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Yemisi Akinbobola

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THEORISING THE AFRICAN DIGITAL PUBLIC SPHERE: A WEST AFRICAN ODYSSEY

Yemisi Akinbobola
Birmingham School of Media
Birmingham City University, UK
yemisi.akinbobola@bcu.ac.uk

ABSTRACT

This theoretical discussion about the impact of information and communication technologies on journalistic practices and the digital public spheres in West Africa, asks two key questions: 1) To what extent does the ICT-enabled impact on journalism practice contribute to the rejuvenation of the public sphere in African societies, and 2) What are the methodological changes of investigating these contributions? Scholars have argued that advances in ICTs can be used to initiate alternative forms of news production and citizen engagement that would either augment the efforts of the mainstream news media in African countries or, if need be, bypass the challenges they face. This argument sits well within current debates about the use and impact of ICTs on news consumption, journalistic practices, and the expansion of the public sphere. As many African countries still aspire towards functioning and modern democratic structures, there is a clear need for further academic discussion on, and empirical research into, this technology-led transformation of journalism. The connection of these challenges with the emancipation of the public sphere is evident, and thus we arrive at the questions this article addresses by drawing on published literature of both theoretical and empirical contexts, as well as the author's observations and research.

Keywords: access, citizen engagement, diaspora media, digital public sphere, Habermasian public sphere, journalistic practices

INTRODUCTION

At the centre of debates about the contributions of information and communication technologies (ICTs) to the public sphere, is accessibility to, and participation in, news and information by the citizen, and the creation of alternative spaces and voices in which community interests are discussed (Atton 2002; Silverstone 1999). The use of specific digital tools (such as smartphones) and social media platforms (such as Facebook and Twitter) has also been key to the debates. For example, many scholars have researched the impact of the spread and development of telecommunication on how citizens use mobile phones to monitor political elections in various African countries. Akinfemisoye (2014) investigated the impact of ICTs on journalism practices and the use of user-generated content (UGC) during Nigeria's 2011 election. Similarly, Moyo (2010) studied the 2008 elections in Zimbabwe and how alternative journalism, particularly deploying mobile phone text messages, was used to monitor the democratic process.

With a history of undemocratic activities during elections in these countries, the ability to report on election proceedings using mobile phones is a significant development in the empowerment of ordinary citizens, who are now able to monitor those in power and contribute to public debate. It also allows those in the diaspora to observe the democratic process unfolding in their home countries.

Social media platforms demonstrate a key position in the monitoring of democratic processes: for instance, Facebook and Twitter are now widely adopted by African politicians as channels of engagement with voters. In 2010, former Nigerian President, Goodluck Jonathan, announced his candidacy for the presidential election via Facebook (Adibe and Odoemelam 2012; Akinfemisoye 2014).

The idea of using new media technologies to facilitate alternative media production and citizen engagement brings to mind McQuail's (1987) democratic-participant theory, in which 'media are ideally constituted in small-scale terms, favouring horizontal patterns of interaction, and facilitating the expression of citizens' needs' (Vatikiotis 2005, 3), and within which alternative media are deeply rooted. However, scholars still struggle to define exactly what 'alternative media' means, and while numerous terminologies are used to describe the concept (e.g., radical, independent, citizen, tactical, activist, autonomy, community and participatory media) these are argued to be limiting, and therefore 'alternative' provides an inclusive interpretation (Atton 2002). Yet the question remains: alternative to what?

Tony Dowmunt (2007, 1) describes alternative media as 'media forms that are on a smaller scale, more accessible and participatory, and less constrained by the bureaucracy or commercial interests than the mainstream media and often in some way in explicit opposition to them'. However, scholars like Atton (2002, viiii) give a more general and wider interpretation, and use the term to refer to 'a range of media projects, interventions and networks that work against, or seek to develop different forms of, the dominant, expected (and broadly accepted) ways of "doing"

media'. Regardless of the difference in interpretations, there is a dominant theme of resistance to the status quo of the mainstream.

For the purposes of this article, 'alternative news media' is taken to refer to alternative methods and forms in the selection, creation, distribution and reception of news, particularly where state/government policies on mainstream media regulation are restrictive. This article also looks at the appropriateness of the tools of digital media in the African context, in that certain peculiarities (the lack of basic infrastructure, like a reliable power supply, for example) mean that, while the idea of an alternative news media is being practised, and access to new technologies like the Internet and wireless technology continues to increase, attention should not solely be placed on 'new' ICTs, but also on the 'old' ICTs of radio, television and the telephone.

Radio, for example, has traditionally been identified as being the best communication tool for African countries (see Fardon and Furniss 2000; Mabweazara 2015). Television was seen as the preserve of the rich, and as satellite television grew on the continent, this, too, being subscription based, was only accessible to the rich and to urban dwellers. New media technology like the Internet and the mobile phone, on the other hand, have been credited with narrowing the digital divide, as nine out of ten people in countries like Nigeria and South Africa own mobile phones (Pew Research Centre 2015). This has been attributed to the increase in competition and subsequent lowering in price, which has opened up many possibilities in the way information is delivered to the ordinary citizen.

Similarly, this article employs Deuze's (2003, 206) definition of online journalism – a style of journalism that is 'produced more or less exclusively for the world wide web' and is characterised by features that allow for 'hypertextuality, interactivity, multimediality' (ibid.). Interactivity in online journalism is when the public are able to 'respond, interact or even customize certain stories' (ibid). As permitted by online journalism, interactivity therefore allows for active participation in news, and is one of the examples of how the online presence of news media organisations has extended the public sphere in countries like Nigeria and Ghana. The online presence of media organisations in these countries and the subsequent digital public sphere is a far cry from the military era, when the dissemination of news and information was their monopoly.

Investigating the development of online journalism in West Africa, Yusha'u (2014) maps out the history of the media in the sub-region, and attributes the growth of online journalism to changes in media policies in the 1990s. These changes saw deregulation in the media industry and the rise of private ownership of media organisations. As competition and innovation grew, so did public access to information. Yusha'u does, however, highlight McChesney's (2003) caution in celebrating deregulation, as it also brings up the debate about the contest between private and public interest.

Access to information and opportunities for interaction, in Yusha'u's view, are two ways in which online journalism has contributed to the expansion of the public sphere, particularly as distance is no longer a factor. This means that the African diaspora is able to stay in touch with home and to contribute to debates and nation-building.

Some scholars are, however, more cautious in their assessments. Citing Frère and Kiyindou's (2009) argument that there is a risk of the Internet reinforcing the class divide and serving the interests of elites who are well connected, literate and living in cities, Yusha'u (2014, 214) rightly questions the extent to which new media can empower the 'polity with political communication' when only a minority of the population have Internet access. This supports the notion that attention cannot be solely placed on new media communication tools when discussing citizen empowerment. Similarly, Eribo and Okigbo (2004) question the effectiveness and viability of using new communication technologies as a catalyst in initiating positive change. They outline pertinent questions on the role of communication (particularly new media technologies) in addressing development issues in Africa, asserting the need to examine useful communications strategies in view of new media and globalisation, which can create awareness, provide education, promote co-orientation and support self-correction mechanisms. All of these are needed to initiate and sustain development (ibid.).

In relation to ideological connotations, the argument is that the new in 'new media' gives a sense of forward-looking, cutting-edge and better technology, stemming from a modernist notion of social progress facilitated by technology (Lister et al. 2003). In Mudhai, Tettey and Banda's (2009, 3) words: 'New media appear, as they have before, with claims and hopes attached – about ideologies of progress for the West and the possibilities of the Third World "catching up"'. This statement implies a connotation of dependency which has contributed to scepticism amongst many scholars (Castel 2001; Merridy 2003; Roszak 2004). In particular, Roszak (2004, 61) notes:

> Such technological infatuations come and go […] I think, however, that the current fascination with the computer and its principal product, information, deserves a more critical response […] the computer does so ingeniously mimic human intelligence that it may significantly shake our confidence in the uses of the mind. And it is the mind that must think about all things, including the computer.

Scholars like Mabweazara, Mudhai and Whittaker (2014) have highlighted a need for research into the impact of ICTs on journalism practices in African countries. The aim is to consider how journalists in those countries adjust to the new media age, rather than simply using old practices to explore the new. They warn against scholarship that takes a technicist approach and diminishes discussions about online journalism in Africa to one that 'privilege[s] technology over wider social dynamics that underlie the distinctive uses of technologies in specific contexts' (ibid, 4).

The different ways in which the mobile phone is used in Africa is one example that illustrates the value of further study into how ICTs are being used by citizens. The capacity of such studies in facilitating localised communication strategies and the tools that accommodate local traditions, interests and needs also need to be investigated. Emerging news media organisations must consider how various cultural environments have influenced the way people use ICTs in African countries. This should be used as a parameter to help gauge the best platforms on which to operate, and the way these platforms might be used, rather than simply utilising them in the same way as the West.

Before I interrogate discussions around the public sphere and its digital equivalent in the West African context, it is important to address the idea of a common public sphere in Africa. First, Africa is a continent comprising 54 countries; the Western Sahara denotes the split between North Africa and sub-Saharan Africa. While this article's main focus is on the latter, and specifically West Africa, it is important to remember examples from North Africa. Many scholars (e.g., Root 2012) have highlighted the role played by Facebook in initiating public mobilisation and triggering political change, in what became known as the Egyptian uprising or Arab Spring.

Second, I do not contend that there is a common African concern (and certainly there is room to argue that concerns around good governance are not uncommon in many African countries), and therefore that a singular African public sphere, digital or otherwise, exists. Rather, I consider that cyberspace has provided an accommodating environment for counter-publics 'barred from mainstream political debate' (Khan 2014, 50) and has enabled multiple public spheres to co-exist. They 'exhibit their shared identities of dissent' and do so while reflecting the sociopolitical conditions of real life (ibid.). Therefore, one must ask: Which voices make up these digital public debates? Are there multiple public spheres? Are we wrong to be asking about a 'universalistic' (Khan 2014, 49) and 'singular' (Rasmussen 2013, 98) African public sphere or even a Cameroonian, Ghanaian or an Ivorian public sphere?

As Papacharissi (2002) argues, the Internet provides for the existence of a network of public spheres, and serves as a space that allows multiple public spheres to exist simultaneously. This begs the following questions: Is the ICT-led public debate of a satisfactory level? Who participates in it? How do we measure this?

In addressing these issues, this article employs a theoretical approach that draws on published literature and my analysis of these, while illustrating ideas using empirical data from my previous research. The first section explores debates in published literature on the Habermasian public sphere and the role of the digital public sphere in initiating political change in West African countries. The study goes on to discuss perspectives on state/media relationships, illustrating this with previous empirical data from Nigeria. I argue that advances in ICTs present opportunities for the media to bypass constraints imposed on them by the state. A discussion around

the voices and contributions of the African diaspora follows, thus raising crucial questions about how (and if) we should be talking about a singular African digital public sphere. This brings us to the question of whose voices are making up these debates and what impact access to technology has.

THE HABERMASIAN PUBLIC SPHERE AND THE AFRICAN CONTEXT

In his foundational study, *The structural transformation of the public sphere* (1962), Jürgen Habermas describes the public sphere as a space where rational debate about matters of general interest can take place. Similarly, Dahlgren (1995, ix) refers to the public sphere as a place 'where information, ideas and debate can circulate in society and where public opinion can be formed'. Through participation in this debate, the public sphere ceases to simply be the coming together of private individuals to form a public – through discussion, they become an 'active' public. The public sphere therefore does not refer to a physical place, but to a realm where rational debate about public interests takes place. While Habermas' work was based on the bourgeois class of 18th-century Great Britain, Germany and France, its flexibility has permitted its application and interrogation in other contexts.

Hartley (1996, 1999) argues that the Internet facilitates the democratisation of journalism by enabling increased audience participation, thus creating a postmodern form of journalism within a 'mediasphere'. Gillmor (2005) describes the future of electronic media as becoming a 'multidirectional conversation' using a 'distributional model'. With easier access to primary information and archives, users are now able to compare news reports with factual documents, as well as with other reports. What this means when we consider Habermas' public sphere is that new media technologies not only produce a new space for rational debate to take place, they also introduce a mechanism for bypassing any restrictions hampering accessing to the information necessary for debates to take place.

Taking an interpretivist approach, Khan (2014) dissects Habermas' public sphere to identify its key elements. In this way, he considers the potentials of an ICT-led new public sphere (NPS). Khan executed his assessment in the context of the role the Internet plays in opening up the communicative space, in allowing access to information, and in linking 'citizens and centres of power in a society' (ibid, 41). The argument he makes is that the 'ICT enabled public sphere shares some of the features of Habermasian ideal' (ibid.), and that the NPS offers more opportunities for inclusivity than the bourgeois public sphere did, particularly as it eliminates the boundaries of the nation-state and facilitates a global reach.

Khan's analysis is a good starting point in investigating the digital public sphere in the African context(s). First, central to Habermas' public sphere is the formation of citizens as a public body which is unhindered in terms of the right of assembly,

access to information, and the right to interaction. As a result, public opinion can be formed about agencies of power, by a reasoning public engaged in critical public debate. Koçan (2008, 2) puts it succinctly:

> Today, public sphere stands for an ideal for the construction of a democratic society in which public scrutiny of governmental policies moves beyond the boundaries of formal politics and acts as a critical resource for the legitimization of these policies, integrating citizens into political community as whole, and protecting individuals' freedom and equality.

Khan (2014) identifies the following six key elements of the Habermasian public sphere: publicness, access to information, inclusivity, rational critical debate, universality, and virtual space and interaction.

Koopmans (2004, 1) places the mass media central in the interactions and resultant reactions between authorities and social movements, arguing that 'authorities react to social movement activities if and as they are depicted in the mass media, and conversely movement activists become aware of political opportunities and constraints through the reactions (or non-reactions) that their actions provoke in the public sphere.' Using the evolution of the German radical right in the 1990s as empirical illustration, he identifies three 'selection mechanisms' that influence the extent to which 'contentious messages' are spread: visibility, resonance and legitimacy. Both sides rely on the media to serve as the go-between, when airing their views. This, argues Koopmans, gives the power to the mass audience watching the interaction at home, as the two sides battle it out for the support of the viewing public.

Notable examples of the function of Koopmans' analysis of the modern-day public sphere are recent events in North Africa, taking place 'between citizens and political society' (Koçan 2008, 1), and for which Internet-based media were as important as the traditional media of television and radio. The example of the Egyptian uprising demonstrates how protesters used Facebook to trigger political change after decades of authoritarian rule, and highlights the direct role this vibrant virtual public sphere plays in destabilising the traditional hold on power by certain African elites. As Rasmussen (2013, 97–98) argues, the Internet-propelled public sphere 'has consequences for its normative power', as it provides legitimacy for the 'critical public sphere'.

This suggests that scholars like Khan should rightly be enthusiastic in their assessment of ICT-led opportunities in opening up the public sphere. Khan (2014, 45) points out the difference between Habermas' 'refeudalized "public"' and the new reliance on electronic communication platforms and tools, arguing that the public does not become a mere spectator in the digital sphere, but is presented with greater opportunities for active participation. Habermas had previously argued that the commercialisation of the public sphere, together with cultural industries and the private interest of the mass media, 'refeudalized the public sphere' (Calhoun 1992;

Khan 2014, 43), thus demoting the public to spectator once again. The basis of the argument is that, once the information required to enable critical debate is infiltrated by state and market actors, the public sphere turns 'into a theatre for advertising [rather] than a realm for rational critical debate' (Khan 2014, 44).

This point still holds some weight, especially as the Internet, specific platforms and tools (like social media, search engines and emarketing) are dominant forces. As the previous example showed, African politicians adopted social media as a channel of engagement and used it to advance their personal ambitions, thus proving that the Internet is not just a space for citizens. Khan (ibid, 49) points out that the 'anonymity of the presenter, state and market influence, local political cultures and individual differences' are challenges facing the ICTs-led NPS, in achieving a Habermasian 'ideal situation of critical debate'.

Similarly, Rasmussen (2013, 2014) attributes the growth of the online media and social network platforms (as public fora which open up the public sphere) to a 'personalisation' which allows individual participation, and an airing and exchange of opinions. In contrast to mainstream media, Internet media promote diversity and 'provide a differentiated space for interaction and user-composed information that tends to be rather specialised – often closer to personal opinion, unconfirmed information and rumour' (ibid, 99). The multiplicity of voices enabled by the Internet therefore comes with its own challenges, some of which Rasmussen lists as the 'polarisation of debates, isolation of issue-based groups, unequal participation' (ibid.).

Rasmussen (2009, 2014) points out that Habermas (2006, 422) highlights the function of the public sphere in established democracies: 'Within established national public spheres, the online debates of web users only promote political communication, when news groups crystallize around the focal points of the quality press, for example national newspapers and political magazines.' On the other hand, the 'democratic significance' of the digital public sphere in other countries is seen only where public voice and interactions 'undermine censorship of authoritarian regimes' (Rasmussen 2014, 1321).

RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THE MEDIA AND THE STATE

Early research on state/media relationships was criticised for its generalisations. The most notable of these was Siebert et al's (1956) *The four theories of the press*, which identified four media models: authoritarian, libertarian, social responsibility and soviet. Siebert et al. (1956, 48) argue that 'the press always takes on the coloration of the social and political structures within which it operates. Especially it reflects the system of social control whereby the relations of individuals and institutions are adjusted.' The leading criticism against *Four theories* is the ethnocentrism of the authors, not to mention their lack of analytical rigour (Merrill 2002; Nerone 2002).

Sparks (1996) identifies six roles the state takes with regard to the media: that of patron, censor, actor, masseur, ideologue and conspirator. As a patron, the state is regarded as the economic beneficiary of the media. The state acts in the role of censor when information is being controlled. When realms of the state become the focus of the news, the actor role is assumed. This role emphasises Ankomah's (2008) argument that presenting the media as a fourth estate means that they have a close relationship with other institutions of state, which suggests that the state can influence the way information is presented. This is what Sparks (1996) refers to as the masseur role, and stemming from this is the role of the ideologue. Campbell (2004) provides two perspectives on ideologue: the first sees the institutions of state having a direct influence on the information provided to journalists, and therefore being an active participant in disseminating information to journalists; the second is the idea that distinguishing between facts and opinion leaves journalists open for manipulation by state spokesmen. Similarly, the conspirator role refers to times when the media work in harmony with the state, not by way of an actual conspiracy between the two, but rather because their organisations/structures (e.g., hierarchy, class, etc.) are the same.

What Sparks (1996) offers us in these six roles is a more objective and less ethnocentric view of media systems than those of the *Four theories*. The six roles are not particular to any one country, though they take shape in different ways, depending on the prevailing socio-political system. Nonetheless, this approach has been criticised for the assumption that press freedom is measured by the level of state interference/influence (Campbell 2004).

In researching the relationship between the media and the state in Nigeria, I found a major anomaly within media regulations in that country: despite transitioning to a democratic civil government in 1999, many aspects of media regulation that were enacted by the military regimes were simply carried over without being amended to reflect the current democratic dispensation (Ogunleye 2010).

Using a grounded theory approach, I analysed various media policies: the Nigeria Broadcasting Commission (NBC) Code (2006), the Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria (1999), and the Nigeria Broadcasting Commission (NBC) Act (1992) and its amendment (1999). I also conducted interviews with media professionals and academics in the country.

In interviews with participants, I observed a lack of faith in media regulations, and, interestingly, one of the main concerns was regarding unspoken/unwritten laws, i.e., fear of political intimidation over content which by law does not breach the NBC code. When questioned about the relationship of news media/journalists with the state in terms of regulatory laws (i.e., whether or not they are restrictive and how such regulations impact on the day-to-day routine of news production), most participants admitted to experiencing fear due to inconsistency in government's approach to media policies, as well as government interference. Two of the three participants referred to journalists' fears about the way the government might react to

certain content. This fear, in their view, stems from imaginary laws that do not exist on paper, yet prevent journalists from reporting freely. As participant 4 observed:

> *It's not so much regulated; it's not restricted in terms of what they do, and how they do it. But, there is always this kind of, you know, fear, among the journalists, even though in law, you don't have anything restricting them actually, but they get afraid of repercussions of doing things like investigative journalism, and being so daring in what they report.*

My findings on the Nigerian media revealed a clear connection between the nature and practice of news journalism, and the wider socio-political context that constitutes its theatre of operation. Particularly, it reveals a lack of rejuvenation of media laws in Nigeria to reflect the country's new democratic dispensation. There was very little acknowledgement of the rights of broadcasters, either in the media laws or in the experiences recounted by participants.

The question we need to ask is: Should one expect political cultures in African countries to experience an ontological renewal because of the Internet? Khan and other scholars (Akinfemisoye 2014; Alzouma 2005) argue that as political life offline has its own challenges, we should not expect 'an ontological transformation' merely because the debate had moved online. The extent to which this can or will change as a result of access to new media technologies has been studied, yet it requires further empirical research.

In an ethnographic study of the impact of ICT developments on journalistic practices, Akinfemisoye (2014, 62) found that the traditional practices of giving prominence to 'official' news sources still prevails among Nigerian journalists, while UGC is increasingly being appropriated for 'subtle economic motives'. However, new and emerging media organisations are being established as a result of advancements in ICTs, coupled with the desire to bypass state controls.

DIASPORA VOICES AND ELIMINATING THE BOUNDARIES OF THE NATION-STATE

The emergence of news media organisations set up by Africans in the diaspora, is an example of how the global reach of the Internet is contributing to debates on an African digital public sphere. Diaspora communities' engagement with online journalism – and the creation thereof – is an example of how commentators and media makers have been able to bypass state-imposed constraints. The role of diaspora voices is thus a key feature of this digital public sphere (Kperogi 2011; Matheson 2004; Ndangam 2008; Ogunyemi 2006, 2014; Sikanku 2011; Yusha'u 2014).

Yusha'u highlights three aspects: access to ICTs, the desire to stay connected with home, and concerns over the 'state of governance' in their countries, creating what Robert Tynes (2007) refers to as a virtual nation. This concept is exemplified in Tynes' analysis of the Sierra Leone website Leonenet, where citizens of a (in

this case, at least) war-ridden nation contribute to nation-building through virtual discussions. Tynes (ibid, 501) defines a virtual nation as 'any community that communicates in cyberspace, whose collective discourse and/or actions are aimed towards the building, binding, maintenance, rebuilding or rebinding of a nation'.

Examples of citizen journalism websites include SaharaReporters.com, which reports on government corruption without government openness, largely due to the organisation's base in the United States. It is therefore not bound by the constraints of the state as home-based media organisations often are. The emergence of citizen journalists presents a challenge for traditional media, without necessarily acting as an alternative. According to Donald McDonald (2005), citizen journalism will bring about a stronger, better and more responsive industry. While some question the professionalism of blogs, others applaud the blogosphere as the latest form of a free press (Hirst and Harrison 2007).

Yusha'u (2014) mentions citizen websites like Camnetwork and GhanaWeb, which are increasingly becoming competition for professional news websites. These websites are owned by members of the diaspora, and are not run by professional journalists. The communicative space is also opened up to bloggers in the diaspora, who are generally not professional journalists, but whose commentaries carry weight to the extent that their content is syndicated in local newspapers in their countries. These voices, Yusha'u (ibid, 217) argues, contribute to the creation of 'healthy debates in West Africa' and ensure that public opinion is no longer solely reliant on newspapers and television broadcasts.

The citizen journalism website, Sahara Reporters, which reports on corruption, human rights abuses and misconduct in governance in Nigeria, allows contributors to report on controversial issues of the day. This style of reporting allows the audience not only to be part of the news-making process, but also to engage in promoting democracy. Crucially, having an online platform implies the creation of a fast and collaborative system – Sahara Reporters, and other similar organisations, have no physical office space, yet they can be based in a country with restrictive media laws.

This ease in facilitating a two-way flow of communication between broadcasters and audience is invaluable. It conforms to current trends in the field of communication for development, in that it enhances and promotes audience participation in development processes, which is essential for sustainability (Credé and Mansell 1998).

Key points which Yusha'u overlooks in his analysis, are the issues of verification and ethics. Being based in the West, how are websites like Sahara Reporters able to verify the stories submitted by contributors? Since their readers rely on their stories, they have a measure of responsibility which is equal to that of professional news websites. Yusha'u points out that such organisations are often self-funded and work out of personal interest; because the publishers take on other jobs to make a living, this poses a threat to the lifespan of these organisations and their contribution

to the public sphere. He does, however, point out that the geographic location of these websites and bloggers (mostly in Europe and North America) demonstrates an existing tie with their colonial heritage(s).

At this juncture it is relevant to discuss the link between colonial heritages and current media practice. Here, I observe a double subalternity. On one level, I argue that many African countries share a colonial heritage that constructed their nation-states, and inasmuch as they function under this exogenous structure, their attempts at organising themselves have been influenced by exogenous techniques that are not in symphony with their own realities. On another level, I argue that the imposed construction of the nation-state impacts the conditions under which the media speak. In this instance, the public sphere becomes the subaltern of the imperial heritage of the nation-state. The media therefore need to cast off the yoke of their imperialist training in order to uphold the principles of 'good' journalism, in the interest of the public. However, while I acknowledge this imperial heritage and the subaltern imposition it produces, I argue that inasmuch as the struggle is against this heritage, 'we' are reinscribing the imposed subaltern position. Consequently, I contend that the focus of the struggle should be the pragmatic realities of the African situation; we should acknowledge the influence of the imperial heritage, but focus on the issues at hand. I contend that the public sphere is in a subaltern position due to the consequences of the nation-state, and the influence of the African-elitist government and its power over the media. Advances in ICTs therefore present an avenue for the subaltern positioning to be cast off.

ICTs-enabled NPS, explains Khan (2014), is the social life within and beyond the confines of the nation-state, where citizens – regardless of nationality and background – make contact and form a 'virtual public body' (ibid.) as they engage in debate about issues from around the world. The displacement of the nation-state as central to the public sphere is thus replaced with the anchoring of 'modern media system[s]' (ibid, 45) in its stead. This system allows for 'networks of communication that facilitate[ ] many-to-many two-way exchange of information' (ibid.) that is able to bypass the constraints of both the state and mass media.

In the NPS, the enabling conditions of Habermas' model of the public sphere (media, political authority and civil society) become global communication networks, governance structures and civil societies. This global connection highlights our economic interconnectedness: 'This consciousness provides the basis for the rise of global "public" joined together as a virtual body by a sense of global affinity which springs out in response to mundane issues of the twenty first century' (ibid.).

This global connection transforms the idea of a common interest (previously confined within the boundaries of the nation-state) to one of a global nature. The unlawful shooting of African-Americans by the American police is no longer a

discussion for Americans alone, nor are discussions about schoolgirls kidnapped in northern Nigeria a Nigerian-only debate, or the mass shooting of university students in Kenya a Kenyan-only debate.

A multiplicity of voices is central to the level of effectiveness of this global affinity (Crack 2007). However, building on Okigbo and Eribo's (2004) argument, it is not enough to stop at the ability to report from a specific location. It is important to consider to what extent websites like Leonenet, Camnetwork, GhanaWeb and Sahara Reporters help bring about real, positive change and development at home. Development in media freedom, yes, but to what end? What impact is it having? And how far does this development extend to the media at home? With diaspora communities having greater and more reliable access to the Internet, whose voices are making up this African digital public sphere?

When applying ideas around Habermas' public sphere and its ICT-led transformations in the African context, we need to consider what key elements should make up our desired digitally-enabled public sphere. Crucially, we need to ask whether we should speak of an African public sphere or spheres, before considering how this differs from current trends in the use of ICTs in this regard, and how this ideal can be actualised by ICTs.

Exploring the idea of a singular European public sphere, Rasmussen (2013) notes that Bernhard Peters (2004) found a modest uptake of the notion of a European identity and references to a collective 'we' in media coverage of Europe. She therefore argues that a singular European identity is problematic if a singular European public opinion is not 'identified through a presentational dimension to balance and synthesise the representational diversity' (Rasmussen 2013, 101). The nation-states that make up Europe can only produce a European public sphere if they become responsive and integrated with one another, and their media and agenda are interconnected. Without this, Rasmussen argues that a significant and 'genuine European media' (ibid.) is unlikely to emerge.

Is it then possible to talk of an African public sphere, given that Africa is more than three times the size of Europe, has more than double its population, and is home to over 2 000 distinct ethnic groups (Asante and Mazama 2007), compared to 87 such groups in Europe (Pan and Pfeil 2002)? This begs a number of questions: Given its sheer size, is there a common African identity, and therefore a singular public opinion (if no such phenomenon exists for Europe)? Where would the African diaspora fit into this common identity and opinion? In considering the notion of a singular African digital public sphere, who makes up this public? How does uneven access to technology impact on the voices being heard? And who is the real benefactor of these developments?

ACCESS AND SUSTAINED DEVELOPMENT

In any discussion of an African digital public sphere, considering excluded groups and those competing for access to the knowledge economy in terms of social consequences, requires an investigation into exclusive processes and tools of access. Exclusion is when only those with access to information can take part in debates, or where options of access to information and debates are limited. ICTs may be 'blind towards race, colo[ur], religion or even nation-state' (Khan 2014, 48), but they are not blind to economic status and infrastructure.

The idea of multimedia access to information implies that 'new media' do not replace 'old media' but simply supplement them. Mudhai, Tettey and Banda (2009) illustrate the interaction between old and new media – an example is the use of UGC by news organisations – where new media technologies become part of a continuum and do not exist as an alternative. This interaction helps create a multimedia platform that improves democratic participation, inclusion and expression.

Lister et al (2004, 10–13) expand on what new media offer old media: the intensity of change, which is typical of new media; the ideological connotations of the new media, and the non-technical and inclusive nature of new media platforms. Intensity of change refers to the idea that new media facilitate a change in the hierarchies of communication by stimulating a shift from elitist democratic forms to more participatory ones. In the same light, new media technologies are facilitating globalisation, which is characterised by a blurring of nation-state and cultural boundaries. Mudhai et al. (2009, 3), however, argue that while there is a growing interconnectedness between Africa and the rest of the world, the 'geography and infrastructure of communications' is still largely controlled by the nation-state. Nevertheless, because of their transnational capabilities, new media have contributed to the decentralisation of centres of power and control.

While optimism about the democratic abilities of new media seem to lean towards the diffussionist/modernisation (top-down) logic, because of the element of participation the view becomes less technological determinist and fosters a closer relation with a participatory-communication (bottom-up) model. Communication becomes receiver-centred because it sees a shift from a time when receivers were fed the view of elites and were expected to be uncritical and un-analytical of their own existence, and to simply ingest the elite rationality. The participatory-communication approach therefore decentralises this process by empowering the receiver to be more knowledgeable of his/her own realities, cutting off the umbilical cord of the ideologies of the elites (Servaes 1999). These ideas make up what Ogden (1996, 128) refers to as a 'cyber-democracy': 'The exercise of democratic principles in cyberspace […it implies] an electronic form of grassroots direct democracy beyond that of local ballot initiatives and referenda.'

CONCLUSION

Although a lack of good access to technology threatens to thwart the use of ICTs in promoting the flow of information, the example of ICT-based news outlets (like those discussed above) may indicate a promising future for the use of ICTs in promoting and facilitating media freedom and access to information. Many benefits are evident in digital content distribution: one of the issues raised in this study revolves around the lack of infrastructure to facilitate information exchange on the continent. With the success of mobile phone technology in Africa, many researchers and telecommunication companies have realised the potential which mobile technology affords the flow of information, and the possibilities of its use in promoting development.

Many constraints nonetheless remain in the form of infrastructure, human resources and finance. Infrastructural constraints (lack of power, low broadband etc.) mean that while wireless technologies like 3G, Wi-Fi and GPRS are available, they cannot be used to their full potential. Where such technology seems most fruitful at present is in newsgathering. As regards human resources, there is an urgent need to train journalists not only how to use such technologies, but also how to engage with them. Financial backing and stability are areas that require more attention.

One area that this article only addresses in part (but which is significant for further discussions), relates to political economic issues around the ownership, funding and commercial interests of diaspora-based online news organisations. Similarly, the emerging trends in online news consumption and the lack of profitable business models for online news have led to the proposal that users should be charged for online content.

This, I think, would have a negative impact on African audiences on the continent, as it could take them back to the age-old constraint of unaffordability. In 2005, Rupert Murdoch predicted that we would charge users for online content. While some media organisations with niche markets (like the *Financial Times*) have succeeded with this premium model, most have not, and are yet to find a viable strategy. For the new and exciting technological phenomena being experienced in African countries, it would be interesting to see whether or not proposals for premium content end up stifling development.

This brings us back to the idea that radio will probably remain the best medium for the continent. As it is, ICTs are available and are a growing market on the continent, as broadband is expanding across Africa. Many research participants agreed that the issue of connectivity will be a thing of the past within the next few years. However, without attending to other infrastructural issues (particularly the supply of power), these developments may once again be rendered useless for the average citizen.

In conclusion, then, what is clear from my discussions and findings is that new communication technologies are highly welcome in African countries, with the mobile phone at the forefront. The examples and debates I have cited all illustrate the

benefits and challenges faced when using ICTs in news media practices. Pertinent, though, to the use of ICTs is a consideration of the traditions and requirements of the locality, and how ICTs can be used and adapted to meet these needs and cultures. News media industries in Africa must heed this, as the various ways in which mobile phones are used in Africa should dictate how the industry engages with its audience. It is just as important to understand the role of the media in African development, when gauging how ICT trends – from production to use – can be applied to developmental efforts and challenges facing the media in Africa.

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BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

YEMISI AKINBOBOLA, PhD, is a visiting lecturer and researcher in media and journalism theory at Birmingham City University. She is also the founder and editor-in-chief of IQ4News.com, a collaborative platform for news and analysis on media industries in Africa. Her PhD thesis, from the same university, looked at the relationship between the media and the state in Nigeria and South Africa within the context of the role of the media in emerging democracies, and how ICTs can help the media to bypass the constraints of the state. She is also a freelance journalist for the *United Nations Africa Renewal* magazine and has several years' experience in communication management in the charity sector.