

Information flows in sub-Saharan Africa

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This essay offers an assessment of emerging characteristics of information flow in southern Africa. The author is involved in an ongoing research project concerning Mozambique – mentioned later – but the focus of this commentary essay is to assess some of the research on information flow in sub-Saharan Africa to date, and its implications.

An assessment of information flows in any large region of the world risks obscuring the peculiarities of nations and, as is often the case in Africa, the individual cultural and language groups within countries; and it also risks obscuring the global nature of some movements of information. But especially in the case of Africa, the continent so frequently presented as one place and one people, it is also vital to avoid generalization.

Sub-Saharan Africa comprises an enormously diverse media environment ranging from the highly influential and complex South African press and media production apparatus through a variety of large press and broadcast operations in most other countries, but also includes vast rural areas with little mass media exposure. But even in these areas community radio operations – often sponsored by

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external funders – and tele-centre based access to information and communications technology (ICT) is increasingly common. Tunstall (2008: 286) estimated that a “typical” African country experienced a tripling of population between 1950 and 2005 but saw the number of literate people increase by 80 times, daily press readers by 50 times, and radio listeners by 200 times so, despite the limitations of infrastructure, media and ICT use is increasing in Africa at an unparalleled rate, and patterns of information flow are shifting accordingly.

Research into media and information flow in southern Africa is constrained, though also made more interesting, by the presence of distinct geo-linguistic mediaspheres. These are comprised of Lusophone Angola and Mozambique bracketing the mostly English-speaking rest of southern Africa; there is, of course, also the presence of substantial indigenous language media in each southern African country including a significant Afrikaans press and broadcasting in South Africa, and Afrikaans and German media in Namibia. Lusophone Africa has been neglected to a large extent in communications scholarship because research and press reports about these countries tend to be in Portuguese. There has been a significant amount of published research in recent years documenting instances of participatory journalism in southern Africa (Adam, L. and Wood, F., 1999; Moyo, D., 2009; Berger, 2005), but mentions of developments in the Lusophone countries tend to be cursory.

This essay describes what are effectively two revolutions in information flow in the region. The first, which began in the 1990s and is still continuing, was a rapid expansion of traditional media, enabled mostly by satellite broadcasting and related technologies (such as the urban distribution of multi-channel television via microwave systems – “*wireless cable television*” [Paterson, 1998]). The second, a phenomenon of the past decade, is the ongoing embrace of mobile telephony. It is the interaction between these two revolutions which most shapes contemporary information flow in southern Africa, though more traditional determinants of flow, such as geo-linguistic markets (Tunstall, 2008; Straubhaar, 2007) and colonial influences, remain important.

It is clear that news from the British media remain popular and influential around English speaking southern Africa. In Zimbabwe, where several European media outlets continue to maintain correspondents, reports from those media are often regarded as more credible than those from the state broadcaster or government connected newspapers. These include especially the websites of the *Guardian* and *Telegraph* newspapers and the *BBC On-*

line. The *BBC*, as well as *CNN*, was banned from operating in Zimbabwe for eight years from 2001, and its resident correspondent expelled, due to the Zimbabwean government’s perception that their coverage of the country was unduly hostile.

As the first revolution I describe here sets the stage for the second, I begin by reviewing its characteristics. In research a decade ago, this author (1998) described shifts in African information flows stemming from the rapid expansion of satellite television, the widespread media deregulation and privatisation, and related increase in local television broadcasting. The 1990s saw individual television broadcasters on the continent increase from about sixty to more than 140. Radio stations increased from just a few in most countries to over 1000 (mainly commercial, FM) stations by 2000 (Tunstall, 2008: 287).

Satellite television came a decade later to most of Africa than it did to Europe, but not for lack of public interest or willingness to pay for such services. Until the late 1990s there had been no taste amongst satellite operators and broadcasters to provide direct satellite broadcasting capabilities for most of sub-Saharan Africa; something of a conspiracy of non-investment significantly limited access to a variety of satellite services for Africa, which other continents had long enjoyed. This author commented, “*few [satellites] are sufficiently proximate to Africa to offer adequate signals; the investors who launched them and lease capacity on them never saw a viable enough African market to consider a placement more beneficial to Africa*” (Paterson, 1998). And from the earliest days of satellite broadcasting inequitable pricing structures enforced by the international satellite communications body INTEL-SAT worsened the situation by penalising African telecommunications organisations with much higher costs than were charged to more frequent satellite users in the North (Holmes, 1996).

The major expansion of satellite broadcasting in Africa came about largely through the convergence of three factors: the launch of PanAmSat’s PAS-4 satellite, with transmission capabilities designed specifically to include southern Africa; the democratization and subsequent liberalisation of broadcasting in South Africa, enabling the growth of media conglomerates eager to invest in transcontinental broadcasting (especially “*Multichoice*”, owned by the Naspers conglomerate); and the expansion into Africa of other broadcast services, such as the French *Canal Plus*. By 2002, 250 satellite television channels from 22 satellites were available in much of Africa (Tunstall, 2008: 323). But given that nearly all of the content on the newly available satellite chan-

nels and local broadcasters originated in the US, or in the former colonial powers, France, Portugal, and the United Kingdom, or to a limited extent in regional hegemon South Africa, this author (1998) warned the “*shift from public to frequently foreign private ownership of television may be symptomatic of a broader re-colonisation of Africa by US and European multinationals that has been euphemistically heralded as Africa’s Renaissance*”.

Tunstall (ibid.) noted that by the 1990’s within English speaking southern Africa substantial cross-border radio audiences had emerged, creating a partially unified linguistic media market extending from, and dominated by, South Africa, north through Namibia, Botswana, Zimbabwe, and Zambia – but excluding Portuguese speaking Angola and Mozambique. A 1993 survey apparently showed 33 percent of Zambians regularly listening to South African radio and substantial listenership as well of radio from neighbouring Malawi, Zimbabwe, and Tanzania, as well as the English language international services of the *BBC* and *Voice of America*. But readership of one country’s press in a neighbouring country remains rare outside of limited elite and expatriate circles (such as the small readership of some South African newspapers in neighbouring countries).

It has been noted since the earliest days of communication research that African journalists typically lack the material resources of newsrooms in the global North (e.g., Kupe, 2004; Mabweazara, 2010), and, with few exceptions, such as the major South African media, this continues to be the case. Equally crucial, but less often commented on, are the source restrictions which further inhibit under-resourced journalism. Such restrictions have often indirectly reinforced hegemonic, even neo-colonial, information flows in the African context.

For example, outside of South Africa, broadcasters in southern African have historically had insufficient funding to receive the same global video news feeds from television news agencies used by wealthier broadcasters around the world. This has often limited their ability to report international television stories to what they can receive at little or no cost, such as video given away by CNN or “WorldNet” compilations of American news broadcasts mixed with US government produced material, given away to African broadcasters by the US embassy in their country. This author’s 1998 survey of broadcasters found African television journalists consistently identified only a small set of European and American companies as their primary sources for international material, and they consistently complained that few, if any, sources of local and regional news were available to them (Paterson, 1998).

The second revolution in information flow in sub-Saharan Africa shares the technological roots which so significantly contributed to political revolution in North Africa and the Middle-East: the widespread use of mobile technologies and the Internet to communicate and participate in new ways, but in southern Africa some common characteristics which seem unique to the region are emerging. For example, recent research by this author (Paterson and Doctors, 2013) suggests that political unrest in Mozambique in 2008 and 2010 and the role of non-professional journalists in reporting and commenting on that unrest constitute important moments in the development of citizen journalism, crowdsourcing, and participatory communications in the region.

The current, dramatic change in information flows in southern Africa is being brought on by the fantastically rapid uptake of ICTs, led not by the Internet but by mobile telephone, “leapfrogging” over stages of telecommunications infrastructure development experienced in other parts of the world. Currently, the increase in mobile phone usage is greater in Africa than anywhere else in the world.

While the “digital divide” has been identified as a key concern in terms of development in Africa, scholars are increasingly focusing on the shift in information flow to mobile telephony and the implications of this for economic and social development, as well as for governance. Around southern Africa, but apart from the generally complex and highly developed communications environment of South Africa, a huge variety of alternative information flows have been described, including the Zimbabwean *Kubatana* blogs (Moyo, L., 2011), African *Indymedia* centres (Frenzal and Sullivan, 2009), and “pirate” radio networks (Moyo, D, 2010; Batist, 2010).

There is mounting evidence that the technology is being used to varying degrees by the previously unconnected and disenfranchised to contribute to information exchange and, often, forms of participatory journalism, in unprecedented and influential ways (Mabweazara, 2012; Moyo, D., 2009, Moyo, L., 2009). Nyamnjoh suggested that the innovative use of new technologies among Africans is dependent on shared cultural values of solidarity, interconnectedness and interdependence, and that these permit the uptake of opportunities provided by new communications technologies, at times even without being directly connected; he has suggested whole communities can benefit from this “single-owner - multi-user” phenomenon through which one mobile phone or computer is widely shared (Nyamnjoh, 2005).

Throughout southern Africa vibrant blogospheres have emerged, creating clear alternative channels to both receive and interact with public affairs news. In a survey of blogs in Mozambique and Angola, Salgado (2012) observed that *“all bloggers state that their mission is to control the political authorities and to promote knowledge and debate about issues, in what can be seen as a new version of the press’s fourth estate power.”*

In addition to blogging, interactions using text messaging between media outlets and the public are increasingly important. Traditional media outlets, as well as the occasional exiled broadcasters or webcasters (as is the case with a number of Zimbabwe-focussed outlets), have become highly dependent on sms-messaging from their widely dispersed mobile-equipped audiences. Mabweazara (2012) explains,

“The mobile phone has also assumed a central place in the operations of the radio stations. Apart from the fact that it does not require a lot of money or electricity (other than charging the battery every now and again), it is an ideal way to get around government censorship in Zimbabwe. Both stations [SW Radio Africa Studio 7], see the short message service (SMS) as one of the most direct ways of building and informing their audience. The creative appropriation of the SMS technology to disseminate news headlines to subscribers scattered across the globe (free of charge), is seen as strategic in the operations of both stations. Similarly, much of the radio stations’ newsgathering is mediated through the mobile phone.”

Moyo, D. (2009), in his study of the role of SMS and blogging in the 2008 Zimbabwean elections, concluded *“that citizen journalism is not necessarily emerging as a distinct form of ‘unmediated’ space of communication, but rather as a hybrid form, as mainstream media increasingly tap into that space as a way of creating a certain impression about their close links to the citizenry as testimony of citizen engagement”*. He detailed what he described as *“the parallel market for information”* in the 2008 Zimbabwean election, when information about disputed election results circulated widely via SMS influenced blogs. Moyo quotes a Zimbabwean journalist as observing,

“In the March election, citizens knew for example which prominent ministers or political rabble rousers lost elections long before the results were announced as people across the country exchanged SMS messages and sent information to blogs with the results that the

mainstream media did not have at the time... By that time mainstream media had printed and it was too late for online publications.”

In the small case study co-authored by this writer, mentioned earlier, we describe the mediation of civil unrest in 2008 in which an unknown number of citizens were killed by police and parts of the country were briefly paralyzed. It was reported to Mozambicans through four overlapping journalistic forms:

- blogs, especially that of one Maputo based academic, providing immediate local news coverage by having citizen journalist witnesses of events report by sms what they were seeing in the streets, including the police shooting at protesters, and relaying that immediately thorough the blog to large audiences; this was combined with critique and analysis of the limited and propagandistic information coming from state media and directly from government;

- coverage by more traditional, but politically independent, national commercial media, providing a mix of original reporting, input from the blogger mentioned above, and other sources;

- state broadcasting and the main newspaper (connected to the ruling-party) providing no coverage initially, and then only official interpretations demonizing protesters;

- coverage by foreign media, which provided almost no detail or context, and which depended heavily on the accounts of officials relayed by state media. This had the effect of describing (to the wider world) the protests as irrational and unprovoked (whereas they were provoked by a sudden, government-condoned rise in transport and bread prices, which the majority of people could not afford), and minimizing state violence against the protesters.

We concluded that in this the case *“a fast developing crisis with both massive political and public safety implications, across social strata, was reported comprehensively and with immediacy, over a broad geographic area, and with considerable independence from dominant institutional forces, and almost exclusively, by a highly informal network of informants using mobile phones to inform a blogger”*. The most complete story came from a form of citizen media with no commercial or state ties, and with a very critical, though slightly interactive, relationship with the traditional media (Paterson and Doctors, 2013). It has become clear since that traditional media, such as the free commercial weekly newspaper, have sought to capitalize on the eagerness of ordi-

nary Mozambicans to participate in news making via SMS (Salgado, 2012).

This essay has sought to provide a cursory sampling of two related upheavals in information flow in southern Africa; one in the 1990s, yielding new forms of exposure to traditional media; and one in the 2000s, largely facilitating the bypassing of (and new uses of) that traditional media. Most pronounced is a distinct shift from asymmetrical, elite dominated, communications concerning the major public affairs of the day toward increasingly symmetrical and participatory electronic communications.

These are increasingly augmented and facilitated by mobile telephony and internet, but depend as well on an assortment of informal and innovative interactions between media professionals, such as newspaper and radio journalists, and media non-professionals, such as bloggers and their mobile phone equipped audiences. At the international level, there is scattered evidence (though little of it subject to recent empirical evaluation) of:

- a limited persistence of neo-colonial flows – e.g. popularity of Portuguese language websites in Mozambique or UK based online news services in Zambia and Zimbabwe (e.g., BBC Online, Guardian Online);
- co-existence and symbiosis of thriving traditional and non-traditional journalism sectors;
- a continuation of state/party dominated media (especially in broadcasting) despite evidence of public distrust.

Atton and Mabweazara (2011: 668) observe that while there tend to be ample utopian predictions about the effects of new communications technologies in Africa there remains a need for empirical research to test those predictions. Citing Nyamnjoh (2005), they note the perennial argument that “*local contextual factors that shape and underlie practices in Africa are often overlooked*”, and they quote South African scholar Guy Berger observing that the bulk of research on news “*is often conducted in splendid oblivion of conditions in the Third World*” (2000: 90). It is vital to conclude, then, with the reminder that this essay has sought only to provide a glimpse of developments in the region but that the pressing need for empirical research into the characteristics of information flows remains.

The broad lessons of these trends are, if not utopian, at least hopeful. Africans have suffered in a multitude of ways from the prevalence of negative and stereotypical representation by a Northern media system, over which they have had no influence and no input (Hawk, 1992; De B'éri and Louw, 2011). The emergence of increasingly participatory and indigenous information flows, in combination with a healthy cynicism and debate about traditional media and apparent decreases in dependence on Northern sources, all imply a more autonomous and confident region of the world actively inventing new ways to communicate.

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En • The state of research into media and information flows in sub-Saharan Africa describes a situation marked by rapid growth of a wide range of media and distinctive geo-linguistic mediaspheres. This article focuses on two revolutions in information flow in the region: first, an expansion since the 1990s of traditional media, facilitated by satellite broadcasting and related technologies; secondly, since about 2000, the ongoing embrace of mobile telephony. It describes these developments in Lusophone, Francophone and Anglophone mediaspheres. Building on the author's own previous research, and that of others, the article highlights the shift from asymmetrical, elite dominated communications concerning the major public affairs of the day toward increasingly symmetrical and participatory electronic communications.

Keywords: sub-Saharan Africa, mediaspheres, language, media technologies

Fr • L'état de la recherche portant sur les flux d'information en Afrique sub-saharienne implique un contexte marqué par la croissance rapide d'un vaste panel de médias et d'espaces médiatiques géolinguistiques spécifiques. Le présent article porte sur deux révolutions liées au flux de l'information dans la région : en premier lieu l'expansion des médias traditionnels depuis les années 90, facilitée par la diffusion satellitaire et les technologies qu'elle implique ; en second lieu, l'intérêt actuel pour la téléphonie mobile qui se développe depuis les années 2000. L'article analyse ces évolutions au sein des espaces médiatiques lusophones, francophones et anglophones. Dans la continuité de notre précédente recherche, et celle développée par d'autres à ce sujet, cet article souligne le déplacement de communications asymétriques et dominées par l'élite, sur les affaires publiques majeures, vers des communications électroniques de plus en plus symétriques et participatives.

Mots-clés : Afrique sub-saharienne, espace médiatique, langue, media, technologies

Po • O estado da pesquisa sobre o fluxo da informação na África subsaariana remete a um contexto marcado pelo rápido crescimento de um vasto conjunto de mídias e de espaços midiáticos geolinguísticos específicos. O presente artigo se centra em duas revoluções que perpassam o fluxo de informações na região: em primeiro lugar, a expansão dos meios tradicionais a partir dos anos 90, facilitada pela difusão via satélite e pelas tecnologias associadas a esse processo; em segundo lugar, pelo atual envolvimento da telefonia móvel na produção midiática, processo iniciado a partir dos anos 2000. O artigo analisa essas evoluções no âmbito dos espaços midiáticos lusófono, francófono e anglófono. Dando continuidade à nossa pesquisa precedente, a amparado em outras pesquisas sobre o assunto, este artigo destaca o deslocamento de comunicações assimétricas e dominadas pela elite sobre assuntos públicos maiores rumo às comunicações eletrônicas, cada vez mais simétricas e participativas.

Palavras chave: África subsaariana, espaço midiático, língua, mídia, tecnologias

