Africa, in this article, is used as an analytical framework for examining communication research from a diachronic perspective. The text is based on a literature review through which the author analyzed a corpus on West African work (articles in scientific journals, grey literature, and books on African communication research). After briefly sketching scientific production trends at the continental level, the author provides a historiography of West African communication research from the 1940s onwards. The substantial contribution of the subfield of philosophy of communication and the foundational orientation that it has lent to research, especially in the 1980s, are then reviewed in greater detail. Particular attention is paid to Francophone communication and gender research. Finally, the article identifies the discernible trends guiding the future agenda of communication research.

KEYWORDS Communication research; Philosophy of communication; West Africa; Critical theory

Introduction

As an analytical category in social sciences research, the term “African” falls short, as the diversity of African countries in terms of religion, language, and institutional structure renders any attempt to talk about “African” science problematic, even when limited to the field of communication (Kane, 2012). More generally, communication...
research tends to concern itself with vague notions so vast that even the categories of Africa, Latin America, and Europe are strongly contested:

How could anyone dream of grouping together, in a single basket, Sub-Saharan African researchers, who are divided by a huge territorial area and some 40 media systems, by three lingua franca each with their own strong colonial legacies, by hundreds of African languages also with their own impact on today’s situation, and finally by individual educational histories, from home as well as from the West? (Kivikuru, 2009, p. 187)

One way of dealing with this problem would be, for example, to select a limited number of countries and to work to identify recurring elements on a limited scale, as Windeck (2010) has suggested. In this article, I take Windeck’s suggestion to heart, limiting my scope to West Africa, a region that, while not homogeneous, nevertheless seems to lend a scale and panoramic view favourable to the delimitation of a regional trend in communication research.

This article is based on a literature review that aims to analyze a corpus consisting of articles published in scientific journals, grey literature (various reports and working papers produced under the auspices of expert work), as well as books on African research—especially communication research work undertaken in West Africa. Working with this corpus, I have conducted a thematic content analysis based on recurring categories appearing in the literature, categories which also structure the current work. The principal goal here is to update the dominant trends in communication research by re-situating them in the context of the emergence of scientific research in Africa according to available historical evidence. I then turn my attention to communication research in West Africa.

With the goal of assembling a cartography of themes, issues, and actors in West African communication research, I first address certain aspects that allow for an understanding of the general framework of African scientific research, both in quantitative terms (with the use of bibliometric indices) and qualitative terms (in identifying favoured methodologies and themes). The second part of this article builds a historiography of West African communication research between the end of the 1940s and the middle of the 1980s. This general portrait serves as a background for appreciating the trajectories later taken in subsequent decades. In the third section, I consider the contribution of the philosophy of communication to the development of research. The claims made under the auspices of the philosophy of communication to orient research are analyzed and its particular critical perspective is detailed. In the fourth section, I analyze the favoured fields of investigation in contemporary West African communication research and identify the preferred themes, methodologies, and primary actors of the field. I pay particular attention to Francophone research in “communication and gender,” which, while similar in many ways to mainstream West African research, nevertheless presents important specific traits. Finally, I return to the global situation, identifying trends relative to the future of communication research.

**Overview of scientific production and diffusion in Africa**

Initially, scientific research in postcolonial Africa replicated the power relationships of
the colonial period by favouring scientific and technical cooperation agreements between established metropolises and new states.\textsuperscript{2} It was during this period that the first African universities emerged. Cairo University in Egypt was founded in 1908. In sub-Saharan Africa, it was followed by the University College of Ibadan in Nigeria in 1948 and the University of Dakar in Senegal—grandfather of Francophone sub-Saharan universities—in 1957 (Gaillard & Waast, 1988). Due to its relative youth, as well as certain structural factors, African scientific research has remained quite scant. The absence of incentives for teachers to invest themselves in research, and a poor level of remuneration that obliges them to undertake various complementary activities just to make ends meet, are among the factors to take into account when explaining the situation.\textsuperscript{3} Table 1 provides a comparison of scientific production on a global scale since the 1990s.

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Region</th>
<th>Ratio of publications per region (%)</th>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1990</td>
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<tr>
<td>North America</td>
<td>41.6</td>
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<td>EU (25 countries)</td>
<td>34.0</td>
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<tr>
<td>Asia</td>
<td>14.5</td>
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<tr>
<td>Latin America/Caribbean</td>
<td>1.7</td>
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<td>Africa</td>
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<td>Oceania</td>
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Here, we can see that the African ratio remains constant from 1990 to 2000. This stability, however, obscures an augmentation in the number of publications in absolute terms in Africa as well as around the world. An important tendency in African research is that it increasingly internationalizes itself through a growing number of co-publications between African researchers and their global peers, perhaps due to the relatively paltry number of publication venues on the continent. Several sociometric studies have attempted to quantify the volume of scientific production in Africa in order to evaluate this work. Tijssen (2007), for instance, analyzes citation indices while concentrating on international journals with review committees, national and regional journals, conference proceedings, books and book chapters, as well as research reports and documents. While his study does not take into account social sciences and humanities due to a lack of available data, this work allows for the identification of certain global characteristics of scientific production in Africa (see Figure 1). Nevertheless, the figure below contrasts greatly with national specificities to such an extent that Tijssen (2007) considers the expression \textit{African science} to be nonsense: South Africa alone accounts for 31% of the total volume of African scientific publications (not counting social sciences and humanities). South Africa and Egypt together account for 51% of the total production (see Figure 1).
Until recently, there have been few reliable quantitative studies of African scientific production, largely due to the importance of grey literature to research and to the fact that the hard sciences have a greater tendency to work at the international level than the social sciences and humanities. Consequently, the hard sciences are more easily accessed by bibliometric instruments that scan databases, lending particular attention to citation indices:

One must, however, account for the fact that African researchers largely publish in local journals that are not indexed by the principal international databases. A large part of their work also remains grey literature which is not accessible to the international scientific community. (Gaillard & Waast, 1988, p. 8)

The pioneering work of the Council for the Development of Social Science Research in Africa (CODESRIA), along with the groundwork laid by the Panos Institute with regard to media studies, though, has contributed greatly to improving the situation by creating spaces at the continental level for the recognition and publication of African social sciences research.

Despite the contrasting character of countries at the economic level, the importance of graduate teaching, and the institutional level of research organization, it is possible to propose a general diagnosis regarding the rarity of African communication research. The causes are multiple; however, the limitations have much to do with the
means of scientific research distribution in general, and of communication research in particular. As digital platforms have become more accessible, the general picture has changed substantially:

A remarkable change has taken place during the past 10-15 years, partly thanks to new technology, and partly due to the fact that African research has grown and received attention owing to the quality of the work. The number of platforms has increased, and northern publishing houses have opened their doors to African authors more frequently than before. Further, texts by African researchers appear regularly in northern, refereed journals. (Kivikuru, 2009, p. 193)

In other words, the model of African scientific production must be made more complicated by taking into account the visibility of communication research in Africa, a large amount of which exists as grey literature. This situation is partially responsible for errors that have been denounced by philosophers of communication, because without memory or traceability of academic work, it becomes very difficult to have a cumulative effect (Goody, 1979). A hysteresis effect should also be taken into account if one adopts Gaillard and Waast's (1988) view that African scientific research is nourished by mainstream research published in the North, but which African researchers are only exposed after a certain delay. This observation, dating from the late 1980s, should be tempered by the importance that has been assumed by digital communication and the accessibility of scientific distribution platforms. To the contrary, the language used continues to affect the visibility of scientific work. In this respect, Anglophone researchers are more visible than their Francophone and Lusophone peers due to the fact that the majority of international journals indexed in international databases are Anglophone. In the following section, I turn my gaze to West African scientific production in communication studies, attempting to trace its historical contours in fine detail.

Historic steps in West African communication research
The first stirrings of communication research in Africa emerged during the colonial period. Edeani (1988), in his periodization, identifies five temporal junctures in attempting to account for this historiography:

1. Before 1945, scientific research was sporadic and very fragmentary. The odd initiative occurred during the colonial period, notably in connection with the British Colonial Research Council and the French Office de la recherche scientifique coloniale (ORSC). Almost no research touched on communication during this time where the discipline did not formally exist.

2. Between 1945 and 1959, the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) undertook several studies in Africa in collaboration with the Colonial Office, Britain's ministry of colonial affairs. In 1957, Hailey conducted pioneering work with a 23-page study, entitled An African Survey, dedicated to the analysis of the development of the French, Belgian, and Anglophone press in Africa (Edeani, 1988). During this period, scientific work was essentially descriptive and favoured a historical approach.
3. The decade of the 1960s was one of African independence as well as an explosive period of research. One hundred and eighty-three studies in the field of communication were conducted, compared with 45 studies during the preceding years (Edeani, 1988). The intervention of foreign researchers in various scientific disciplines is an important trend that emerged in the development of empirical and quantitative approaches and in the generalized use of questionnaires by both African and foreign researchers. Communication, however, was little more than a supplementary variable for engaging with phenomena like urbanization, social behaviour, or political implication (Frère, 2012). Journalism and the press, however, occupied an important place in research. This was well demonstrated by the important role played by the Séminaire international sur la presse et le progrès that took place in Dakar in 1960 and energized future communication research, with the publication of several collections on the press (Edeani, 1988).

4. In the 1970s, the tendency to consolidate mass communication research entrenched itself in Africa. With this, certain problems emerged that were connected with the importation of theories from the United States and the interpretation of field research data in a manner that tended to reinforce certain prejudices regarding African populations. Methodologically, research favoured the massive use of questionnaires, especially for audience analysis and to quantify the diversity of equipment used in different media models. High-quality research was produced during this period, and the first annotated bibliographies on mass communication were published, leading to the first attempts at synthesizing West African communication research.

5. In the 1980s, African communication researchers undertook a vital process of appropriation. During this period, university communication studies programs were founded, first at the master’s and doctoral levels and then at the undergraduate level. Nigeria and Ghana were important innovators. At the same time, since 1965, Senegal was home to the Centre d’études des sciences et techniques de l’information (Cesti), a school founded with the support of UNESCO that has trained generations of Francophone African journalists and intellectuals. During the same period, research diversified significantly, and researchers concentrated on a great variety of themes, such as journalistic coverage, mass media effects, public opinion, and the gatekeeper role of journalists. These research interests were quite similar to mainstream research concerns in the United States. Research methods favoured during this period were interviews and surveys, even if the historical approach maintained a certain importance (Edeani, 1988).

Thus, until the 1980s, communication research in Africa was primarily concerned with the study of mass media content and functions, and freedom of the press or news-gathering services. The question of transborder data flow and the role of international news agencies were also important concerns. Research from this period was subject to continuous and heated debates, including the call for a New World Information and
Communication Order (NWICO), which played out in the theatre of UNESCO during the 1970s and 1980s. Subjects that were investigated to a lesser extent included analysis of audience effects and attitudes, as well as public relations, legal aspects of the media, public perception of the media, and media strategies. The music and magazine industries were largely ignored (Edeani, 1988). Throughout the 1980s, West African communication research benefited from the significant contribution of researchers in the philosophy of communication domain who sought to orient and unify African communication research.

The philosophy of West African communication: A critical perspective and differentialist epistemology

While the theme of “communication and development”—spawn of the American empiricist tradition—has known great popularity in Africa, numerous studies in Latin America have been anchored in dependency theory, probably due to the historical trajectory of countries in the region.\textsuperscript{10,11}

Faced with this adverse scenario, one can easily understand the behaviour of the emerging Latin American community of communication research, which decided to adopt the “Dependency Theory” as the basis of Latin American thought on communication, showing also a particular interest in scientific materialism or Marxism. (Islas & Arribas, 2009, p. 6)

This approach to questioning, linked to a geographic and cultural anchoring of communication, also exists in Africa. The classic opposition between American empirical research and the European tradition doubtlessly has numerous critics, but is also often taken up by African and Latin American communication researchers in proposing a third way that is more closely related to their realities. The defenders of a philosophy of African communication thus have sought to develop a sense and a direction to communication research originating in Africa: “[The 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” (Okigbo, 1987, p. 28).

“Ferment in the field,” the celebrated metaphor referring to the state of communication research in the 1980s, has been invoked in Africa (Okigbo, 1987) and Latin America (Marques de Melo, 2007) to criticize the absence of unity in communication research in these geographic communities. Research fragmentation is considered to be due primarily to the absence of a philosophical perspective uniquely capable of allowing researchers to comprehend and analyze reality in relation to a uniquely African worldview (Lugalambi, 2009; Okigbo, 1987). In the context of West Africa, the diversity of research is considered problematic, as it lacks an approach that respects forms of communication that are specifically African.\textsuperscript{12}

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. (Okigbo, 1987, p. 21)
While this conceptualization, which grants philosophy the privilege of clarifying and guiding other sciences, is not dominant, it is an important characteristic of critical communication research in Africa. It posits that all communication research that is not guided by an underlying philosophical synthesis is doomed to be erratic and non-systematic. M’Bayo and Nwanko (1989) defend this thesis explicitly when they affirm that the contribution of African communication researchers has been “minimal” due to a lack of systematization of scientific production in the field. Ugboajah (1987) equally supports this notion on the basis of recurring conceptualization problems in communication research that compound difficulties in research administration.

The philosophy of West African communication research, however, is not homogenous in relation to critical approach. While Okigbo (1987) appears to adopt critical theory in defining the unique quality of African communication research, M’Bayo and Nwanko (1989, p. 10) consider administrative and critical research to be “two sides of the same coin” and look to the creation of an approach that is either hybrid (mobilizing both traditional African modes of communication and borrowed cultural elements) or specifically African (attentive to the specific African symbolic communication and social forms). Communication is thus considered a form of cultural expression, as it determines “how members of a society communicate with each other and what meanings they assign to various symbols” (M’Bayo & Nwanko, 1989, p. 11). Pratt (1992) also adopts this differentialist perspective, calling for the development of a communication research agenda attentive to the needs and specificities of Africa, which include “the need for communication research methodologies to be linked to the core values of the African: the role of the Supreme God or Allah, the concept of time, the function of work as a necessity for survival, and the non-individuality of the African” (p. 136).

With regard to such a research agenda, Ugboajah (1987) relates the problems to the fact that research design essentially responds to imperatives pertaining to knowledge production in occidental countries. Thus, he calls for a de-emphasis of research on “communication and development,” whose limits would have been made clear by approaches to modernization developed by Wilbur Schramm, Daniel Lerner, or Everett Rogers. Here, it is the social pertinence of this research that is criticized, and not its scientific validity. According to Ugboajah (1987), communication research in Africa is limited in four ways: 1) the small number of experienced African researchers; 2) the absence of ad hoc methodologies adapted to the African context; 3) the lack of involvement by public authorities and their misunderstanding of the positive effects of communication research on national development; and 4) the inability of researchers to obtain moral and material support, which reinforces their dependency on the international community. Kivikuru (2009) sums the situation up succinctly: “To date, purely academic research has appeared as a phenomenon that Africa cannot afford” (p. 190). Berger (2002) makes a similar diagnosis regarding the extroversion of theory, noting that the concepts of media, democracy, and civil society are used without first questioning whether they apply to the specific forms of social communication in Africa. Thus, it is worth considering a more adequate research agenda such as that proposed by Kupe (2004). Kupe proposes five trajectories: audience and media content studies;
relationships between different media; development and democracy; media and communication as institutions; and media organizations. This research agenda is bound to take into consideration the “communicational complexity” (Lugalambi, 2009, p. 214) of the context that is studied.

The desire for an authentically African communication research trajectory can be understood as a reaction to a form of domination and epistemic extroversion that is manifest throughout the African continent (Kane, 2010b). That said, this undertaking has its own criticisms. One primary criticism levelled at authors such as Asante (2004) is that advocates for a philosophy of African communication consider the normative construction of an ethics of communication, on the basis of principles that are essentially an epistemological and political reconstruction, to be an impossibility. Asante’s work on Afrocentrism is emblematic of an entire vein of communication research concerned with the particularities of the African experience and specific African forms of communication (Asante, 1980). Asante views Afrocentrism as “an intellectual orientation toward viewing Africans as subjects of history with their own agency in the midst of all phenomena” (Asante, 2004, p. 5). He defines Afrocentrism according to six characteristics, three of which are pertinent to the current discussion: the taking into account of African symbols, signs, and rituals; the imperative of rewriting collective African history according to a process of re-appropriation; and the obligation to assume a critical approach in order to restore Africa to its just place in the world. This jointly scientific and emancipatory agenda aims to focus upon specificities of ways of life considered to be authentically African, such as collective solidarity and the central place of orality. For several African philosophers of communication, this signifies a rejection of occidental values, occidental models of living, and occidental technology.

This view is far from unanimous, though, and has been denounced as unrealistic by authors who recognize the “triple heritage” of occidental-Christian, Islamic-Muslim, and pagan-African traditions that collectively contribute to informing the worldviews and values of contemporary Africa (Mazrui & Okigbo, 2004), as well as an Indian tradition that is very present in South Africa. In this way, the blending or hybridity of cultural imagination and social life in contemporary Africa emerges, formerly hidden in unpublished analytical perspectives designed under the guise of syncretism (Mbembe, 2000). The analysis of organic African cultural interactions in and of themselves is a recent innovation in African research (Mazrui & Okigbo, 2004), standing in stark contrast to the pioneering work of Cheikh Anta Diop (1982) on the cultural unity of black Africa.

Having provided a brief summary of the overarching and foundational critical perspective asserted by the philosophy of West African communication and its proper tensions, in the final section of this article I will address avenues of research taken up more recently in this region, focusing on the relationship between communication and gender.

Recent trajectories in West African research communication
Not all African countries undertake communication-oriented scientific production in the same way. South Africa is a unique case, especially due to its long isolation, which limited it to developing a distinctive research production and dissemination infrastruc-
tution (Kivikuru, 2009). To a lesser degree, in West Africa, Ghana and Nigeria are among the countries that have developed a high quantity and quality of scientific production over the past decades that sets them apart from other sub-Saharan countries, especially those where French and Portuguese is the dominant language.

The question of the dynamism of African communication research is well-worn and multifarious, and the construction of a research agenda conforming to the specific needs of African countries has been a recurrent project since the 1960s. As has been the case elsewhere in the world, African communication research has undergone considerable expansion, on par with a range of other fields:

As the number of African communication scholars has grown so has the scope of African scholarship in the field. These scholars have been groomed under varying academic traditions and have injected diverse perspectives into the field. Evidently, though these developments need to be studied systematically, the body of work on journalism, media and communication in Africa and about the continent appears to be expanding. Much of it is produced by African scholars. (Lugalambi, 2009, p. 209)

There is a correlation between the importance of communication education and training, the resources made available to these activities, and the vitality of the academic field. In fact, according to Lugalambi (2009), the wealthier a country is, the greater the level of their academic production of communication research. This is due, in particular, to the variety of educational and training programs available.

One dominant trend in West African communication research is the almost unavoidable theme of development. In recent years, public policy has emphasized such themes as “media and democracy,” “communication and development,” and “communication and reduction of inequalities,” due to the social relevance of these themes and their correlation with national development that is established by public authorities. According to Servaes (cited in White, 2009, p. 204), the dominant communication and development paradigms have been modernization in the 1950s, dependence in the 1960s and 1970s, and participation since the 1980s. Such a view proposes that today there is almost total consensus with respect to the need for participatory approaches to communication and development in Africa.

After a few decades of research oriented around the central thematic axis of “communication and development,” “communication and democracy” became a more important field of research in the 1990s. The displacement of “communication and development” was accompanied by a refocusing of interest at the national level toward registering the participation of subnational groups and communities within deliberation processes concerned with the common good. At the same time, interest among researchers in communication and community media grew dramatically in West Africa. According to Moyo (2007), this increased interest is linked to alternative media research developed in occidental countries. The participatory paradigm exhibits the following five characteristics: an attention to local culture; a sensibility to the horizontal structure of interactions; accounting for empowerment; accounting for the potential for change in the use of power; and the primacy of the local as a space where the autonomy of the population is exercised (Servaes, cited in White, 2009).
The importance of the theme of participation, however, should not be overestimated, as it sometimes provides the illusion of autonomy: “You will now decide for yourselves by majority vote. Do you want a clinic, a school or a bore hole?” (Kasongo, cited by Nyamnjoh, 2010, p. 3). In the same vein, having evaluated rural development projects in a dozen countries, Diaz Bordenave (1977) concluded that none of the projects he studied were initiated by the local population. At play here is the phenomenon of ventriloquism, which, as analyzed by Kane (2010a), demonstrates that development projects are conceived and initiated by external institutional actors, under the appearance of grassroots initiatives, and only then mobilize the “participation” of the local populations ex post facto.

The rise of research in “communication and health,” especially with respect to HIV/AIDS, is an important trend throughout the continent and seems to follow in the steps of previous research that focused on education and agriculture. What remains constant no matter the subject matter is a desire to change attitudes and perceptions according to the diffusionist canon, even if the models employed have been affiliated considerably with the integration of the participatory paradigm. Here, communication is often considered as a tool of facilitation rather than as an autonomous phenomenon:

Development communication has mainly been related to practical activity promoting health, agriculture, or education. It has not been intended to be academically challenging. The ghosts of modernization are easily detected in the theoretical considerations in, say, the introduction parts of project plans. Such texts are often designed according to northern donors’ or international organizations’ wishes. It would hardly be justified to expect original theoretical thinking under such circumstances. (Kivikuru, 2009, p. 190)

This approach, which privileges an instrumentalist vision of technology, is found widely in West African communication research. The integration of “ICTs and gender” into issues connected to development is another example and has essentially consisted of considering technologies as a means to reduce socio-economic inequalities, thereby re-configuring gender-related social behaviours in order to attain greater equality and equity. It was within this perspective that, during the African regional preparatory conference of the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS) in Accra, Ghana, in October 2005, that the WSIS Gender Caucus framed its recommendations according to the United Nations’ Millennium Development Goals (MDG). The caucus recommended “that gender equality and the rights of women in ICTs and the information and knowledge society be treated as a fundamental question of integration” (Caucus genre du SMSI, 2005). The Gender Caucus identified five priorities into which it proposed investing time and resources: funding through the creation of a Digital Solidarity Fund (DSF); the creation of gender-specific statistical indicators to precisely account for the degree of inclusion/exclusion of women in the information and knowledge society; the insertion of the factor of gender into research on ICTs and development; rural and urban accessibility; and the inclusion of women in the industrial sector and in Internet governance.

ICTs are thus considered to be at the heart of social inclusion processes, and the notion of “connectivity” becomes essential to the analysis of processes of exclusion,
starting jointly with social and digital modalities. Despite its relatively recent emergence in the African context, within the theme of “ICTs, gender, and development,” one can see an interweaving of the issue of ICTs and the information society, and an older battle around the question of “women and development” (Touré, n.d.). In many respects, the “ICT and gender” theme is quite removed from British and American feminist research on technology and gender. It is, however, very close to occidental concerns with assuring accessibility for minorities and disadvantaged communities:

Regarding minority communities, the literature argues that ICTs do provide a new focus for understanding bridging and bonding forms of social capital and thus for fostering connectivity within and between minority communities. Thus it supports the importance of examining the role of ICTs in strengthening minority communities, enhancing their within and between ‘connectedness’ and responding to their perceived problems of social exclusion and limited social or community cohesion. At the same time, evidence points to a series of economic, educational/skills, psychological, cultural and political barriers which prevent minority communities from fully appropriating ICTs. (Tsatsou, Stafford, Higgs, Fry, & Berry, 2011)

In 2004, the Réseau genre et TIC produced a manual entitled *African Citizens in the Information Society* that aimed to address “issues connected to the entry of African countries into the information society from the point of view of women” (Réseau genre et TIC, 2004). The Réseau’s goal was to fundamentally reduce the digital gender gap, considered a hazard contributing to the marginalization of African women.

For many organizations active in the area of “ICTs, gender, and development,” changes in gender relations are generally slow, but do have a tendency to accelerate during transition periods, such as the current technological revolution. The advent of the information society is considered a period of major transition that will change gender relations significantly. In this sense, the information society serves as an argumentative lever for promoting (discursively, through integration) the place of women in a historical and technological conjuncture considered exceptionally supportive of feminist approaches:

In this way, ICTs can be a blessing for African women, permitting them to make themselves literate in their national and local languages. ICTs help them suffer less frequently from maternal and infant mortality, to find higher paying opportunities for their revenue-generating activities, to improve their social standing by having their rights and dignity more greatly respected, and by being less often victims of violence, assuming their roles as citizens of their country, their continent and the world. (Réseau genre et TIC, 2004, p. 39)

“ICTs and gender” research sits well within the mainstream of West African communication research. Indeed, its analysis concerning development is one of its key characteristics, likewise the privilege it grants to democratic and participatory initiatives supporting the empowerment of women and their integration into deliberative processes.
Yet an ambivalence is evident regarding the effects (impact theory) that research attributes to both ICTs and gender according to the epistemologies mobilized. This is not surprising, as it reflects the diversity of representations, analyses, and discourses concerning technology and gender. It is tempting to conclude, as Quéré and Smoreda (2000) have, that in “the sociology of gender, having developed largely as critical sociology, the variable of sex has often been made the central theme in the problematization of male domination and the unequal distribution of power and resources” (p. 10). However, it would be an error to depart from this premise by proposing a potential systematic criticism of studies on “ICTs, gender, and development” and making claims to a universalist approach. This sort of research strategically and crucially favours the successful achievement of access to ICTs and the appropriation of ICTs by women in its perspective on development. This does not mean, however, that gender relations will be renewed in light of the virtues of ICTs. To turn the tide and conserve the critical potential at the heart of the feminist project in the analysis of its links with ICTs and gender, feminist critique should not be merely instrumentalized at the service of ICTs. Instead, technology itself must be examined through the filter of feminist critique.

Conclusion

Au regard des problèmes cruciaux tels que la faim et la pauvreté auxquels la plupart des pays sont confrontés, celui des flux de l’information pourrait apparaître comme de seconde priorité.

— Thierno-Djibi Thiam (1982, p. 7)

This preoccupation voiced by Thiam underlies all debates concerning questions of communication in Africa. It was initially evoked in reference to the New World Information and Communication Order (NWICO), and the Internet and new technologies are the current issues at hand (Ntambue Tshimbulu, 2001; Thioune, 2000). Historically, this ethical question was resolved through an emphasis on the contribution of telecommunication infrastructures and media systems to the democratic life of African countries (Akwule, 1991; Chêneau-Loquay, 2000; Hardy, 1980). Thus, the research problems articulated around the new media of the Internet and mobile telephony emphasize the positive effects of integration into the information society, on development, business productivity, citizen debate, political implication, unfettered cultural expression, accountability of political power, the contribution of diasporas, equal access, the inclusion of women, et cetera. “Communication and development” research can play a very important social engineering role throughout the African continent as modernization, through development projects, is always a given, independent of particular national trajectories.

The communicational approach to modernization has essentially consisted of theoretical mimicry and a lack of sensitivity to the socio-cultural realities that are central to African forms of communication and symbolic production. Communication researchers, development experts, and policymakers have been at the core of this triad and have thus been targeted for criticism by philosophers of African communication.
(Nyamnjoh, 2010). Wishing to develop an agenda more attuned to African modes of communication, these philosophers have adopted a resolutely critical perspective. However, in their somewhat hegemonic claim to define the communication research agenda in West Africa, they have avoided contributing to the correction of a structural tendency in West African communication research to favour “serious” subjects, spurning what they consider to be the frivolous subjects of comedy and soap operas. New avenues of research, such as a focus on languages and the revelation of gender as more than simply a development issue, are helping to renew communication research, linking it to the normative claims to emancipation through critical research.

Notes
1. The pertinence of making such a selection based on Francophone and Anglophone geographic areas is favoured by Frère (2012). Evoking the multiplicity and diversity of Africas, the author nevertheless considers that it is possible to identify organizational dynamics of African media systems according to their linguistic delimitations. In spite of its hermeneutic interest, this homogenization of African diversity cannot help but be a bit forced in its effort to identify “media traditions.”

2. The desire of former colonial nations to conserve some sort of power over their former colonies is not a factor to be completely ignored (Gaillard & Waast, 1988).

3. These complementary activities, ironically referred to as “har matteu” (a Wolof term that in Senegal refers resorting to complementary professional activities for financial ends), take the form of private school teaching and the provision of expertise to private firms or non-governmental organizations (NGOs).

4. Graduate teaching sometimes poses a problem, as the necessity of increasing the accessibility of university studies has led to a substantial increase in the graduate student population in West Africa. For example, between 1985 and 2005, the average number of students more than tripled throughout Africa. Ghana, for instance, experienced an increase of 1,224% and Senegal an increase of 343% (Atuahene, 2011).

5. To cite but a few communication journals: Africa Media Review, the journal of the Council for the Development of Social Science Research in Africa (CODESRIA); in Senegal, the very irregular Revue Africaine de Communication; in Tanzania, African Communication Research (Tanzania); in South Africa, Ecuquid Novi; African Journalism Studies, Communication: South African Journal of Communication Theory and Research, Critical Arts: A South-North Journal of Cultural and Media Studies, as well as the African edition of Global Media Studies. Generally, Anglophone countries are better served than Francophone countries due, in part, to the over-representation of South Africa (Kivikuru, 2009).

6. According to these two authors, half the references cited in the 1980s were more than 10 years old.

7. Created in 1943 with the intent to organize French colonial scientific research, the ORSC would change its name several times, first becoming the Office de la recherche scientifique et technique outre-mer (Orstom). Since 1998, it has been known as the Institut de recherche pour le développement (IRD).

8. It was also during this period—the golden age of independence—that nationalist journalists such as Nnamdi Azikiwe of Nigeria and E. Bankole Timothy of Sierra Leone emerged.

9. The role of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) should not be overlooked. Its 1961 report entitled Mass Media in the Developing Countries used the teledensity indicators of the International Telecommunication Union (ITU) and considered that in order for media systems to be fully developed, they must support—for example—10 copies of a newspaper, five radios, two movie theatre seats, or two televisions per 100 inhabitants (Edeani, 1988).

10. In Latin America, a recent historiography of the discipline has identified the existence of international federations of Latin American communication researchers as an identifying trait (Islas & Arribas,
2009; Marques de Melo, 2004). This is especially the case for CIESPAL (Centro Internacional de Estudios Superiores de Comunicación), which was the initial forum for communication research (Marques de Melo, 2007), as well as ALAIC (Asociación Latinoamericana de Investigadores en Comunicación) and FELEFACS (Federación Latinoamericana de Facultades de Comunicación Social), founded in 1978 and 1981, respectively.

11. In one respect, the influence of Paulo Freire had a structural effect on communication research in the region, as it led to different variants of participatory communication in Latin America (White, 2009). More generally, communication served to explicitly support the numerous revolutionary movements during decolonization. Certain intellectuals such as Frantz Fanon or, in a less radical vein, Léopold Sédar Senghor, produced a body of texts on the need to use communication to support revolution or social change.

12. One of the arguments supporting this thesis is that all research, especially communication research, is founded upon philosophic principles. For example, with respect to the influence of philosophic principles on American communication theories, “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” (Okigbo, 1987, pp. 23–27).

13. The Intergovernmental Conference on Communication Policies in Africa, which took place in Yaoundé, Cameroon, from July 22 to 31, 1980, attests to this. This conference was part of a cycle of regional conferences on communication policies. At the behest of the United Nations (UN), it aimed to, among other things, evaluate the role of communications in a development approach that focuses upon education, science, culture, and technology.

14. The approaches to this question are numerous (women and development, the integration of women in development, gender and development, et cetera) and return to the debates which gave life to feminist theory and which see a liberal conception that concerns itself with reforming the state of social relationships paradigmatically opposed to a Marxist approach that resolves to rebuild a social architecture upon a different foundation.

References


