

Media and cyber-democracy in Africa: an introduction

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1.0 Introduction

I am privileged to welcome all of you to this inaugural academic seminar on 'African media and the digital public sphere' being held under the auspices of the SABMiller Chair of Media & Democracy. What makes this occasion particularly special is its cast of distinguished academics, both from Africa and Europe. Although we have been referring to this seminar as 'academic', it does not mean that we want to be shrouded in any intellectual priesthood. Rather, the characterisation is simply an affirmation of the contributions that academe can make towards explicating the 'theoretical' premises of human practices in a range of fields – politics, economics, the arts, media and communications, science and technology, education, culture, et cetera.

In fact, this is what the SABMiller Chair of Media & Democracy is all about – to critically reflect on academic discourses of mediation and democratisation and how these can more effectively inform the practices of our societies in Africa. More specifically, then, the Chair aims to:

1. conduct pure and applied research into the interrelationships between mediation and democratisation in Africa, and relate the findings to the practice of journalism and other forms of communication;
2. publish such research for use by different publics i.e. academics, practitioners, activists, policy makers, and the general public;
3. based on such research, stimulate and inform public and policy debate about the role of the media in promoting inclusive citizenship; and
4. integrate the outcomes of (1), (2) and (3) above into the teaching of journalism and media studies courses at Rhodes University.

This seminar seeks to stimulate more critical thinking about the new opportunities for enhanced and engaged citizenship presented by African media as they become implicated into the digital age, acquiring, in the process, characteristics of 'new media'. In this regard, my task is to provide a sketch of the discourse of media and 'cyber-democracy' as I see it unfolding, in and out of Africa. In so doing, I will, firstly, draw attention to the characteristic features of new media technology. Secondly, I will attempt a 'theorising' of cyber-democracy, within the context of general democratic theory. Thirdly, I will set out a vision of cyber-democracy for Africa. In delineating this vision, I will highlight six features characteristic of the democratic potential of new media technology and give examples of how Africa has appropriated them. Finally, I will outline what I think might constitute a 'new media' research agenda for Africa.

I hope that this contextualisation will demonstrate that discussions about 'new media' are implicated in discussions about 'old media'. As Martin Lister et al (2003: 10), in their book *New Media: a critical introduction* suggest, discussions about 'new media' force us to acknowledge, on the one hand, a rapidly changing set of formal and technological experiments and, on the other, a complex set of interactions between new technological possibilities and established media forms. As George Landow (2003: 58) suggests, 'new media' technologies should be seen as existing on a continuum or spectrum rather than in any fundamental opposition to one another. This perspective allows us to contextualise 'new media' – the Internet, email, cellular telephony, et cetera – in terms of the old questions posed of 'old media,' such as universal access, regulation, content, et cetera.

2.0 Features of 'new media': what differentiates them from 'old media'?

Since at the core of the term 'cyber-democracy' is the notion of new media, I need to spend some time unpacking this term. There seem to be unique features that mark out the 'new' in 'new media.' Lister et al (2004: 10-13) list the following such features:

The intensity of change

The term 'new media' has about it an aura of change, of a sense that, quite rapidly from the late 1980s onwards, the world of media and communications began to look quite different and this difference was not restricted to any one sector or element of that world, although the actual timing of change may have been different from medium to medium. Among the changes associated with new media are the following:

- *Postmodernity*: a contested, but widely subscribed attempt to characterise deep and structural changes in societies and economies from the 1960s onwards, with correlative cultural changes;
- *Globalisation*: a dissolving of national states and boundaries in terms of trade, corporate organisation, customs and cultures, identities and beliefs, in which new media have been seen as a contributory element;
- *'Post-industrial' information age*: a shift in employment, skill, investment and profit, in the production of material goods to service and information 'industries' which many uses of new media are seen to epitomise; and
- *Decentralisation*: the weakening of mechanisms of power and control from Western colonial centres, facilitated by the dispersed, boundary-transgressing, networks of new communication media.

New media are thus seen as part of a much larger landscape of social, technological and cultural change, what Lister et al (2003: 11) refer to as a 'new technoculture.'

The ideological connotations of the new

The second sense of the 'new' in new media as a reference to 'the most recent' also carries the ideological sense that new equals better and it carries with it a cluster of glamorous and exciting meanings. The 'new' is also 'the cutting edge', the 'avant-garde', the place for forward-thinking people to be. These connotations of 'the new' are derived from a modernist belief in social

progress as delivered by technology. Such long-standing beliefs are clearly being re-inscribed in new media as we invest in them. New media appear, as they have before, with claims and hopes attached; they will deliver increased productivity, educational opportunity and open up new creative and communicative horizon. Associated with this is a powerful ideological movement and narrative, heavily supported by the international ideological apparatuses of the International Telecommunications Union (ITU), the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF), about progress in Western societies and the possibilities of the Third World 'catching up' with such Western societies (Lister et al 2003: 11; Banda 2003; Fourie 2001). Indeed, this narrative is subscribed to not only by the entrepreneurs, corporations who produce media hardware and software in question, but also by whole sections of media commentators, educationalists and cultural activists. This apparently innocent enthusiasm for the 'latest thing' is rarely if ever ideologically neutral. The celebration and incessant promotion of new media and ICTs in both state and corporate sectors cannot be dissociated from the globalising neo-liberal forms of production and distribution which have been characteristic of the past twenty years (Lister et al 2003: 11).

Non-technical and inclusive

Ascribed to 'new media' is the quality of inclusiveness. It avoids, at the expense of its generality and its ideological overtones, the reductions of some of its alternatives. It avoids the emphasis on purely technical and formal definition, as in 'digital' or 'electronic' media; the stress on a single, ill-defined and contentious quality as in 'interactive media'; or the limitation to one set of machines and practices as in 'computer-mediated communication' (CMC). So, while a person using 'new media' may have one kind of thing in mind (the Internet), others may mean something else (digital TV, cellular telephony, etc.) (Lister et al 2003: 11).

I have deliberately marked out these characteristics of new media because any discussion about cyber-democracy is linked to the extent to which new media technology can make it cyber-democratic project attainable in the lives

of the citizenry. As will become clear, it is these features that most proponents of the benefits of cyber-democracy point to. But what is 'cyber-democracy', then? Is it any different from what we may call 'traditional' democracy?

3.0 Theorising cyber-democracy

Of course, one technical distinction between the term 'cyber-democracy' and 'democracy' is that the former has the prefix 'cyber.' The prefix 'cyber' comes from the word 'cybernetics,' which refers to the 'relationship between human activity and machine activity' (Branston & Stafford 2003: 423; cf. Pavlik 1996: 136). It stands to reason, therefore, that any theorising about cyber-democracy will appropriate the culturally specific meanings of 'democracy' within the context of new technological possibilities.

Hagen (1997) locates the ideological genesis of the term 'cyber-democracy' in the 'peculiar mixture between hippie and yuppie cultures in the American West, which became typical for a new, 'virtual class' living and working between Stanford University and Silicon Valley'. This virtual class dreamed of cyber-democracy in two distinct ways: (i) that it would constitute true democracy, generally understood as direct, self-empowered citizen government and (ii) that it would result in material wealth, the individual pursuit of happiness. According to Hagen (1997), both these dreams entail an anti-statist outlook on politics, with the state perceived as a potential threat both to individual freedom and the maximisation of wealth.

It is from these two dreams that Hagen (1997) identifies what we might characterise as two 'theoretical' approaches towards cyber-democracy. The first is the more conservative and libertarian vision of cyber-democracy, stressing the importance of a free market and unfettered capitalism; and the second is the more liberal and communitarian vision, which privileges community values (cf. Poster 2000).

It seems to me that cyber-democracy is better appreciated as a vision of participatory forms democracy made possible by the availability and

purposeful use of computer technology, especially the Internet. This accords with Ogden's view that cyber-democracy is 'the exercise of democratic principles in cyberspace' (Ogden 1996: 128). It seeks to exploit the 'new' benefits of computer technology, such as I have alluded to above. In particular, it seeks to exploit the interactive nature of new media to enhance citizen participation in the running of their lives. As Ogden suggests, it implies 'an electronic form of grassroots direct democracy beyond that of local ballot initiatives and referenda' (Ogden 1996: 128).

Bucy and Gregson (2001: 358), in reflecting on 'new media use as political participation', argue that this emergent form of electronic democracy (a type of political participation *through* media) involves not just net activism, but also the broader range of citizen actions that can take place online, over the airwaves and through exposure to political messages – actions which invite involvement. These actions include, but are not limited to, direct leader/legislator contact, public opinion formation, participating in civic discussions and agenda building, mediated interactions with candidates and other political actors, donating to political causes, and joining mobilising efforts – each of which may contribute to the psychological feeling of being engaged with the political system. In nutshell, then, cyber-democracy implies a disenchantment with modern forms of political organisation, with a view to broadening such forms for enhanced citizen involvement and participation.

One has to be cautious in one's allusions to the concept of democracy, largely because it is an imprecise concept and tends to be used relatively. To understand this, all we need to do is refer to the definitional debates on 'democracy' as presented by Margaret Scammell and Holli Semetko (2000: xx-xlix) in their book *The media, journalism and democracy*. They list, and attempt to define, the following variants of democracy as practised across the world, from the countries of the West to the socialist republics of the former Soviet Union, including Africa and present-day China:

- *Direct democracy (socialism)*: The general conditions of existence for the socialist variant of direct democracy are the unity of the working

classes, the defeat of the capitalist classes and an end to class privilege, the end of economic scarcity and the progressive integration of state and society. According to this model of democracy, the media must not be treated as 'watchdogs' over the state, as the state is not seen as potentially threatening, but acting on behalf of the working class. The media is required to provide information on art and culture as well as to provide education for the triumph of socialism (propaganda).

- *Competitive elitist democracy*: A critique of socialism and classic liberalism, competitive elitist democracy postulates that the most that can be expected of democracy is that it may choose the most competent leaders and provide mechanisms for controlling their excesses, such as constitutions of parliamentary government and strong executives, regular elections, et cetera. The media are required to espouse a 'watchdog' role. There is thus an explicit commitment to freedom of the press, as an expression of the principle of freedom of speech. The media is expected to provide information for citizens to base their decisions on, apart from representing public opinion.
- *Pluralism*: The pluralists, often also called the 'empirical democratic theorists', accept that democracy in practice falls far short of the Athenian conception or the kinds of participatory citizenship envisaged by Karl Marx. Pluralists thus draw attention to the 'thousands of intermediary groups from community associations to trade unions,' emphasising the dynamics of group politics into which the individual citizen, otherwise 'isolated and vulnerable', can be inserted. The pluralist conception assumes some social consensus. According to this model of democracy, the media is expected to contribute towards representing the diverse interest groups in society. The media is expected to actively promote freedom of expression. The media itself must be free and pluralistic.
- *Neopluralism*: A response to, among others, Marxist critiques of pluralism, neopluralism is a robust defence of the pluralist model of democracy and isolates as a danger to it the modern system of capitalism. Corporate business interests are systematically privileged

within the key mechanisms for controlling governments – most importantly, the market and polyarchal (party) politics. Moreover, business uses its privileges of wealth and resources to ‘indoctrinate’ citizens into overlooking its privileged position and into associating private enterprise with political democracy. According to this view, then, the media are clearly seen as important in the furtherance of neopluralistic forms of democracy, partly because their ‘indoctrinating’ role must be carefully watched, especially when placed in the hands of corporate interests. Positively, this conception views information and communications technology as key resources to be deliberately developed on behalf of democracy in order to promote knowledge and enable effective political participation. Of course, this model does not bother about how audiences receive and make meaning out of media messages, treating them as ‘passive ciphers of information.’ Neopluralism clearly resonates with most of the radical political-economic thinking about the vested corporate, propagandistic interests inherent in media institutions. This view is associated with such media commentators as Chomsky, Herman and McChesney (cf. Herman & McChesney 1997).

- *The New Right and Libertarianism*: This is a resurgence or revival of classical liberalism and asserts the centrality of freedom or liberty as an individual’s natural right, as opposed to the claims of collective rights at the group or society level. Groups and societies are seen simply as aggregates of individuals. Individual liberty is best ensured by free market economy, with its ‘invisible hand’ enabling the optimum distribution of resources according to individual decisions with minimum need for central direction and coercion. This faith in markets and principled hostility to planning contrasts sharply with the neopluralists, for whom planning and redistribution is essential for the maintenance of democracy. This return to classical liberalism entails that the media, under libertarianism, must be free, founded on freedom of speech and private ownership, acting crucially as an ever-vigilant watchdog against the state, providing information and representing the spectrum of public opinion via the ‘invisible hand’ of the market.

- *Participatory democracy: The New Left*. In agreement with classic Marxism, this model of democracy rejects the concept of the state as a neutral umpire or 'protective knight'. The state is inescapably enmeshed in the maintenance and reproduction of the inequalities of everyday life. However, it accepts the vital importance of institutions of representative democracy and pluralism. The practices of direct democracy should be fostered and extended, but they cannot replace completely the institutions of representative democracy. These institutions can be democratised so that they become more participatory, just as the formation of alternative and local-level activity – for example, workplace democracy, women's groups, ecological movements and community politics – can be encouraged. According to this view, the media would need state regulation in the interest, perhaps, of fairness, accuracy and balance. The strongest advocates for public service obligations in broadcasting tend to come from this tradition. There is emphasis on the provision of information and education by the media, because it is assumed that given 'the appropriate conditions and adequate resources, including information, human behaviour can and will develop its true potential.'
- *Deliberative Democracy and Communitarianism*: This is a variant within participatory (democratic) theory. It emphasises the fundamental importance of consensus-oriented public deliberation to a democratic society. The stress on participation as deliberative *communication* or *dialogue* is the main distinction with earlier theories of participatory democracy. The influence of communitarianism and deliberative democracy seems to be linked to the 'Third Way' political projects of Bill Clinton and Tony Blair and to Habermas's concept of the public sphere. Suffice to note here that deliberative democracy reclaims the classic idea that democratic government should embody the will of the people, and states result from the public deliberation of citizens. Of course, represented as a 'public sphere,' deliberative democracy is a heavily contested terrain. Communitarianism, championed by Amitai Etzioni (cf. Etzioni 2003), among others, shares with the deliberative democrats the central question of how a community may live together

in justice and unity. Communitarianism rejects the classical libertarianism, with its emphasis on individualism, and affirms the moral of community renewal and re-engagement. The loosening of community bonds and structures, exemplified in group membership, effectively undermines all social trust and hence the ability of people to act together in pursuit of shared objectives. It is such thinking that spurred the growth of the public/civic journalism movement in the USA. It accepted the thesis of declining social capital and democracy in crisis, and also took from Etzioni a belief that journalism can reinvigorate public life, although not his scepticism about private media.

This overview of democratic theory is important for three reasons. Firstly, it highlights the fact that any 'theoretical' conception of cyber-democracy borrows from traditional democratic theory and hence has to contend with more or less the same problems. We have already established the Hippie and Yuppie 'theoretical' visions of cyber-democracy, some of which resonate with the various democratic-theoretical premises reviewed.

Secondly, the review serves to remind us that any vision of cyber-democracy is, in fact, based on a lamentation about the weaknesses associated with contemporary liberal democracy as preached and practised in most Western countries, and increasingly in African transitional democracies. I need not belabour the criticism advanced by some African scholars against liberal democratic forms. Suffice to note, for example, the late Claude Ake's indictment of the formalism of liberal democratic politics. In his book *The feasibility of democracy in Africa*, he offers a passionate critique of 'liberal democracy', citing the following:

Instead of the collectivity, liberal democracy focuses on the individual whose claims are ultimately placed above those of the collectivity. It replaces government by the people with government by the consent of the people. Instead of the sovereignty of the people it offers the

sovereignty of law...In the final analysis, liberal democracy repudiates popular power...(Ake 2000)

This disenchantment with liberal democracy is also evident in empirical research surveys. For instance, the Afrobarometer studies demonstrate that while 69 percent of Africans interviewed say that democracy is 'always preferable', only 58 percent say that they are satisfied with democracy's performance.

The Afrobarometer study singled out 'low political participation in between elections' as a challenge in African liberal democracies. For instance, 47 percent of the respondents reported attending a community meeting; 43 percent reported joining with others to raise an issue; and 11 percent reported joining a protest. Notably, only 14 percent of the respondents had contacted a government or political party official during the previous year. Indeed, respondents in Africa's new democracies complain of a wide gap between citizens and their political representatives (Afrobarometer 2002).

Thirdly, and related to the second observation, my review of democratic theory causes us to pause and ask what kinds of normative democratic roles the media can play as a consequence of new-media technologies. Indeed, we are compelled to ask, as Benjamin R. Barber has rightly done: 'which technology and which democracy?' (Barber 2003: 33).

4.0 What cyber-democracy do we envision for Africa?

There seems to be general agreement that the kind of democracy being advocated for is certainly an improvement on the liberal form of democracy. At best, according to Barber, liberal representative democracy is 'thin' democracy, in which representative institutions dominate and citizens are reduced to mere 'monitors' of the system (Barber 2003: 36). Barber prefers what he calls 'strong democracy', by which he means democracy that, though not necessarily always direct, incorporates strong participatory and deliberative elements. As we have already noted in our review of democratic

theory, this model of democracy postulates the engagement of citizens at the local and national levels in a variety of political activities and regard discourse, debate and deliberation as essential conditions for reaching common ground and arbitrating differences among people in a given large, multicultural society. In strong democracy, citizens actually participate in governing themselves, if not in all matters all of the time, at least in some matters at least some of the time (Barber 2003: 37).

The question by Barber – which technology and which democracy? – assumes that the type of democracy we want will dictate the type of technology to employ. It is a good assumption because it avoids the Marshall McLuhan's doctrine of technological determinism (McLuhan 1964). The question invites us to construct the social uses to which we put the new media. It invites us to think critically about the democracy that we want and the technology that we need to use in order to attain our goal. This leaves room for the deployment of a multimedia (a mix of both old and new media forms) strategy in our democratic project.

A more elaborate articulation of the normative correlation between new media and '(cyber-) democracy' is usefully provided by Lloyd Morrisett (2003: 26-30) in an article *Technologies of freedom?* According to him, there are six important elements that are required to define democratic uses of new interactive information technologies and the Internet. These are access, information and education, discussion, deliberation, choices and action. In discussing these characteristics, I will be giving African examples as a way of contextualising my analysis. Let me start with the first, then.

Access

Citizens hunger for access to their leaders and to means for expressing their own opinions and judgements. It is this problem of access for a growing and diverse population, dispersed over a very large geographical area, that makes a national system of interactive information technology civically useful. If well-

designed, such a system could counter divisive trends and help bring the nation together.

While the concept of universal access is usually an admirable political goal of almost all governments in Africa, the reality of it caught up in some statistics. For example, the total number of African Internet users is around 5-8 million, with about 1.5-2.5 million outside of North and South Africa (African Internet Status 2002).

To further unpack the problem of access, Nulens (1997) identifies three key sub-problems: (i) operational; (ii) contextual; and (iii) strategic. *Operational* problems have to do with the lack of technical efficiency of power-plants, the low quality of the African electricity network and the inaccessibility of transmission channels, such as satellites. *Contextual* problems refer to the apprehension that the transfer of Western technology only leads to economic and cultural dependency. In other words, technology is not neutral, and ICT policies must thus take into account the potential socio-cultural problems in the appropriation of technology. Another contextual issue could refer to the protracted wrangling among African countries, especially Kenya and South Africa, over the New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD)'s proposed Eastern Africa Submarine System (EASSy) project to roll out fibre-optic cable from South Africa to Sudan in a bid to enhance Africa's broadband connectivity with the rest of the globe (allAfrica.com 2006).¹ *Strategy* problems are largely due to some telecommunications transnational companies whose business interests may go against the national-developmental aspirations of African countries. Such companies tend to influence international policy-making institutions, such as the World Bank, on ICT matters (Nulens 1997:6).

¹At the time of writing this paper, Kenya and South Africa had announced a resolution of their conflict which, among other things, concerned who would construct the cable, the terms under which Internet Service Providers (ISPs) would access the fibre optic network, et cetera.

Information and education

A vital part of any deliberative discussion is the provision of relevant information and education or knowledge. According to Morrisett (2003: 28), in the absence of such information and education, debate is likely to be based on opinion rather than fact, prejudice rather than knowledge. A system of interactive information technology need not itself contain the vital information. References could be made to other sources of information ranging from reference material in libraries to documentaries on television.

The importance of the mediation of relevant content is reinforced when one considers the content of most media in Africa. For example, most state (public) broadcasting systems are still caught up in the espousal of the 'revolutionary press' model as championed by such nationalist leaders as Nkrumah of Ghana, Nyerere of Tanzania and Kaunda of Zambia, in the immediate aftermath of colonialism (Ainslie 1966: 19-20; Wilcox 1975: 19-21). From the 1950's onwards, postcolonial state media systems have generally churned out content that stresses national unification and development, to the near marginalisation of oppositional voices (in Ainslie 1966: 19).

With the emergence of liberalisation in the 1990s, and the attendant re-emergence of private media systems across the continent, the pendulum seems to have swung to the other extreme – from political nationalist propaganda to entertainment propaganda (Bourgault 1995: 103; Banda 2003).

In most cases, private commercial broadcasting stations, now equipped with the capability for online audio-visual streaming, churn out foreign popular music, causing concern about the place of local content. Indeed, although the debates that characterised the 1970's and 1980's with regard to the New World Information and Communication Order (NWICO) had become muffled, the 1990's rekindled the concerns of NWICO about 'cultural/media imperialism' (Oosthuizen & Fourie 2001). This has led some countries, such as South Africa, within the context of their broadcasting regulatory agencies,

to evolve regulations governing local content production (Banda 2003: 196-197).

Discussion

Information technology can stimulate discussion not only between citizens and their leaders, but among the citizens themselves. Networked computers, Morrisett claims, offer quite a different model from traditional broadcasting. Whether through computer conference or electronic mail, networked computing encourages people to communicate with one another. When people are connected over a computer system, they tend to communicate more broadly and intensively than without the system. To discuss civic issues, people need easy ways to enter such discussions. Morrisett gives an anecdote of the local barbershop as one place where citizens have naturally gathered to talk with each other. He then concludes that electronic technology can be used to provide a modern-day equivalent of the barbershop, connecting citizens with each other all across the nation and with their leaders.

Within the context of Africa, there appears to be anecdotal evidence of the Internet connecting ordinary people with some centres of power, including mainstream media. For example, Goldfain and Van der Merwe (2006: 120), in their study of the political role of 'web-blogging' in Johannesburg, concluded that, although blogs are not well established in South Africa, their function is 'provide citizens with an alternative source of news, add more perspectives to the events and issues of the day, and initiate conversation.' A 'blog' (a periodic and often continuously updated website that posts the thoughts and observations of a single writer and often the responses to those observations) serves as 'an aggregator of information that encourages dialogue and participation in a society that is flooded with information dispersed by authoritative voices. It is a media platform and has the potential to give minorities a voice.'

This seems to chime with some earlier research findings made by Debra Spitulnik (2002) in her article *Alternative small media and communicative spaces*. She contends that the existence of the Internet has enabled a dramatic proliferation of completely new ways of communicating, networking, forming community, and maintaining diasporic identities. She gives examples of such electronic forms as electronic mail discussion lists (listservs), Usenet groups and Web page guest books and chat forums (Spitulnik 2002: 186).

Spitulnik cites the case of the Zambia-list. She reports that the list is used primarily by Zambians living abroad, mostly men, for political discussions and news exchange. The list carries an average of forty to sixty postings per day. Debates, political commentary, humorous jabs, and friendly in-jokes are intensive, and some threads continue for weeks with scores of postings. Occasionally non-Zambians post on the list, but for the most part, the list is dominated by a very tightly knit community of Zambian nationals who have built up a history of friendly rapport and repartee (Spitulnik 2002: 187).

Like many listservs, Zambia-list functions as a bulletin board for information, addresses, and reconnecting. A few subscribers also regularly re-post the full texts of newspaper articles from the Web pages of the *Times of Zambia* and the *Post*. Discussions revolve around a handful of topics: the Zambian economy, soccer, Zambian identity, humour and religion (Spitulnik 2002: 187).

Since then, other listservs have emerged from within Zambia, such as the Zambia Media Forum (The-Zambia-Media-Forum@googlegroups.com), connecting members of the journalistic profession around some core issues. Even at such a miniaturised level, one discerns the near absence of women, raising questions about the extent to which new technology is gendered, compelling Dafne Sabanes Plou (2003: 16) to lament that ‘the “new” ICTs already reflect many of the gender patterns (in relation to power, values, exclusion and so on) that have been evident for decades in relation to the “old” media.’

Regardless of this, it is evident that such listservs provide an opportunity for members of a community of interest to engage in sustained discussion of an issue or event.

Deliberation

Any interactive communication system must provide the means for deliberation, that is, the careful consideration of an issue and the likely consequences of decisions. For deliberation to occur, provision must be made for the presentation of various sides of a question and attention given to different approaches to outcomes.

Examples abound of the 'interactivity' of the communication processes characterising most of the Internet-based communicative forms (cf. Tambini 1999: 315). In elevating this quality, there is an implied criticism of old media as providing a largely unidirectional system of communication, based on formulaic entertainment-based media genres, with audiences treated as mere receivers of mediated content.

Barber (2003: 38) has a word of caution, however. Deliberation can be held back by the type of technology deployed. In elucidating his misgivings, he points to the elements of 'speed, reductive simplicity and solitude' characterising new technology as potential dangers to a deliberative form of democracy. Barber sees 'speed' as both the greatest virtue and the greatest vice of digitalised media. Digital media are in a rush. According to Barber, the impact of 'fast' varies, however, depending on the version of democracy we postulate. With representative democracy, for example, accelerated pace may make little difference, at least for citizens. Where thought and deliberation are not essential, a speeded-up political process may simply appear as time saving and efficient. For deliberation to occur, Barber warns us, there is need for new technology to slow down, although he admits that would be like asking a hare to run at the same pace as a tortoise!

Barber also laments the possibility that digital media, already implicated in the binary dualisms of 'on/off' and 'zero/one', might reduce citizens' participation in politics to the barest necessities of voting between polarised alternatives, without subjecting the available choices to serious political deliberation (Barber 2003: 39).

In the same vein, Barber (2002: 39) argues that digital media encourage 'a politics of solitude' in which citizens just sit 'at home in front of electronic screens and view the world and its political choices as so many consumer alternatives.' Barber (2002: 39) dismisses the counter criticism that refers to 'virtual communities' as merely pointing to 'vicarious conglomerates lacking the empathy and need for common ground that define real-world communities.'

Choices and action

Discussion and deliberation are sharpened when participants understand that choices among alternative courses of action must be made. The managers of an interactive system devoted to electronic democracy need to organise the process so that choices are the outcome. Users of new technologies must understand that when they go through the hard work of education, discussion and deliberation, their choices and judgements will be used (Morrisett 2003: 29-30), or acted upon.

It is not entirely clear whether every involvement in cyberspace must result in specific actions. However, a body of empirical evidence is emerging across Africa suggesting that such involvement does result in some form of action or other. An example of collective action engendered by the Zambia listserv (Z-list) is documented by Spultnik. Thirty-five Z-listers signed a letter to the editor of the *Post* on the severe deterioration of academic standards and academic freedom at the University of Zambia. Using the UNZA situation as a microcosm of 'the current crisis in academic' across the nation, the authors of the letter elaborated several areas of concern (e.g. resource development,

corruption, low morale, and staff retention) and suggested 'policy initiatives that can correct that situation' (Spulnik 2002: 188).

4.0 Towards a research agenda for Africa

As I have suggested, there is emerging some anecdotal evidence across Africa to enable us conclude tentatively that new media technologies can expand the bounds of communicative space. At best, this is 'anecdotal' evidence. There is therefore need for more rigorous research whose findings will enable us to make more definitive statements.

In this regard, I would like to suggest a research agenda for African countries. The overall research question should be whether new media technology, possibly the Internet, do *indeed* improve and qualitatively change existing communication systems, or whether it only creates a quantitative increase stemming from the ease and relative cheapness of communicating via new media technology. I borrow this idea from Rabia Karakaya Polat (2005: 442-447) who, in the article *The Internet and political participation: exploring the explanatory links*, offers a useful way of analysing the Internet as a communication medium, among other things. Polat asks two sub-questions:

- (i) Does the Internet affect communication capacity? and
- (ii) If it does, how does this affect levels and styles of political participation?

To answer the first sub-question, Polat uses Weare's typology of communication (in Polat 2005: 443). This typology postulates four different forms of communication that the Internet is likely to support, namely:

- *Conversation* (one-to-one talk);
- *Information aggregation* (collection, analysis and transmission from many to a single agency);

- *Broadcast* (mass-mediation from one centre to many); and
- *Group dialogue* (interaction among a large number of senders and receivers).

For the second sub-question, Polat evaluates the communication potential of the Internet in relation to different modes of political participation, such as e-voting, group dialogue, et cetera. Polat's conclusion is that the Internet as a communication medium increases the communication capacity in an unequal way by supporting some forms of communication more than others. Hence, different modes of political participation are affected asymmetrically by the use of the Internet.

For me, a replication of Polat's study would provide us with more sophisticated and nuanced data about Africa's appropriation of new media technologies in defined spheres of life, with possibilities for use by media practitioners, policymakers, et cetera. Hopefully, this seminar will serve as a forum for framing possible research questions.

5.0 Conclusion

In this paper, I have noted the fact that discussions about cyber-democracy invoke notions of new media and the possibilities presented to old media for appropriating new media technologies to enhance democracy. In this breath, I have highlighted the key characteristics that define new media, and linked them to the vision of cyber-democracy as borrowed from 'deliberative,' 'dialogic' or 'communitarian' notions of traditional democratic theory. In effect, I have established that there is no such thing as 'cyber-democracy' but only a wilful or purposeful application of new media technology to enhance the day-to-day practice or outworking of democratic values, norms and principles.

I have expanded upon the democratic potential of new media by borrowing from Morrisett's framework for analysing the interface between new media

technology and the vision of cyber-democracy proposed. Following Morrisett's framework, I have relied on such variables as: access, information and education, discussion, deliberation, choices and action. I have attempted to illustrate my analysis in terms of anecdotes from the African context.

It is clear that, although questions of access still have to be tackled, the new media technologies are providing opportunities for engaging communities of interest in various discourses – ranging from professional matters, health issues, to political democracy. The interactive nature of the new media has, in many ways, been responsible for this proliferation of new-mediated discourses. However, I have also noted, following Barber, that the very revolutionising features of new technology, such as speed, reductive simplicity and solitude, can undo the 'cyber-democratic' project. How to negotiate that is a matter that the future will determine, not least because we must be wary of McLuhan's technological determinism.

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