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Communication Studies in Africa: The Case for a Paradigm Shift for the 21st Century

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Abstract

The paradigm for communication education in African universities has historically revolved around a mass communication or media-centered perspective. This orientation of the discipline in the African continent resulted from structural forces that derived from historical legacies rooted in Africa's colonial past as well as the theoretical attraction of the mass media as agents of change. Additionally, the need to train university graduates for careers in journalism, broadcasting, public relations, and advertising has helped to entrench this paradigm as the cornerstone of communication education in Africa. Elsewhere however the discipline has experienced widespread growth in human communication specialties in such areas as intercultural communication, speech communication, interpersonal communication and others. This paper argues for a paradigm shift asserting that the time is ripe for the discipline at African universities to expand by shifting towards greater emphasis on human communication. Such a transformation would permit better understanding of the African communication environment as well as enable scholars to better respond, from a communication perspective, to the challenges of development in such areas as conflict resolution and, interethnic disputes among others. To achieve this, it is suggested that a consortium of communication scholars and other

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stakeholders convene to engage in discussions on new ways of thinking about communication education. The dialogue would need to be sensitive to past forces that have catalyzed change in meaningful directions.

Key terms: paradigm shift, communication education, communication studies, media-centered model, structural forces, training curricular, ferment, human communication, civil society, stakeholders, consortium of universities.

Résumé

Dans les universités africaines, le paradigme employé dans le cadre de l'enseignement de la communication a toujours porté sur une certaine perspective centrée autour de la communication de masse ou les médias. Une telle orientation s'explique par les dynamiques structurelles résultant de l'héritage historique colonial, mais également de cet intérêt théorique pour les médias, considérés comme des acteurs du changement. De plus, ce besoin de former des diplômés en journalisme, en sciences de la radiodiffusion / télévision, en relations publiques et en publicité, a contribué à considérer ce paradigme comme étant la base de l'enseignement de la communication en Afrique. Dans d'autres contrées, cependant, cette discipline a connu un véritable essor dans le domaine de la communication humaine, à travers de multiples matières, telles que la communication interculturelle, la communication discursive, la communication interpersonnelle, etc. Cet article prône un changement de paradigme, en affirmant qu'il est grand temps que cette discipline enseignée dans les universités africaines s'oriente davantage vers la communication humaine. Cela permettrait de mieux comprendre l'environnement africain de communication, tout en permettant aux universitaires de mieux relever les défis de développement, en se servant d'une perspective de communication, ceci dans divers domaines, tels que la résolution de conflit, les querelles interethniques, etc. Pour ce faire, nous suggérons la tenue d'un consortium réunissant les universitaires spécialisés dans la communication, ainsi que les diverses parties prenantes, afin que ceux-ci puissent engager des discussions sur les éventuelles nouvelles orientations de l'enseignement de la communication. Ce dialogue devra prendre en compte les dynamiques du passé qui ont servi de catalyseur aux changements.

Mots clés : changement de paradigme, enseignement de la communication, études en communication, modèle centré sur les médias, dynamiques structurelles, programme de formation, ferment, communication humaine, société civile, parties prenantes, consortium d'universités.

Introduction

Few, if any, scholars would argue with the notion that understanding human communication is a prerequisite for human development, and societal progress including the maintenance of peace. This realization

has produced enormous growth in communication education at universities in North America and Western Europe over the past thirty years. Many communication degree programmes at those universities have grown from emphases in speech communication, mass communication and journalism to include several of the so called 'human communication' specialties in intercultural and international communication, interpersonal communication, organizational communication and instructional communication.

Indeed, since the 1970s the study of communication at Western universities has witnessed large-scale transformation that produced ferment in the field and the maturation of various theories and perspectives. These developments were largely in response to the critical issues of the times. For example, intercultural and international communication grew in a bid to extend abstract anthropological constructs to the world of international relations and international diplomacy. This area took on further momentum in response to the emerging domestic and international imperatives of the times. In the United States, for example, by the 1970s there was increasing intercultural mix in the population, producing a need for improved race relations. At the same time, business leaders saw the onward march of overseas competitiveness producing a need for better understanding of international business communication so as to maintain competitive advantage. Similar responses to societal and theoretical crises can be offered for the growth of the other specialties in communication education at Western universities. The practical outcome of this continued maturation of the discipline is that since the 1970s, Western universities have produced thousands of well-trained communication professionals and scholars who have been responding to the challenges and opportunities of their societies and serving in such myriad fields as health communication, political communication, communication education, cultural studies, and gender communication.

Unfortunately, these developments which have shaped the growth of the discipline internationally have found little ground in the communication studies curricula of most universities in Africa. In the late 1970s, the Nigerian scholar Professor Alfred Opubor¹ lamented that everything known about communication education in Africa is mass communication-oriented. Opubor, then head of the department of mass communication at Nigeria's University of Lagos, was concerned that the curricula of communication education in Africa, with its apparently heavy focus on journalism and mass communication, was ill-prepared to deal

with the emerging challenges of civil strife and political turmoil that was gripping the continent.

Established largely as training centers for journalism education across the continent, the defining feature of communication studies remains mass communication and journalism education. As part of this media-centered approach, several African universities have also included programmes in public relations, advertising, and development communication. Although many of the communication degree programmes particularly in Nigeria, South Africa, and Ghana include classes in the human communication areas, none has been able to fully develop and graduate students in one or more of the human communication fields. Nearly four decades after Professor Opubor's prophetic remark, communication education in Africa is still designed to produce journalists and mass communication practitioners.

Clearly, this overriding paradigm for communication education in Africa which revolves around a media-centered model is inadequate to respond to the requirements for building a civil society and the development and human resources needs of the continent into the 21st century. The prevalence of interethnic and religious conflict, the struggle to build the vital habits of democracy, the impact of modernisation on family relations and family communication patterns, the spread of AIDS and other robust diseases, the importance of greater competitiveness and comparative advantage in international trade and diplomacy offer only a microcosm of the evidence that the need to expand communication education in Africa is vital, crucial, and immediate.

Another element of this need lies in the absence of African-centered explanations and theoretical constructs suitable to explain the human communication phenomena for African societies although Ansu-Kyeremeh (1997) proposes an 'indigenisation' perspective. The few faculty members who teach introductory classes in some of the human communication subjects in Africa have come to rely on research findings and textbooks that are often unsuitable to explain and predict the African communication experience. Even against this background recent efforts to strengthen communication training in Africa have merely served to reinforce the mass communication bias of the perspective. For example, UNESCO's (2002) model curricular for communication training in Africa (project coordinator, S.T. Kwame Boafo, 2002) identified eight areas for non-degree and degree programmes—all with mass media emphases. The areas include print journalism, advertising, broadcasting (radio and television), publishing and cinematography. It seems reasonable to assert therefore that the situational contexts in Africa, the dearth of

communication research from an Afrocentric perspective, and the inadequacy of new training curricula compel the need to rethink the nature and direction of communication education in Africa. When fully conceptualized and implemented, the new paradigm would serve to enhance the available pool of communication experts for various societal development needs as well as augment our theoretical knowledge of African communication phenomena.

In this paper, we discuss the several issues related to the status of communication education in Africa around our thesis that the time is ripe for a paradigm shift towards greater embrace of the human communication disciplines. The discussion is organized into four parts. First, is a review of some structural influences that have shaped communication education in Africa. Second, is an analysis of communication training curricular from selected African universities. Third, is a discussion of past attempts made to address the deficits inherent in communication education and training in Africa, and fourth, is a discussion of the implications of the current approach to communication studies at universities in Africa.

Structural Influences shaping communication education in Africa

The emergence and development of communication studies in African Universities around a media emphasis can be linked to a number of socio-structural forces that responded to the needs of the times. Specifically, a number of historical legacies, the push towards technological determinism as a cure for Africa's development goals, the intellectual paradigm that linked mass media to national development and the sheer need for training of journalists and other media professionals propelled an intellectual tradition that has remained robust, dynamic, and resilient to dramatic changes occurring in the discipline elsewhere. Each of these elements is discussed below.

Historical legacies

History to a large extent has shaped the landscape of communication education in Africa. Among the major historical considerations are the colonial experience and that relationship to the spread of journalism in Africa. Others include the 1960s shift in theory towards psychologically-based solutions to communication problems, and the 1970s emphases by African communication scholars exploring how modern mass media may appropriately respond to the African socio-cultural background. This approach is regogitated contemporarily by Ansu-Kyeremeh (1997, 2005) in his 'indigenisation' thesis and Wilson (2005) in his 'diachronic' and 'synchronic' models.

The colonial experience

A major historical element relates to the colonial experiences of many African nations. Nearly every one of the countries in Africa was colonized by a European power. Most were colonies of Great Britain and France. The colonial experience produced two important dynamics in the growth and spread of journalism. They were (a) the emergence of print as advocacy journalism, and (b) situating early broadcasting as a mouthpiece of government. By the early 1800s, a number of newspapers in Africa served as the mainstay of campaigns for political leaders to advocate for national independence from the colonies. Setting up print was not difficult technologically and so as many as wanted to could utilize the print avenue to mount anti-colonial campaigns. The press became a magnet for politically conscious individuals who began to see journalism as an attractive career option. Many of Africa's pre-independence leaders (among them Kwame Nkrumah, Nnamdi Azikiwe, Julius Nyerere, Leopold Senghor, and Kenneth Kaunda) wrote pieces that mobilised their nations for change.

Not surprisingly, the need grew for the establishment of journalism training centres to equip journalists with the knowledge, skills and values to support a growing press industry. Some of the earliest training centers were established in Nigeria, Ghana and South Africa. In South Africa especially, the authoritarian media system denied access to the anti-apartheid movement, members of which found the printed press as the most effective organ to mobilize citizens for majority rule. The printed press had maintained this role across most of Africa and even today, the privately owned ones largely function as independently owned entities serving as surveillance watchdogs of their environments and often publishing spirited editorials and critical pieces. As more and more economies are liberalized, so too have the numbers of independent publications increased. In addition, the continuing attraction of journalism as a career in Africa makes the demand for journalistic skills even more urgent. The universities have a high demand for journalism students and lack the resources to meet those demands (Nwosu *et al.*, 2003).

By contrast, the colonialists introduced radio broadcasting into West Africa around 1933 and placed them directly in the hands of the colonial governments. For example, broadcasting was introduced in Sierra Leone in 1933 as a branch of the public relations office of the Governor-General. Initially, the programmes were relayed directly from the BBC in London with a few local spots for the announcement of official activities. Eventually, more and more local programmes were introduced and this

created a need for training in the art and practice of broadcasting (Taylor 1981). Many of the earliest African broadcasters were sent on 3–9 months training programmes in Europe, notably attached to the *BBC* in London for English speaking nations. After independence, those nations needed to start their own training programmes as training abroad became more restricted and limited. This was even more crucial with the advent of television in the 1960s across most of the independent African nations. To satisfy this professional niche, universities began to include broadcast training options in both their non-degree and degree programmes in communication studies. Again, with limited resources and an ever growing need for trained broadcasters, many of the universities could mostly deliver a media-oriented curriculum.

The emergence of psychology-based solutions to media uses and effects

Another historical factor can be linked to the impetus given to psychological explanations about media/audience relations in the 1970s. Specifically, the maturation of journalism and broadcast education programmes in the United States about thirty years ago coincided with the expansion of communication studies to reflect a new psychology-oriented superstructure for the discipline. Indeed, many of the human communication specialties that emerged into communication studies at about this time were pretty interested in seeking measurable solutions to social problems. Communication scholars were attracted to exploring and testing causal inferences for a plethora of communication behaviours. Cronen (1998) has described this shift as replacing the classical focus of public communication with what he described as the ‘wreckage of the psychology project’ (Cronen 1998: 21). The psychology project held out great promise not only for the new and emerging specialties of the discipline but helped to situate mass communication firmly within the fabric of a social psychological framework.

Against this background the new African communication scholars such as Frank Okwu Ugboajah, attracted to the elegance of social scientific approaches, became very interested in such concepts as modernisation, development and change, diffusion processes, and the influences shaping public information campaigns. Scholars were interested in assessing various hypotheses about media/audience relationships and especially to know the contingent conditions under which the mass media could propel change. Indeed, Ugboajah (1985) became especially interested in learning how to integrate oral media into the mass media in order to produce

effects. Other eminent scholars of the time gave further support to these perspectives (Asante and Blake 1979). In historical terms, this new preoccupation with the social psychology of communication helped to give academic vitality to professional journalism training programmes. Conceptualized as mass communication, this new academic focus was established at par with the traditional social science degrees offered at African universities. Even till today, many African universities offer either non-degree training programmes for various media-oriented professions or a fully-developed mass communication degree programme grounded in theory and social science research.

Taken together, these historical legacies provided the backbone for the conceptualization of communication studies in Africa from a media-bias perspective.

Technological determinism as a cure all

Another major structural influence that has contributed to the status of communication studies in Africa relates to the positive value placed on technology as the driving engine of change, and in particular information and communication technologies (ICTs). We currently live in a world that has been aptly described as either the 'information age' or the 'information society.' The information society is characterized by the 'information revolution.' The information revolution reflects rapid developments in information and communication technologies (ICTs) that produce vast amounts of knowledge and access to various resources instantly around the world. In this context, national progress is being measured in part by a nation's ability to acquire, manufacture, process, distribute, store, retrieve information faster and accurately for multiple purposes. Unfortunately, African countries have not fared well on any of these measures, which in part may account for major setbacks in economic development on the continent.

In the Western industrial nations, more than fifty percent of the workforce is employed in ICT-related services accounting for rapid economic growth. These technological developments have included major transformations in the use of radio, television, cable, wireless, computers, the Internet, and various multi-media technologies that can deliver information rapidly to large segments of society in specially targeted ways. With the growth in digital technologies, these technological developments now make limitless the boundaries of possibilities for their application to communication. Consequently, it is reasonable to assert that in the information age, possession and expert use of these ICTs is a

sine qua non for development and global influence. Not surprisingly, therefore, the countries seen as more advanced are also sometimes described as information-rich while the countries that are less advanced, the nations of Africa being examples, are sometimes described as information-poor. Clearly, the ever-widening gap between the information rich and the information poor is of tremendous concern to all interested in the development of Africa with clear calls to bridge the 'digital divide' (Taylor 2002).

The quest to bridge the digital divide has led to extraordinary emphasis and focus among development enthusiasts to push for the use of ICTs both as a panacea for change as well as the means for catching up with the technologically with leader nations. This is widely reminiscent of the earlier linear paradigm of development that advocated the use of the mass media for national development. These days, discussion at various world fora on Africa's development tend to focus on ICTs. The principal objective of the Geneva 2003 and Tunis 2005 United Nations World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS) (WSIS 2003) in particular, is to assist developing nations in Africa and elsewhere understand how the information revolution can be used to transform their economies in order to achieve the Millennium Development Goals identified for those countries (see www.itu.int/wsis). These fora are also aimed at identifying strategies and action plans for more effective uses of ICTs in those countries.

In this context, African media systems are seen as pivotal to help build the information society through adoption and use of the available means of technology. Once again, communication degree programmes remain the principal university avenue to acquire these necessary skills for African nations to respond to the opportunities of the information age. Thus, rather than transforming curricula to engage the emerging contours of the discipline in human communication, most of these programmes have strengthened their focus to reflect the need for training in ICTs. Clearly, this need is realistic. The South African commentator Lyndell Shopa-Mafole (2004: 11) noted in an article in the *Rhodes Journalism Review* that 'the role of journalists is to influence the direction of the information society by acting as the catalyst' for applications of the new technologies. This reinforces the paradigm of a media-centred model of communication education and further solidifies the value of mass communication/media studies programmes to supply vital skill needs of the information society as proposed by Olorunnisola (1995); Mukassa (1995), Alali (1995), and Taylor (2002).

The intellectual paradigm of the mass media and national development

The paradigm of a media-centred approach for development in Africa has been attractive for quite some time and is a central factor in the structural sustainability of mass communication as a focus of communication studies in Africa. The preceding discussion about ICTs is to some extent an extension of the model that saw its beginnings in the late 1950s with the work of Lerner (1958) and notably Schramm (1964). The perspective of these and later scholars suggested that the mass media were powerful agents of change and would be influential in transforming audience members' ways of thinking to assist in the modernization process. Initially, the model proposed that audience members were mostly passive and would easily succumb to the modernizing messages of the mass media. The model, to some extent, also lays blame on individuals' lack of empathy (Lerner 1958) and the entrepreneurial spirit (McClelland 1961) for the low levels of development in Africa and other less developed nations. As discussed earlier, this was probably the beginning of the wreckage of the psychology project in communication studies (Cronen 1998). It saw the introduction of western social psychology concepts into discussions about media studies and opened up a vibrant research agenda for three decades or more of research by the new African mass communication scholars.

From a developing region context of communication and transformation of society, work by Nwosu *et al.* (1995) provide a useful insight into the various research attempts, including those by Taylor (1995), Ozoh (1995) and Nwosu (1995), that first dethroned the earlier formulations and later exhorted multiple possibilities for use of the mass media in development. The thrust of the African media research agenda has certainly been grounded in this intellectual tradition and indeed shaped the doctoral dissertations of many African scholars who studied abroad especially in the United States of America and in Africa. Although these scholars had disagreed with the earlier proponents of a powerful-media with passive-audience approach, they nevertheless stayed true to an eventual role for the mass media if planners employed indigenous media (Awa 1995, Blake 1971; Ugboajah 1968) or employed a dualistic participatory approach that engaged audiences in planning (Nwosu, 1995) or assessed the needs of the audience (Moemeka 2002; Ozoh 1995; Taylor 1995). In each of these and several others, the researchers have sought to identify various contingent conditions in which the mass media could serve as agents of change.

Given their roles as educators in universities in developing countries, it is not surprising that these scholars have found in communication degree programmes a nexus between media use and national development. But, as many of these commentators have noted, development is a complex process and even any influence by the mass media must be understood in the context of other forces that may themselves be influencing the pace and direction of change. Again, the interethnic and religious conflicts coupled with the often elusive attempts to secure entrenched institutions of democracy are instances where communication research could help to advance development from a non-media perspective.

Indeed, to some extent, the focus on mass media and development has limited media research into what we know about the effects of the mass media in Africa. Those effects such as the cultivation of western cultural values through cultural homogenization/cultural imperialism, agenda setting and issue salience in the body-politic, the role of media violence in the escalation of aggression and physical harm to others, and emotional reactions to exposure to the mass media, including the brain-drain, seem to have suffered as the drumbeat for mass media and development reaches a crescendo. Perhaps some movement in mass media effects research in Africa might spur significant interest in the human communication domain than has been so far.

Need for training of career professionals

Another major socio-structural influence for the status of communication studies in Africa relates to the urgent need for skilled manpower. In the African environment, most universities see their role as fulfilling both the intellectual and occupational needs of their nations. The majority of universities exist through public funding where the primary goal is to produce an educated workforce in areas earmarked by government as central to achieving development goals in sectors such as health, education, agriculture, and business administration. In all of these areas, career opportunities exist for mass communication, journalism, advertising and public relations graduates working as change agents, information officers, and others. In addition, the explosive growth of newspapers, radio, and TV stations, as well as film production studios has added to the demand. Employers have become accustomed to an understanding that a communication degree in Africa is linked to some form of media training. These expectations are embodied in the structure of the various degree and non-degree programmes in communication studies offered at African universities.

In sum, the growth of communication education in Africa has been hampered by several socio-structural forces—historical legacies informed by colonialism, perceptions about media/audience relations, the value placed on technology as the driving engine of change, the intellectual paradigm about media's role in national development, and the apparent focus on producing professionals to satisfy the perceived occupational needs of the continent.

Status of communication education in Africa

In this section, we review the structure and content of communication education and training in Africa. To date, there are well over 100 institutions in Africa that offer various programmes of study in the discipline of communication education. About 60 percent of these institutions are universities and polytechnics, while the remaining 40 percent consist of private tertiary and vocational institutions. Mohammed (1995) reports that most of the communication training institutions are found in West Africa (58 in number), while Central and Southern Africa account for 17; East Africa accounts for 10; and North Africa has 10 such institutions. Most of the courses offered in these programmes focus on journalism training and several examine strategies for enhancing the application of mass media in societal change. For example, about a quarter of the 100 institutions offer, at least, one course in development communication.

To provide a closer assessment of the various curricula offered at these institutions, we reviewed data from eight universities that were selected to reflect the broad range of communication studies degree programmes offered at universities in each of the sub-regions of Africa. Moreover, because of language-resource constraints we focused on universities that offer an English-based curriculum. The review offers a vivid illustration of the media-emphasis described earlier.

Brief overview of communication studies curricula at eight selected universities: A preliminary assessment from Anglophone Africa

Based on criteria outlined earlier, we selected the following universities to guide our review of curricular emphases in communication studies. Table 1 sets this out.

Information about these communication programmes was compiled using UNESCO documents, websites of the universities, as well as printed resources from the sampled institutions. Findings are discussed in terms of three categories: non-degree programmes, degree programmes, and curricula foci.

Table 1: Selected Institutions and Communication Studies Focus

<i>Region</i>	<i>Institution</i>	<i>Area</i>
<i>West Africa (Nigeria)</i>	University of Nigeria	mass communication
	University of Lagos	mass communication
	Institute of Management & Technology, Enugu	mass communication
<i>Southern Africa (South Africa)</i>	The University of Natal	media and cultural studies
	University of South Africa	communications
	Rhodes University	journalism and media studies
<i>East Africa (Kenya)</i>	University of Nairobi	journalism
<i>North Africa (Egypt)</i>	Cairo University	mass communication, journalism, advertising, and public relations

Non-degree programmes

Typically, two kinds of non-degree programmes (Table 2) are offered at our sample institutions.

Degree programmes

There appear to be several emphases for students pursuing degree options in communication studies at the selected universities (see Table 3).

Communication curricula

Our examination also shows that programme curricula for both degree and non-degree programmes in communication studies in these institutions draw from the following subject areas:

1. Print media (reporting and news production)
2. Electronic media (news reporting, news production and programming)
3. Advertising and public relations
4. Media management and economics
5. Media history
6. Communication policies
7. Media law and ethics
8. Communication theory and research
9. Communication for development
10. Communication and society
11. International communication
12. Social marketing

Table 2: Types of Non-Degree Programmes

<i>Non-Degree Programmes</i>	<i>Duration</i>	<i>Description</i>
Certificate programmes	3-6 months	In-service training and workshops in a variety of areas such as photo-journalism, film/documentary, television, video and radio production. These workshops are offered to non-traditional students already in career-oriented professions in the industry or with the public sector. These classes typically entail training on the technical material needed to support appropriate skills. Examples are: video editing, audio functions, lighting, introduction to scriptwriting, and so forth.
Diploma programmes	Two years	In-service training in journalism, mass communication, and film production, and are designed for those interested in entry-level careers in journalism and/or mass communication. Some of the subjects taught in the diploma programme include introduction to reporting, report writing, script writing, radio, television and film production.

In addition to coursework in these subject areas, students at the institutions in Nigeria and South Africa may also choose elective courses from the following: interpersonal communication, intercultural communication, public speaking, organizational communication, and conflict resolution. The journalism programme at the University of Nairobi, Kenya, requires students to take courses in performance studies. The availability of introductory courses in the human communication subjects reveals faculty awareness of the value of these areas for strengthening of communication education in those places where such courses are offered. Yet, after nearly four decades none of these core areas have risen to the status of a stand-alone degree programme. Stand-alone degree programmes help foster the development and institutionalization of human communication as a major part of the communication discipline in the continent.

Table 3: Types of Degree Programmes

<i>Degree Programme</i>	<i>Duration</i>	<i>Description</i>
B.A. in Journalism	Four-year programme of coursework	Offered in a variety of subject areas, and includes a capstone project. The B.A. in journalism provides career options in the mass media—radio, television, and newspaper/magazine industry.
B.A. in Mass Communication	Four-year programme of coursework	Offered in a variety of subject areas, and includes a capstone project. The B.A. in mass communication provides specializations for career options in journalism and public relations.
Postgraduate Diploma	One-year programme of coursework (after a B.A.)	Offered in journalism, mass communication, or television and radio production, and includes such courses as media law and ethics. There is also a final research report.
M.A. Mass Communication	Two-year programme of coursework	Includes a research project in the form of a thesis.
M.A. Communication Arts	Two-year programme of coursework	Includes a research project in the form of a thesis.
Ph.D. Mass Communication		The only one of its kind in Africa, offered at the University of Lagos, Nigeria.
Ph.D. Media and Cultural Studies		Offered at the University of Natal, South Africa

As electives, however, they serve the intellectual rather than the professional needs of students while lacking the depth and breadth to foster an appetite for enthusiastic research in those areas, development of new theories, applications to critical issues of the times, or expanding employer expectations of what graduates can do with a communication studies degree. In part, as stated earlier some of the structural impediments lie in the ever-challenging resource constraints that restrict faculty opportunities to explore new areas. Specifically, they include the

following: lack of textbooks and other African-centred curriculum materials in the human communication areas, and absence of a voice that helps showcase the value of human communication to university authorities as well as among major employers such as the government. Other constraints include the very few faculty who possess doctorate degrees and have an active programme of research in these areas, and the brain-drain wherein many African communication scholars trained overseas remain abroad for several reasons. So while the need to expand communication education in Africa has been apparent for some time now, the struggle has faced monumental challenges that have made movement difficult.

Attempts to refocus communication education & training

To address these challenges some important efforts have been made over the past twenty years to respond to the crisis in communication education. There have been two major attempts by UNESCO since the 1980s to redirect and refocus communication education and training in Africa. These projects have focused on textbook development and curriculum enhancement. The Textbooks Project (1986–1987) identified the limitations regarding communication textbooks and study materials in African countries. The major conclusion drawn was the need to support the development of communication textbooks and study materials in the discipline by the 1990s and beyond. Progress thus far indicates minimal increase in the number of textbooks published in the 1990s (Nordenstreng and Boafo 1988). General reader texts with a bias towards communication and development, public relations and advertising, training manuals and guides, as well as texts in media ethics have been published. The Textbook Project (Nordenstreng and Boafo 1988) has not produced works in communication theory and intercultural communication nor in any of the core areas of human communication studies.

The second project on curricula review (1996–2000) was a response emerging from a proactive dialogue on curriculum review that began at the 1996 African Council for Communication Education (ACCE) biennial conference in Cape Town, South Africa with the goal to expand communication education and training. The major conclusion drawn from the project revealed the need to expand the curricula of existing training institutions to cover the broad spectrum of communication studies, rather than the narrow focus on journalism and communication. Some of the new concentration areas proposed include: interpersonal, intercultural, organizational, inter-ethnic communication and new communication and

information technologies. These proposals are outlined in the UNESCO (2002) publication, *Communication Training in Africa: Model Curricula*.

While the UNESCO projects reflect some progress towards advancing communication education and training, they both failed to address the structural deterrents that have impeded the growth of communication studies at African universities.

Impact and consequences of media-centred curriculum emphasis

To understand the impact and consequences of these interrelated factors, it is useful to borrow from Cushman's (1998) conclusions regarding the then state of communication studies in the United States. Cushman (1998) spoke about an academic environment that had produced both 'retarding and catalytic' forces in our discipline. Using those concepts, Cushman (1998) saw the retarding forces as those intellectual traditions that failed to break out of the box. It reflected a sense of being limited by the earlier definitions, approaches, theories and perspectives. The catalytic forces on the other hand indicated the movements that thrust forth new ideas, planted new seeds and blazed forth new horizons that allowed for a richer understanding of human communication. Though separate, it is sometimes the interactions and struggles between these two forces that lead to paradigm shifts and the onward growth of a discipline. The status of communication studies in Africa can similarly be assessed against this yardstick.

Clearly, there have been several retarding forces limiting the growth of the discipline in the continent. Together, these forces have placed a restrictive environment in a field that can be a critical player in the service of national development. Some of the deficits have wide reaching implications. For example, the nature of inquiry that has dominated the African communication environment in the last thirty years can be seen as stifling. Scholars have churned out the bulk of their work supporting the media superstructure of the discipline thereby further legitimizing its strategic priority.

A cursory review of all issues of *Africa Media Review*, the premier communication journal in Africa, from 1986 when the journal began publishing to date, paints a clear portrait of this bias. Indeed, the very fact that the leading journal coming from communication scholars in Africa is entitled *Africa Media Review (AMR)* is a vivid illustration of the stifling nature of the discipline in practice. Except for a few articles about human communication processes and patterns in Africa (see for example Blake 1993; Opubor 2004), most of the research on

communication in Africa by scholars in Africa has been about mass communication. Certainly, a number of African scholars outside the continent (for example Awa, Moemeka, Nwosu, Taylor and Blake, to name a few) have written extensively about the need to expand communication studies in Africa to incorporate a human communication emphasis. A good illustration of this approach from outside the continent is reflected in the new journal entitled *Journal of African Communication* published from California State University at Bakersfield, California. Against this background it seems evident that there is a dearth of research on important aspects of human communication that Africans have not been able to respond to in any systematic ways.

Another related deficit, and an important one, is that very little work has emerged regarding theory building about African communication practices. Frey *et al.* (1991: 11) have noted that 'A theory is . . . a useful explanation to the extent that it excites us about inquiry, organizes our knowledge, leads us to expect certain outcomes to occur, and focuses research efforts.' This is why Opubor's (2004) discourse in a recent issue of *AMR* represents a good starting point for theorizing about human communication in ways that advance our understanding of such processes and patterns in Africa. One might ask: What theories guide the teaching of such elective courses in intercultural communication that are currently offered in some universities in South Africa and Nigeria? In general, we have relied on theories developed in western societies for the purposes of explaining western rationality and communication phenomena to explain African rationality and communication practices. As Taylor and Nwosu (2001) point out, the need to understand how Africans interpret reality must become the indispensable starting point for studying communication in different contexts in Africa.

At a minimum, it needs to present a new imperative of integrating an understanding of the core value boundaries that guide African rationality into communication problem solving in that setting. Any assumptions of universal or homogenous African processes and patterns are considered in relation to cultural variability, unique cultural experiences, and environment-specific factors that make Africans similar but yet different in their communication experiences (Taylor & Nwosu 2001: 301).

One of the long-term objectives of communication education and training in Africa is the need to develop and adapt communication curricula relevant to the social and development goals of African people. Whilst numerous efforts reveal progressive response towards this

objective, more effort is needed in the way of connecting content and context.

Here lie the catalytic forces that are moving us towards a review of the content and curriculum. In the past decade, for example, ACCE and UNESCO have been vocal in calling for a change in the African communication studies curricula, but changes in the greater information and communication environment call for communication scholars and practitioners in Africa to be more proactive and to find new possibilities that connect content and context and forms the foundation of communication education and training in the continent. For example, the declaration of principles spelled out in two the major World Summits namely the 2000 Millennium Summit and the 2003 World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS) outline the agenda to meet the challenges facing a majority of the poor in the world. Similarly, previous dialogue on the same subject held during the 1996 ACCE Biennial conference in Cape Town, South Africa and recommendations made during the 2003 ACCE 13th Biennial Conference in Abuja, Nigeria to review the communication curriculum, inform the urgency of the matter.

The assumption behind the new urgency is that communication can 'invent' fixes for solving both our material and social problems. However, our review of the status of communication education in Africa tells us that there is no guarantee that our institutions of learning can provide these anticipated quick fixes unless we can engage in the search for new modes of thinking about the social organization of meaning and how it is negotiated by different actors in a diverse African communication environment.

Since communication is a process, content and context play crucial roles in the construction of meaning. By raising the question about content and context, we are opening room to ask how the communication discipline in Africa can be altered to meet different goals and objectives. In essence, we invite a proactive follow-up action of previous dialogues concerning communication education and training in Africa that have suggested the need to explore new grounds of scholarship relevant to the African environment. Our purpose in this paper reiterates the vision of UNESCO and ACCE in the late 1980s to support the development of communication teaching and study materials relevant to the African environment. By redirecting teaching and research to African needs, we are building on the successes of African communication research, and so improve the prospects for human survival and advancement in Africa.

Conclusion

The challenge ahead for expanding communication education in Africa is great, and the task is enormous. Our call for a paradigm shift suggests that the current focus on journalism and mass communication is problematic. A paradigm shift towards greater embrace of the human communication disciplines is timely for communication degree programmes in Africa. The degree programmes should develop in ways that respond to the new communication challenges such as community and nation building, conflict resolution, leadership, international relations and diplomacy, and intercultural communication. As we have noted in this discussion, the call for broadening the contours of communication inquiry is not new. What is new is the urgency for Africa. In the preceding sections, we have laid out a compelling case about the intellectual and historical conditions that have shaped and retarded the discipline's status and growth in the last century. We have also made a case about the rising catalytic forces that must propel new scholarship in the service of the discipline and of national development. The 21st century is now the time to begin in this new direction. Without doubt, catapulting the discipline to newer heights will require comprehensive and systematic planning and implementation. It will also require collaborative effort among key stakeholders that would span several years until the field's maturation. What is needed then to begin this important process is the coming together of a consortium of communication scholars, government, industry and donor agencies from Africa and the African Diaspora to engage in new modes of thinking about communication studies in the continent. The new mode of thinking would require undertaking such activities as creating the institutional mechanism to support, coordinate and manage the expansion of communication studies; and conducting in-depth regional assessments of the structural impediments to such expansion that identify the unique challenges and promises for each region. The new mode of thinking would also require a new framework for implementation of the recommendations emanating from the assessments, including the use of an incremental strategy for meeting specific goals on a pilot basis in select universities for each region; periodically assessing progress, promises and challenges and reporting back to the consortium. Any progress in paradigm shift must, however, begin with a reorientation of the mindset in African universities, and in both the public and private sectors that see communication education as only education about journalism and mass communication.

Notes

- 1 Opubor is with the West African Newsmedia and Development Centre, Cotonou, Benin Republic.

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