



9-2012

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Guy Berger
Rhodes University

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Abstract

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Comments

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The embedded theory that informs African accord on BDM assumes unquestioningly that this particular development in advanced economies has to be emulated in Africa. As a result, primary African communications characteristics are ignored, including the case for investing in radio or mobile internet rather than BDM. Also missed is the value of democratic and interactive communications, meaning that the BDM Set Top Boxes (STBs) are seen merely as decoders of one-way content flows. In sum, the experience of BDM as a particular intersection of communications technology and social conditions reflects an inadequate African communication theorisation.

Keywords: Digital migration, Set Top Box, Internet, Democracy, Africanisation

1. Introduction and Definitions

The notion of an “African theory of communications” suggests a distinctive body of abstract propositions about a particular dimension of human activity (in this case, communication). This is not a “mere” application of another theory to the field, such as a political economy application, or a normative-centric application. It implies, rather that there should be an original, coherent and stand-alone system, linked to a particular locality, even if drawing in part (and inevitably) from theories peculiar to other continents. The quest for such a conceptual tool-set arises from the belief, as expressed by Obonyo (2011), that it is difficult “to universally apply to Africa theories of communication that have been developed within the context of liberal pluralism”. That perspective in turn rests upon a (questionable) belief about the coherence of an

object called “Africa”, based on commonalities within such a locality, and it further assumes that this object is not liberal democratic in context. These assumptions hold whether “Africa” is construed as a sub-Saharan cultural identity or a purely geographic one.

The complexity in what is sketched above makes it hard to see how such an ambitious undertaking as “an African theory of communication” could be met – and similarly, why there is limited scholarship attempting to advance such an endeavour. Accordingly, the idea of trying to develop a “grand” theory that amounts to an “African theory” should probably best be set aside. A more modest quest can be postulated: i.e. to see to what extent the varied conditions in sub-Saharan Africa can sustain a theoretical proposition of abstractions and generalisations that can then be appropriately applied to analysis within (at least some) contexts. Such application would not be a matter of setting up an “idealised” theory of “African communications” and then measuring whether empirical realities correspond to or deviate from it. That kind of exercise would only describe greater or lesser shortfalls or fulfilments, whereas the point of theory should instead be to help illuminate and explain relationships in what is (see Berger, 2002).

The challenge then is to examine a number of communications-relevant conditions that are common in much of sub-Saharan Africa, with a view to establishing connections and patterns that may in turn lead to a number of theoretical propositions for subsequent application to an empirical case. This is not likely to generate uniquely continent-relevant “African” knowledge, let alone count as an “African theory”, as much as a constituting only a far-less-grand set of criteria that could be relevant to analysing communications initiatives in the region. The methodology involved is akin to Marx’s development of his theory of capital. It is a movement that starts from the particular, moves to the general, and then utilises this general level to make an assessment of particular instances.

More concretely, in this paper, the approach will thus be first to highlight a number of phenomena evident in many African communications landscapes; second to extrapolate their significance into a more abstract set of general propositions about relationships and interdependencies; and third, to then use these to analyse broadcast digital migration (BDM) issues within selected African instances.

Before this, however, it is important to underline what is meant by “communications” – a notion that needs unpacking, just as “African” and “theory” do. Although communications and information are often conflated, and although much mass media engages in the latter and not the former, the task of trying to theorise and then analyse “communications” is different to doing the same as regards “information”. To clarify conceptually, information is the currency of communication, yet to inform someone does not require communication in the to-and-fro flow sense that the term conveys, as Raymond Williams pointed out many decades ago. It follows from this distinction that a media-dense society is not necessarily a communication-rich society: information may flow through the mass media, but in a one-way direction. In this way, theorising communications (in Africa as elsewhere) is a wider endeavour than theorising information or media. On the other hand, mass communications via the media, even in the form of highly imbalanced information flows between sender and receiver, should not be side-lined. What this means for this paper, therefore, is that the focus will be on communications contexts within which the mass media can then be located.

Against this background, a number of salient phenomena can be observed in regard to empirical information about communications in many sub-Saharan African countries. These general observations allow for a degree of theorisation that can subsequently contribute to analysis of a phenomenon like BDM.

- i. Most people in the region relied on oral media prior to colonialism, and word-of-mouth remains a major form of not just information transmission, but also the direct interaction that is often characteristic of communication (as distinct from information). In the nature of the medium, it pre-empts the distancing of participants which can more easily occur when information is “mediated” via a “third-party mechanism” – often thereby separating sender and receivers from the possibility of direct and immediate dialogue. Word-of-mouth thus not only obviates a need for literacy, it also lends itself more to communication more than does a mass-mediated flow of information, although one should not ignore social limitations that compel children or women to listen rather than to initiate conversation, to question or respond. Nevertheless, much of the information in circulation (or in storage) in Africa is still reliant on face-to-face voice interactions (and human memory), and one can reasonably posit that

this constitutes, proportionately, a far greater share of the total, than is the case in more media-dense parts of the world. (See Bourgault, 1995).

- ii. Significantly, what mass media technology exists in sub-Saharan Africa is largely imported, along with many genres and media roles (see Golding, 1997; Mwesige, 2004; Kanyegerire 2008). The technology therefore has been a vector for dependent linkage to external sources, and styles, of information generation and distribution.
- iii. Colonialism in various forms characterised and shaped the constitution of nation-states (and national media systems) on the continent, as well as many of its international, economic, political and legal relationships. Although the specifics and their legacy are diverse, at a more general level many Africans have a shared experience of external domination, racism and exploitation (and slavery in many instances), some of which persist in what is described as neo-colonial characteristics. In the field of communications, it can be posited that there are two rival approaches that are related to this history – liberal pluralism vs developmentalism. The first stresses media independence of government, the second highlights the role of the state in regard to society at large and media in particular. Although these approaches achieved formulation elsewhere in the world (for example in the Anglophone vs Francophone press traditions, and also in regard to the US vs European broadcast traditions), and percolated into Africa, they also each have endogenous drivers and resonances amongst African media practitioners, politicians and scholars. It can further be noted that they both also share an underlying assumption of normative voluntarism – that a given media system is the result of what a society has chosen. Indeed, the notion that “the role of the media” (or the role of communications) is a matter of debate and selection, can arguably be traced to a particular (even hegemonic) strand of Western scholarship and ideology based on conceptions of functionalist consensus. The recognition that there are determinants and constraints related to power, political economy, technology, literacy, etc., often exists in a distant paradigm - even if in many ways this alternative conceptualisation provides greater insight into the empirical realities of communication anywhere, than does a normative focus. In some respects, African media and communications more widely operate within a tug-of-war between various

“normative” pulls on the one hand, and diverse “materialist” pushes on the other.

- iv. The sub-Saharan Africa region and its history means that it is characterised by enormous pluri-lingualism on the one hand, and one or two (usually colonial) languages of power on the other. Many people are multilingual, even though this can pale in the face of the extent of linguistic variation in a given country or sub-region. The implications for cross-communication are substantial, as they are for the size of markets for minority language content.
- v. Economic, social and educational inequalities are very high, with the majority of Africans being located on the deprived side of the scale. This has implications for the cost, literacy and time required to engage with mass communication. It also emphasises that media markets in Africa are limited by audience poverty and an owner lack of capital in addition to the common problem of infrastructural underdevelopment and collapse. One consequence is that sub-Saharan Africa sometimes attracts the label of being an “information desert” from the point of view of the broader public that endures widespread “information poverty”, although the elites do have access to communications technologies and international content on a par with developed countries. On the other hand, many Africans have valuable information resources gleaned from history and experience, and many have also proved tenacious in developing and appropriating media tools, and in creating media companies, to fulfil various purposes – some narrowly political or cultural/linguistic, others primarily profit-driven and a number motivated by concepts of public service. In other words, the African communications environment is not one of passive victims and ignorant vessels awaiting fulfilment, although it is also evident that there is a relative dearth of local content in much media, especially TV.
- vi. The demographics of the region entail a young population, primarily non-nuclear families, and large and scattered rural populations. These factors can militate against mass communications uptake. At a cultural level, many Africans practice hybridized cultures that both draw upon past traditions and at the same time mesh these with imported notions and artefacts. This is evident regarding issues like mixtures of cultural belief and practice regarding individualism vs communitarianism, women’s status, sexual orientations, the

significance of age, the role of gifts, attitudes to authority and leadership styles (a point made by Obonyo, 2011), spiritual and health care, music and dance, etc.

- vii. Only a minority of countries in Africa are democracies and the media freedom dispensation appears to have actually declined over the past decade (Berger, 2011a). Control and repression of mass communications via the media has played its part in preventing the industry from reaching its wider potential. Corresponding to top-down and despotic rule, media is widely treated as a tool by the powerful who have little interest in dialogue with subject populations. While state power in much of Africa is successfully abused by rulers to stay in power – and this includes deployment of state-owned media (often the largest component within the media sector), in other respects dysfunctionality is the order of the day. This latter feature impacts on the infrastructure for media (such as electricity), as well as on state provision of education, with the knock-on effect that universities are under-resourced and lacking in research capacity and output – not least in regard to the communications field which is scanty in regard to scholarship on African conditions.

Against this backdrop, it can be stated that, at a general level, the media component of the African communications landscape is dependent and hybridised, often oriented towards a major colonial language and metropole rather than internally, and difficult to develop in the face of unfavourable economic and political conditions. It is the object of major political contest and control, and it operates in a unidirectional rather than interactive mode.

The seven features identified above can be summarised as: prevalence of word-of-mouth communications, imported technologies and genres, colonial legacy approaches to media roles, pluri-lingualism, social inequality, particular demographics, and political repression. These complement each other in varying combinations in particular African countries, creating a whole which is difficult to transform. An effect therefore is that media enterprises are generally limited in size and range, as is their role, with the consequence that only limited quantities of information are generated. These enterprises, due to the politics of control, are also

more likely to concentrate on information (or in many cases, misinformation), rather than communication as such. The public sphere in African countries is thus often exemplified by polarised media, akin to the Mediterranean model (Hallin and Mancini, 2004) – although pluralism in broadcasting has been deliberately constrained by many governments who retain control of such an important informational apparatus.

These broad abstracted propositions do not amount to a theory as such, but it can be posited that the issues and interdependences that are highlighted are sufficiently widespread as to require that a strategy such as BDM should be assessed with regard to the complex and variegated totality of these features. Regrettably, this is exactly what has not happened.

2. Broadcasting in the African media landscape

This is not the place to review the history of African broadcasting, except to highlight the instrumentalist and informational approach that has characterised the deployment of this medium since colonial days (see Head, 1974; Mytton, 1983, Salama, 1989; Paterson, 1998; Article 19, 2003; Panos, 2006). Even liberation radio has had a similar character, meaning that broadcasting organisations have generally not been recognised as deserving of autonomy. The normative perspective of developmentalism, linked to control and a state-driven structure, is alive - if not very well - in regard to what constitutes the dominant broadcast network in very many sub-Saharan African countries: i.e. the state-owned broadcast industry (see broadcast reports at www.afrimap.org). At the same time, in those limited cases where the repressive “lid” has been lifted, extra-state broadcasters have flourished, especially in radio, as in the DRC, Uganda and Tanzania (see AMDI, 2007). Generally, however, broadcasting has kept its character shaped by its unidirectional history. Talk radio, given impetus by cellphone dissemination and access, has begun to initiate a new understanding of broadcasting, but this perspective has not extensively taken hold in other forms of radio, nor in TV. The result is that broadcasting continues to largely be seen – by senders as well as receivers – as an informational, rather than communicational, medium. Despite its apparent similarity with interpersonal word-of-mouth communication, it generally lacks interaction and sender-receiver conversation.

The strengths of broadcasting – in terms of reliance only on sound or video – and the capacity of the medium to transcend distances, are one reason why this medium has come to achieve greatest reach in African conditions (though by no means universal). This is even although cellphones are now becoming very widespread as well (and one should also note that these devices are still at present mainly used as interpersonal rather than mass communication devices). Broadcasting is also able to accommodate diverse languages and ages on different stations, channels and programmes; accord with people’s interests in cultural hybridisation; and remain generally free-to-air for the audience. In this way, broadcasting constitutes a “best fit” medium in sub-Saharan Africa. One qualification, however, is electrical power which is hugely problematic in most countries in the region. In this regard, radio is more easily powered by portable batteries than TV. In addition, signal distribution for radio is a less expensive (and often more local) endeavour, than it is for TV. As a result, TV in sub-Saharan Africa is primarily an urban phenomenon, apart from subscription satellite TV (which itself is only available to the elite). In addition, it should be noted that the production of content for TV is generally more expensive than radio, and the same applies even to the acquisition of imported content. Besides for regulatory conservatism which limits TV licencing in many African countries, these costs are probably the next big inhibitor of this medium. In a word, radio is what deserves policy attention, investment, development and research in Africa as the pre-eminent mass-media platform within the wider information and communications ecology.

Into this context, BDM has come. It applies, however, to TV – not to radio (at least not for the next decade). And it comes with a huge price related to conversion of production, transmission and reception (see Berger, 2006). This is not just an inexorable advance of technology, but a phenomenon that has been consciously constructed at the international level – and in particular in Geneva under the auspices of the ITU. In 2006, members of this body agreed a treaty which declared that 2015 would be the cut-off point for analogue TV broadcasting in the European-African region of the world. It is a little known fact that a full 30 of Africa’s 54 states are actually given up till 2020 in the same treaty – i.e. almost two-thirds of the continent (see Berger, 2010b). Even so, most African states have formally committed to trying to reach the milestone even before 2015, notwithstanding the extreme likelihood that such a goal is about as illusory as Muammar Gaddafi’s United States

of Africa. What is also little discussed is what consequences will befall a country that fails to meet the deadline. Instead, misunderstanding is evident. For example, Uganda Communications Commission Executive Director, Godfrey Mutabazi, claimed in 2011 that the country's failures around BDM were "bound to leave Uganda without television as the rest of the world goes digital by 2015" (Imaka, 2011). In fact, the consequences of missing ITU deadlines are merely that this international body will not help to protect analogue TV signals from interference from neighbouring countries – something that is far from being a major problem in Africa.

It is easy to see how the reasons for BDM and its deadline make sense for Europe. By switching from analogue to digital TV transmission, spectrum is freed up. Where once an analogue channel took up a whole frequency, now up to 24 video channels can ride on the same signal (via compression, and through a multiplex). Digital quality allows for better reproduction and even HD TV channels – as long as the audience has the requisite equipment. And, because the airwaves are being more efficiently utilised, a "digital dividend" can be reaped that will allow for new TV channels to be carried, and more spectrum to be released for wireless telecoms and internet. This is good for ambitious TV and telecoms players in media-dense Europe, and also for audiences there. It is also good for technology vendors who see a bright market for either STBs to enable the digital signal to be viewed on an analogue TV set, or for digital-ready TV sets (and HD versions of these sets).

What is not so easy to see is why any of this makes sense for Africa (Berger, 2010c). Generally, the problem of limited numbers of TV channels in the sub-Saharan region is a factor of regulatory restriction that seeks to protect state TV, and/or a factor of weak business conditions related to limited advertising, a limited market for pay-TV, and an absence of low-cost local content that would attract domestic viewers. The advent of more TV opportunities via digital channels in Africa does not change these material constraints. Likewise, African cellphone companies and wireless internet service providers have learnt to "re-farm" their existing spectrum allocations, and are not generally desperate for more spectrum. Lastly, there is barely a market for digital ready TV sets outside of the tiny African elite. Similarly, the distances in Africa suggest that digital satellite would be a better investment than digital terrestrial TV which is what BDM refers to.

Arguments by Africans in favour of proceeding with BDM have neglected these issues and focused instead on what amounts to the extensive hype about the switchover. The benefits not only have very little traction in African conditions, but have also been stressed without reference to balancing them with the costs. And amongst the benefits, there has also been a great deal of disinformation – for example, exaggerating the quality improvements of a picture (which is decoded from digital to display on the analogue set), and allowing for subtitling in diverse languages. There is widespread confusion that Digital Terrestrial Television (DTT) equates to HD TV quality,¹ which is by no means necessarily the case: most in fact is both transmitted and viewed in Standard Definition. Analogue sets certainly cannot show HD quality, not all digital sets can, and nor are all STBs necessarily HD-ready.

Most weak of all is the argument that “Africa” needs to go along with BDM because the “rest of the world is doing so” (even though most Latin American countries are targeting 2020). This argument falls squarely into a colonised mentality that goes hand-in-hand with a modernisation understanding of global and national development. In this, the name of the game is “catch-up”, and the fear of lagging.² It concentrates on a deficit view of Africa’s status in communications, instead of examining what the internal strengths, needs and opportunities might be. The massive resources required for BDM are thus unquestioningly seen as a necessary expense for continuing to provide TV services, when they could be allocated to other highly-meritorious communicational purposes – like radio development, support for local content development and languages on analogue TV, extending transmission of analogue TV signals, subsidies for community TV, conversion of state broadcasting into public broadcasting, and satellite broadcast options – and not to

¹ For example, the International Marketing Council of South Africa (2011) misunderstands as follows: “The move will allow for high-definition (HD) television viewing, which produces a substantially higher image resolution. HD television sets are already available on the local market, and those who own them, will not be affected by the transition to the digital signal. But millions of poor South Africans still have the standard-definition television sets. Their transition to digital television will be simplified by set top boxes, which will make their sets compatible for HD viewing.”

² In 2009, South African regulator Robert Nkuna speaking on BDM was reported as follows: “Currently, he said, Africa lagged behind, but was optimistic that the continent would soon catch up with the rest of the world.” (Udeorah, 2009). A Nigerian counterpart, Ernest Ndukwe a few years earlier stated: “As we strive to catch up with the world, it is imperative that Nigeria is in tune with technological trends in this fast moving industry”. (Ndukwe 2005) In 2011, another report read: “The international switch off date from analogue to digital broadcasting is expected on June, 17, 2015, but African leaders met a few years ago and brought forward the continent’s deadline to 2012 so as to catch up with the world.” (Oluka, 2011).

mention supporting Internet backbone development and subsidising Internet access for schools, clinics, etc. (see Berger 2010a).

Where this unfortunate modernist view really runs into trouble is in regard to the occasionally-expressed fear of Africa becoming a dumping ground for obsolete analogue equipment (see Berger 2010a; CTO 2010). This arguably arises from a sense of injured pride that, despite the formal ending of racist colonial control, Africans risk being relegated to second-class citizen status and reliant on hand-me-downs from other races. On the other hand, the import of second-hand analogue TV sets from Europe can hardly be considered as keeping Africans condemned to use backward technologies. This is because the primary BDM change in sub-Saharan Africa will be in transmission, not in the TV set. Thus, STBs will become distributed en masse in order to view digital signals on the continent's existing analogue TV sets – so more of these sets actually mean more opportunities for viewing even after BDM is completed.

Finally, another argument sometimes made in favour of BDM in sub-Saharan Africa is that this is a strategy to bridge the “digital divide”. The idea is that the STB will also enable Internet access, and therefore e-governance (see Armstrong and Collins, 2011). This is something that exists in South African government policy, for example, and it has also been expressed by a senior Namibian civil servant.³ But in practice, this benefit is not being translated into the necessary technical specifications for modems, memory, storage space, individual box addressability, keyboards, or open application-programme-interfaces. Instead the boxes are basically decoders, rather than being designed to serve as multi-purpose computers with the TV screen as monitor and the remote control as a possible input device.

South African government experience has been to regard broadcast and internet worlds as separate entities, requiring policies and implementing institutions that do not overlap or intersect (Berger, 2011b). Although South African policy has been that there should be protectionism for a local electronics industry to manufacture the STBS, and in this sense there is a flicker of a “dependista” challenge to the modernisation model of BDM, the paradigm still remains broadcast-centric and

³ Mbeuta Ua-Ndjarakana, Permanent Secretary, Ministry of Information, Communication and Technology, speaking at conference to mark Namibia World Press Freedom Day, 2011 on 5 - 6 May 2011, Safari Court Hotel, Windhoek, Namibia

therefore unidirectional and informational, rather than communicational. The boxes, in short, are likely to be assemblies of parts made elsewhere, with little thought about what kinds of components and software would represent an original combination which more properly addresses African communications problems and opportunities.

What this means is that BDM is being conceived primarily as a new way to deliver an old information service. To the extent that there could be interactive communicational benefits, this is mainly envisaged as a longer-term outcome of the digital dividend facilitating the growth of wireless internet and telephony. What this misses is how convergence can exist right at the heart of BDM itself. In particular, the STB could not only receive and convert digital broadcast signals back to analogue, it could also provide an interface with the Internet that allows users to send their own signals back to the broadcaster, and to the wider Internet world. The notion of hybrid TV is increasingly established in developed countries, where a single STB provides triple play of internet access, digital TV access (by airwaves, and/or cable and/or satellite), and telephony. But the significant enabling feature of this device is its inclusion of a cable component which typically provides broadband Internet capability. The absence of cable in most African environments has understandably meant that this form of hybrid has not caught on in the region. However, hybridisation of the box, by linking it to cellphone modem, is not too distant a notion from this configuration. But there is one hitch – cellphone-based Internet, even carried by 3G, is unsuited to video or even audio streaming, especially when the airwaves are congested. So what's an African to do, given that fibre connections to the home are not a realistic prospect in most of the continent for many years to come?

The answer is that it is possible to consider a work-around: using 3G (via a STB in-built or plug-in modem) for uplink, and the digital TV signal for the downlink. This requires hybridisation at the level of the 3G ISP and the digital broadcaster – an interface at that point that will allow for this creative solution. In this scenario, instead of digital broadcasters sitting with unused digital TV channels on their multiplexes, they use that capacity for data delivery that is triggered by a user through 3G and delivered to the STB for viewing on an analogue TV set. In this way, the STB is a smart device linked in turn to a smart communications circuit. The result is a system that is no longer confined to a unidirectional content flow paradigm, nor cramped within the confines of a given broadcaster's own content inventory. The entire online

universe becomes available to download – and to interact with and contribute content to. The possibility thus exists for expanded user-generated content by Africans to be produced and disseminated on a vast scale – spanning languages, ages and cultures.

All this would not end information and communications inequality and deprivation in Africa; nor would it eliminate the broadband digital divide for those outside the TV-broadband combo loop. But it would both piggyback upon and transform the nature of TV as a significant medium on the continent. In this way, the solution could have a bearing on repressive regimes, assuming at least that they do not insist on “dumb” STB or erect walls between internet and broadcast industries.

3. Conclusion

To unfold this kind of vision of communications development for sub-Saharan Africa is something beyond the mainstream paradigms which operate with broadcast-internet silos, and with assumptions about broadcasting as being about a unidirectional information flow. Its inspiration arises, however, from engagement with the context in which African media operate. It entails creative adaptation of the unnecessary, but already advanced, importation of BDM. This is firstly by critically analysing how understanding how this fits into a history of dependence. Secondly, it entails examining predominant features of African communications – like the continuing centrality of face-to-face communications and how broadcasting replicates some of this (orality, visuality, language diversity), and how this loses the interactive and dialogic character through its primarily uni-directional operation to date. This new vision focuses on the material determinants that affect communications, and still attempts to allow for choice and conscious direction to develop a viable interactive media system even in the face of the limitations. In this way, this perspective operates with a potential to go beyond the dichotomy of communication as being about a negative concept of rights of liberal pluralism (rights against the state) versus a concept of rights through the state. It is also a notion that transcends states and which integrates Africans into a more global ecology of communications possibilities.

The intellectual work in this paper does not constitute a new theory of African communications, and much less an “African theory” of communications. But there

may be something in the way that this responds to local realities that nevertheless has a wider relevance. It could be that if African countries could reinvent BDM to make a really significant contribution to their communications conditions, that could open eyes in other parts of the world. At least, however, it would help to change the local communications systems along more democratic and participative lines. That ultimately should be the measure of whether theorising African communications is worth the effort.

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