

**Extending the theoretical cloth to make room for African experience:
An interview with Francis Nyamnjoh**

Herman Wasserman, University of Sheffield (Originally published in *Journalism Studies*, 10:2, 281 – 293)

Francis Beng Nyamnjoh was born in Lakabum-Bum, Cameroon, and was educated in Yaounde and Leicester, where he obtained his PhD on a thesis titled *Broadcasting for Nation-building in Cameroon: Development and Constraints*, supervised by the late James Halloran at the famous Centre for Mass Communication Research. Currently Head of Publications at the Council for the Development of Social Science Research in Africa (CODESRIA) in Dakar, Senegal, his research centres around questions of citizenship, globalization and the media and their intersections in Africa. His training in anthropology and sociology has inclined him to view media from the way it is used by people in their everyday lives, among conditions that often differ starkly from those in the Global North. Nyamnjoh's anthropological interest in the everyday not only affords him a preference for and keen insight into popular forms of communication in Africa like cartooning, radio and gossip – or 'radio trottoir' – but also adds a vividness and sparkle to his writing, punctuated with perceptive observations and sparkling with humour. Alongside his academic publications, Nyamnjoh has also published several novels set in the fictional "Mimboland", a mirror of his native Cameroon.

Nyamnjoh's attunedness to context and everyday life has given him occasion to criticise the liberal democratic theory underpinning dominant media theory globally, and has directed his attention time and again to the specificities of locale, the agency of ordinary people in their encounters with media and the politics of everyday life. In his widely acclaimed *Africa's Media: Democracy and the Politics of Belonging* (Nyamnjoh 2005) he provides a powerful critique of the Western liberal model of journalism based on individual autonomy and freedom that ignores the complicated patterns of "belonging" in Africa, or anywhere else for that matter, upon a closer look. This dichotomy between dominant journalist theories that demand of journalists a professional independence and

detachment on the one hand, and their belonging to cultural and ethnic communities on the other, bring about conflicting loyalties. He describes this situation as follows in *Africa's Media* (2005:2-3):

African world-views and cultural values are hence doubly excluded: first by the ideology of hierarchies of cultures, and second by cultural industries more interested in profits than the promotion of creative diversity and cultural plurality. The consequence is an idea of democracy hardly informed by popular articulations of personhood and agency in Africa, and media whose professional values are not in tune with the expectations of those they purport to serve. The predicament of media practitioners in such a situation is obvious: to be of real service to liberal democracy, they must ignore alternative ideas of personhood and agency in the cultural communities of which they are part. Similarly, attending to the interests of particular cultural groups risks contradicting the principles of liberal democracy and its emphasis on the autonomous individual. Torn between such competing and conflicting understandings of democracy, the media find it increasingly difficult to marry rhetoric with practice, and for strategic instrumentalist reasons may opt for a Jekyll and Hyde personality

Yet despite this critique of the dominant liberal democratic normative paradigm, Nyamnjoh carefully avoids the trap of an idealisation of Africa or the romantic essentialism of “African values” that many proponents of Afrocentric thought are prone to. He does not spare the rod for African journalists who fail to uphold ethical standards either. This flexible position is characteristic of Nyamnjoh’s work, which takes into account the multiple, overlapping spaces and flows in the era of globalization yet refuses to gloss over global power imbalances and material inequalities. His work on ICTs in Africa is characteristic in this regard – while in the past (1999) he has warned of the “need for mitigated euphoria” with regards to the potential of ICTs in Africa, he views recent developments in media technologies that have given rise to participatory “citizen” journalism as a positive development that could open new opportunities for democratic

citizenship and flexible mobility. (This interview was conducted via Skype on his suggestion and following which he fished out and shared with me a magazine article on African bloggers [Bahree 2008]). This fits with his view, as expressed in *Africa's Media* (2005:4), that: "Africa's creativity simply cannot allow for simple dichotomies or distinctions between old and new technologies, since its peoples are daily modernising the indigenous and indigenising the modern with novel outcomes".

It is this creative tension between the local and the global, between liberal individualism and patterns of belonging, and between global power relations and creative agency that form the focus of this conversation about Africa's position in theories of media and journalism.

Your background is in sociology and anthropology. How did you become interested in journalism and media studies?

My interest in media studies was an accident, because I started off in Sociology and Anthropology. Then in the mid-80s, 1985 or thereabout, the Cameroon State introduced national television that was called Cameroon Radio and Television (CRTV). Then the government still had some money for education, and there was a possibility of training people who would eventually come to work on national TV – either as journalists, or programme producers, or as researchers on the media and communications. So I applied for admission in Leicester, to train for television and radio research – so they made the mistake of giving me a scholarship. They did not understand that Leicester was mostly about research and I don't think they would have wanted someone to waste valuable time and money doing something called research at a time when they were launching TV and they needed practitioners! So I went to Leicester. The scholarship eventually dried up of course and I ended up having to work as a security guard in order to make ends meet. But basically that's how I came into close contact with journalists as practitioners. The fact that I went to Leicester meant that I never in fact left research. The Centre for Mass Communication Research in Leicester was a centre for research of a sociological nature, much more sociological than anthropological in terms of an ethnographic study, but their

research was quite critical. If you read James Halloran or Peter Golding or Graham Murdock, all of those people in Leicester, they did very critical left of mainstream research. Political economy type research. In that case they asked critical questions and their research contributed to theory-building and stood out quite in sharp contrast with what was going on in the United States at the time, which was quite empiricist and tended to emphasise doing rather than thinking critically about issues, and made a lot of assumptions about the nature of society and market logic, while in Europe at the time state and market were not as conflated. The state was seen as important in terms of its regulatory function to the market and to the notion of the individual as a sovereign entity, much more so than in the United States. So I could see whenever the researchers in Leicester wanted to position themselves it was mostly in relation to media studies in the US which they saw as rather simplistic in their assumptions about the nature of society and the nature of the market and the notion of the autonomous individual. That was the school that I went into, and it was very good for me, I identified with the critical media research inclinations. I brought an additional element from anthropology, the notion of fieldwork where you do a thorough ethnography of an institution. Of course the colleagues at Leicester were already used to works like those of Peter Schlesinger who did the *Putting reality together* study of television news production, and Halloran had some interesting encounters as well when he did work among prisoners and was able to observe while being part and parcel of what was going on. Basically it was a very timely exposure to media studies for me, it provided an opportunity not to get out of my anthropological and sociological background but to combine it with my new interest in media.

Do you think the critical school at Leicester fitted well with your study of African media, more so the case than it would have been if you went to say an African studies department in the US?

Oh yes, definitely, definitely. I took these critical concerns and extended them to understand African realities, and by so doing I stretched the critical approach to its logical conclusion. I now took the critical approach from the West and was even more

critical of the critical approach in my understanding of Africa. No theorization takes place in a void. I mean meaningful theorization has to be contextualised and the fact that the Leicester people were drawing on the experience of British and European societies to critically position themselves vis-à-vis theory and theorizing that came from the US mainly, meant that an African in these settings could critically situate his or her scholarship in relation to theories from the UK and Europe as well as theories from the US. So it was like covering extra mileage in the field of critical thinking. But basically it illustrates the point that the test of the theoretical pudding is in the practical eating. No scholar should enter the marketplace of ideas without fully being aware where they're coming from, and the extent to which the theories on sale, on display in the shop windows of ideas, make sense. When you buy a dress you don't buy it to hang in a wardrobe, you buy it to wear it, so you try on these different dresses to see which one fits your bulk. If you're a bulky person and you go and buy a Barbie-like dress just because it's fashionable to be a Barbie, you won't have the opportunity of wearing that dress. The dress would not be relevant to your reality, because your reality is simply too large for the Barbie-like dress, no matter how appealing that dress might appear.

So the dress that you saw in the shop windows at Leicester was a better fit for your bulk than the US theories of media at the time?

No, it had room for expansion. It was a dress still being made. There was room on the sides for me to extend the cloth.

So what did you need to sew onto the dress?

I said: well, if critical thinking was the order of the day, let's carry the game to its logical conclusion. If Western scholarship finds reason to be critical of American scholarship because it was too narrowly focused, either because of a focus on American society or an American understanding of what society should be like, then it is normal that an African who buys into Western theoretical articulations would say that much as it makes sense when you narrow it down to comparing European and American societies, these theories

don't quite make that much sense when you compare Western societies taken together with non-Western societies like those in Africa. So I get inspiration from the critical thinking, but I am going to open up this dress and beat it and stretch it, because of the African colonial experience, of the African post-colonial situation, and then come up with something that is not radically different as such but has different nuances in tune with the African experience.

So when you applied Western theory to African experience, you had to modify it. Has Western theory been returning the favour, to the extent that Western theory also modified itself through attention to what was happening in other contexts? Or is there still much ignorance in Western theoretical thinking about other contexts?

I think that when we don't speak in terms of levels, and we don't bring condescension to bear unduly, but stick to the science, and provide room for dialogue and cross-fertilization, it really opens up new ways of seeing Western societies just as it does for the African context in which I operate. So there is a lot of room for enriching theory if we don't allow science to serve ideology as is often the case. If we are modest enough to know that science is not the monopoly of any given individual or group, and that conferencing and interaction between scholars globally – much more possible today in a context of flexible mobility – then we will all be the winners for that.

Do you think there is enough of that dialogue happening in the metropolitan centres, that there is enough attention being paid to the lived realities of people elsewhere?

I think the problem is that we scholars are trapped in the normal hierarchies that inform how we relate to the rest of the world – whether those hierarchies are based on race, based on geography, gender or generation or whatever – we are all part and parcel of these hierarchies, and we bring them into our workplaces and into our scholarship. So the tendency is to be condescending towards a fellow scholar who happens to be female, younger, black, or from Africa: “What has Africa got to tell the world?” That is the

normal tendency. The tendency is also to be condescending to a female scholar: “What has a woman got to tell us?” It’s the same with youth or students: “How dare a student claim greater knowledge than a professor?” Even if for the sake of political correctness you might say the right thing in public, the tendency is to be dismissive of those we perceived to be lower down the hierarchies that inform our worlds. But if only we could listen, could open up and know we don’t have the monopoly on initiative and innovation, we might be surprised with how much those on the margins can understand. Why has America elected Obama? Barack Obama is much less of a black man as such than someone who successfully straddles identity margins. I don’t want to use the word cosmopolitan, because people can understand it on a very limited level, meaning someone has the experience of Western and non-Western societies. No, you can be cosmopolitan even when you haven’t moved out of your village, just by drawing on the experience of neighbouring villages, opening up to strangers, being able to internalise several different worlds. In Obama’s case, in terms of identity he is able to navigate several different identity margins, to convincingly negotiate several different worlds and influences. That is his strength, because he comes across as someone in whom everyone can find something to identify with.

Good theories, sophisticated theories, lasting theories have got to be able to serve as navigators of various identity margins, various margins of reality, being able to capture reality in its wholeness and nuanced complexities. A good theory should not be like an undertaker who stubbornly imposes Lilliputian coffins on Man-Mountain realities. Listening to dynamic social reality and the creativity diversity of our world is the business of good theory building.

Where are the areas, the points of focus, where a Western study of media and journalism specifically can benefit from being more open and more dialogue with African scholars and African experiences? What is the contribution that African scholars can make to a study of journalism and the media?

I think the area could be for example, just very simple, how do people on the margins – margins of every society – come by information? How do they communicate with one

another and with others over and above those margins? How do they relate? Now when you start asking those questions you will find out that instead of the focus and the exchange being centred on mainstream media, you will see that these people bring on board a buffet of communication possibilities that at different levels might involve the mainstream media, soap operas, alternative media, as well as just straightforward word of mouth and symbolic communication. Ordinary people at the margins of focus of technology, use a combination of possibilities to relate and to exchange in ways that can be quite instructive about theory-building. They use a combination of different factors in ways that mean that media theories of communication which only focus on possibilities as if people were autonomous and atomized individuals, miss the point about the creative domestication of individual agency by the groups and communities to which various individual actors belong. It is people on the margins, in economic difficulties, that bring the complex and comprehensive nature of communication home to us. It's not a question of dichotomies, of either/or. Often we talk about the have's and the have-not's, in a way that does not quite capture the situation. So my approach is to try as much as possible to allow the given situation or context that I am researching tell its story, rather than saying this is the storyline.

Can the different types of communication that are typical to African settings also be seen as a metaphor for the different forms of communication within Western societies?

Oh yes, definitely. It has nothing to do with geography or race. It has to do with marginality, regardless of where that marginality happens to be, or who happens to inhabit it. Only in Africa's case it happens to be a potent concoction of racial, spatial, economic and cultural marginality. Marginality can take different forms, and Africa's experience in that regard can be very useful in theory-building, especially if we don't get carried away with the superiority complex that a feeling or perception of relative comfort tends to engender.

How does that marginality itself impact on scholarly production, on the ability for these very alternative perspectives to enter the Western theoretical dialogue?

Yes that is a problem, because the person who has the power to define has that power not only to define the Self, but also to define Others. That means that Western scholarship tends to determine who is going to be included and who excluded, and that does not always have to do with the quality of scholarship being produced. A journal that is based in the UK, run by somebody who has assumptions about the world and North/South divisions, might take positions about which papers will be published. Those decisions have very little to do with science, but more with the politics of scholarly production. It therefore becomes very difficult for African ideas, African scholarship, African research to filter through. But fortunately we are living in the 21st century, where you have alternative ways of surviving even while you are being excluded. There are possibilities through new technologies of dissemination – just by putting something on a listserv or online, even if you have limited bandwidth, means that you increase the chances of excluded scholarship, of excluded theoretical contributions, thereby preventing them from dying simply because they haven't been published in a mainstream channel.

So it comes back again to the notion of community media and alternative sites of knowledge production to give voice to those excluded from mainstream channels, because those exclusions have not always been informed by the mediocrity of output, but it could be a political decision.

So yes, the likelihood exists that knowledge produced in the South might not always make its way to publication or public debate for various reasons – economic, political or otherwise – but also thanks to recent developments in technologies, even if they cannot quite make it, the chance of them being accessed by those who really want to know, who really want to relate, are greater than before.

But isn't there a dilemma there, as you have pointed out in your article "From publish or perish to publish and perish" (Nyamnjoh 2004) that African scholars have to focus their attention so much on entering and impacting on the Western

theoretical discourse that they lose sight of the imperative of speaking to people closer to home?

Exactly. But I think it is something that is easily corrected. However generous these new technologies might be to the margins, and however accommodating of the margins the metropolis might be, only an elite does filter through. So it creates the possibility of other, alternative centres within Africa, for a certain type of exchange, and you have places like CODESRIA or OSSREA, here on the continent, promoting such exchanges. The danger is also of locking yourself up in your alternatives, and creating a new form of fundamentalism that excludes everything that differs from you and then you become just as bad as those you are critical of. We must create room to reach out while at the same time encouraging exchanges within the continent. It's in some ways the same as the classic debate – how well do you provide for gender in scholarship, do you do it by creating room for gender in the mainstream, or by creating a forum for gender in its own right without creating a ghetto. Both these options should be pursued at the same time.

So you would say it would be wrong to attempt to construct an African theory of journalism, because that would be based on the essentialist assumption that Africanness is different?

What I would rather say is that the African context and experience should contribute towards theory-building. The African condition is not a birthmark, it is not exclusive to Africa. At this point in history Africa has those conditions that makes such a view possible, but it can also outgrow that reality.

That said, it must be admitted that currently, the basic assumptions underpinning African Journalism in definition and practice, are not informed by the fact that ordinary Africans are busy Africanizing their modernity and modernizing their Africanity in ways often too complex for simplistic dichotomies to capture. The precepts of journalism that apply currently in Africa are largely at variance with dominant ideas of personhood and agency (and by extension society, culture and democracy) shared by communities across the continent, as it assumes that there is a One-Best-Way of being and doing to which

Africans must aspire and be converted in the name of modernity and civilization. This divorce is at the heart of some of the professional and ethical dilemmas that haunt journalism in and on Africa, a journalism whose tendency is to debase and caricature African humanity, creativity and realities. It is a constraint that renders African Journalism a journalism of bandwagonism, where mimicry is the order of the day, as emphases is less on thinking than on doing, less on leading than on being led.

African Journalism lacks both the power of self-definition and the power to shape the universals that are deaf-and-dumb to the particularities of journalism in and on Africa. Because journalism has tended to be treated as an attribute of so-called 'modern' societies or of 'superior' others, it is only proper, so the reasoning goes, that African Journalism and the societies it serves, are taught the principles and professional practices by those who 'know' what it means to be civilized and to be relevant to civilization. Aspiring journalists in Africa must, like containers, be dewatered of the mud and dirt of culture as tradition and custom, and filled afresh with the tested sparkles of culture as modernity and civilization. African journalists are thus called upon to operate in a world where everything has been predefined for them by others, where they are meant to implement and hardly ever to think or rethink, where what is expected of them is respect for canons, not to question how or why canons are forged, or the extent to which canons are inclusive of the creative diversity of the universe that is purportedly of interest to the journalism of the One-Best-Way.

Do you think that the way that certain attempts to counter the dominance of Western perspectives, by introducing 'African Studies' programmes, for example, has the danger of ghettoizing Africa?

Area studies in general is a bit like that – you make a deliberate decision that attention is going to be paid to Africa in programming, in planning, in budgeting and so on. But at the same time you run the risk of making it stand apart, as something 'out there', something to be studied by those who are interested in those margins. The main business,

of studying the disciplines and universal concerns, takes place elsewhere. I think it's more a question of how African studies programmes are structured, than saying that they are not important. If they are structured in such a way that their discussions are not incestuous, just maintaining mediocrity amongst themselves, people just interacting among themselves like a religious sect, then they can be very useful. Because although the focus of research is Africa, the attempts to build theories are not confined to Africa and they are dialoging with the mainstream scientific concerns that operate elsewhere. So – enough attention internally to attract attention to the plight of Africa, but sufficiently open to debates elsewhere to be able to draw on them and contribute to them at the same time.

So it's a process of an oscillating border?

It's best captured by the notion of flexibility – flexible mobility, flexible belonging, flexible citizenship. That's the only way to challenging these things, by questioning the tendency to essentialize even when it's important to draw attention to some things that have been overlooked or some specific experiences that stand apart.

In your book *Africa's Media* (Nyamnyoh 2005) you criticize the imposition of liberal democratic normative theory on African media. Africa always seems to do poorly on indices of press freedom, for instance, because freedom is measured in a particular way. Does this tie in to your notion of African media being made to wear a dress it is not suited for?

I think normative theories are good in that there is already a social consensus about values we share and about the social order that we need. But when normative theories take upon themselves an export component, it can become very dangerous, because you are glossing over power relations and unequal encounters and unequal exchanges. You are providing for norms without knowing where they are coming from. It is a bit like gender, where you take a world structured around manhood and its vision of how things should be, and then you impose it on men as well as on the victims of manhood. Then you say these are values that we hold dear and should respect. I think it begs a lot of

questions. If we think about North-South divisions, and we believe in geopolitics and that factors such as gender, class, race, age, and so on can impact on the social values at play, then we should be much more careful in negotiating and arriving at the ethics and values that we think we can afford to impose. Norms require far more negotiation, especially when you are talking between societies.

Thus, as I have pointed out in the book, how well journalism is relevant to Africa and Africans depends on what value such journalism gives African humanity and creativity. If a journalism is such that privileges a hierarchy of humanity and human creativity, and if such journalism believes that African humanity and creativity are at the abyss of that hierarchy, such journalism is bound to be prescriptive, condescending, contrived, caricatured and hardly in tune with the quest by Africans for equality of humanity and for recognition and representation.

And if African journalists were to, wittingly or unwittingly, buy into that hierarchy, they would in effect be working against the interests of the very African communities they claim to serve with their journalism. But if one convinces one's self that one is at the abyss, that one is a veritable heart of darkness, one doesn't need much convincing buying into prescriptions on how to fish one's self out of the abyss or the heart of darkness, especially if such prescriptions are by those one has been schooled to recognize and represent as superior.

A closer look at democracy in Africa is a good indicator of how journalism has tended to articulate and appreciate African realities through the prescriptive lenses of those who believe their ideas of humanity and creativity to be sufficiently rich and practiced for uncritical adoption by 'emerging' others. In Europe and North America, *liberal democracy* is said to guarantee journalism the best environment it needs to foster freedom and progress. Liberal democracy's colossal investments in the making of the Independent Individual is projected as the model to be promoted and defended by journalism in and on Africa. Yet the more African Journalism strives to implant liberal democracy, the less the successes it has had to report.

In the use of language alone, few African journalists have dared to write the way Chinua Achebe suggests is a popular mode of communication amongst the Igbo, where proverbs are the palm oil with which words are eaten. Fewer still have dared to

contemplate using English, French, Portuguese or Spanish the creative ways that the ordinary Africans whom they purportedly target with their journalism do. While journalists mark time with linguistic orthodoxy, African communities have been busy creolizing inherited European languages through promoting intercourse with African languages, and in turn enriching local languages through borrowings. Everywhere the spoken word has also perfected its intermarriage with the unspoken through body language and other nonverbal forms.

When African journalists begin to reflect such popular creativity among Africans, and without a sense of guilt that they are violating journalistic taboos, they would be helping towards a democracy and journalism of relevance to, in and on Africa. In this, there is much in how Africans relate to their cultures and home village to inspire African journalists. Instead of seeing it as a problem to be defined out of the realm of acceptability, African Journalism must recognise and provide for the fact that, the home village in Africa has retained its appeal both for those who have been disappointed by the town, as well as for those who have found success in the town.

The way forward is in recognising the creative ways in which Africans merge their traditions with exogenous influences to create realities that are not reducible to either but enriched by both. The implication of this argument is that how we understand the role of African Journalism depends on what democratic model we draw from. Under liberal democracy where the individual is perceived and treated as an autonomous agent, and where primary solidarities and cultural identities are discouraged in favour of a national citizenship and culture, journalism is expected to be disinterested, objective, balanced and fair in gathering, processing and disseminating news and information. The assumption is that since all individuals have equal rights as citizens, there can be no justification for bias among journalists. But under popular notions of democracy where emphasis is on interdependence and competing cultural solidarities are a reality, journalists and the media are under constant internal and external pressure to promote the interests of the various groups competing for recognition and representation.

The tensions and pressures are even greater in situations where states and governments purport to pursue liberal democracy in principle, while in reality they continue to be highhanded and repressive to their populations. When this happens,

journalists are at risk of employing double-standards as well, by claiming one thing and doing the opposite, or by straddling various identity margins, without always being honest about it, especially if their very survival depends on it. To democratise means to question basic monolithic assumptions, conventional wisdom about democracy, journalism, government, power myths and accepted personality cults, and to suggest and work for the demystification of the state, custom and society.

To democratize African Journalism is to provide the missing cultural link to current efforts, links informed by respect for African humanity and creativity, and by popular ideas of personhood and domesticated agency. It is to negotiate conviviality between competing ideas of how best to provide for the humanity and dignity of all and sundry. It is above all to observe and draw from the predicaments of ordinary Africans forced by culture, history and material realities to live their lives as ‘subjects’ rather than as ‘citizens’, even as liberal democratic rhetoric claims otherwise. The mere call for an exploration of alternatives in African Journalism, is bound to be perceived as a threat and a challenge.

You are quite critical of the state of African journalism. But are there also any initiatives currently underway in Africa in the field of journalism and media that you are excited about?

I think what is exciting for me is what is termed elsewhere ‘citizen journalism’. I’ve had occasion in the past to criticize mainstream journalism in Africa for being so neatly detached from what is really going on in the ordinary lives of people and how they make news, how they gather news and how they communicate. It is because our journalists, by sticking to Western canons of journalism miss the point of African value added in terms of how people communicate and how they share communication with one another. And Africa has a much richer landscape in this regard that can inform journalism. Before citizen journalism came to the West, you had citizen journalism all over Africa. So, how did the excluded succeed in making news about their experiences and sharing this news among themselves? Today, with ICTs this seems like something new, but if we look at Africa, people have been using ways like ‘radio trottoir’ to obtain information, share it

and create possibilities where normal channels were beyond their reach. So citizen journalism is something that helps me to revisit an old problem, that of understanding popular forms of communication and how they blend in with conventional media for the best of society.

Citizen journalism and user generated content is indeed currently high on the research agenda of journalism studies in the North, in terms of that that means for the future of journalism and in fact for the very definition of what journalism is. But would you say that debate is relevant for Africa, given problems of infrastructure and access?

A book just came out, in fact I have a copy on my desk, it's called *Communicating Peace: Entertaining Angels Unawares* edited by Philip Lee, published by WACC, it is a collection of essays in honour of Michael Traber. I have a chapter in there in which I bring out these issues (Nyamnjoh 2008). I talk about citizen journalism and what I think its contribution is to the way journalism should go in future.

Journalism, to be relevant to social consolidation and renewal in Africa, must embrace professional and social responsibilities in tune with the collective aspirations of Africans. In a context where economic and political constraints have often hindered the fulfillment of this expectation, the advent and increasing adoption in Africa of information and communication technologies (ICTs) offer fascinating new possibilities. While journalists are usually open to new technologies in their work, their practice of journalism has not always capitalized upon the creative ways in which the public they target for and with information adopt, adapt and use the very same technologies. The future for democracy and the relevance of journalism therein would have much to learn from the creative ways in which Africans are currently relating to innovations in ICTs. The same popular creativity that has been largely ignored by conventional journalism in the past is remarkable today all over Africa and amongst Africans in the Diaspora. The body of literature informed by empirical research is considerable to suggest that individuals and the cultural communities they represent often refuse to celebrate victimhood. They seek

to harness, within the limits of the structural constraints facing them, whatever possibilities are available to contest and seek inclusion. Hence the need to highlight the importance of blending conventional and citizen journalism through the myriad possibilities offered by ICTs to harness both democracy and its nemesis. The current context of globalization facilitated by the ICTs offers exciting new prospects not only for citizens and journalists to compete and complement one another, but also an opportunity for new solidarities to challenge undemocratic forces, ideologies and practices that stand in the way of social progress.

The lessons for African journalism of such creative appropriation processes underway are obvious. Comprehending the overall development, usage and application of ICTs within African social spaces would take the fusion of keen observation and complex analysis to capture structural, gendered, class, generational, racial and spatial dimensions of the phenomenon. A dialectical interrogation of the processes involved promises a more accurate grasp of the linkages than would impressionistic, linear and prescriptive narratives of technological determinism. If African journalism pays closer attention to the creative usages of ICTs by ordinary Africans, African journalists could begin to think less of professional journalism in the conventional sense, and more of seeking ways to blend the information and communication cultures of the general public with their conventional canon and practices, to give birth to a conventional-cum-citizen journalism that is of greater relevance to Africa and its predicaments.

Do you think your anthropological background has helped you to understand journalism in this way, as a social practice? Do you think there is room for more such anthropological approaches to media studies?

Yes, definitely. It makes my relationship with journalists very interesting, because we're always teasing each other, but in a very friendly, balanced way. If ever I were to run a media training school, I would recommend a thorough grounding in ethnographic methods. The ethnographic method makes up for a certain weakness in journalism,

especially when you do investigative journalism without understanding the society thoroughly, it can be very superficial and a caricature rather than a rich debate. So the ethnographic method draws attention to knowing the context about which you are reporting, and knowing the issues beyond simply the assumption that facts speak for themselves.

This could be especially true of global journalists who tend to parachute into news hot spots around the world?

Liberal journalism, like liberal social science, has always held that if you stay in a place long enough, you might just develop sympathies with those you are supposed to be reporting on or that you are supposed to be studying. So people prefer to report *on*, to speak *at*, to speak *past*, but hardly ever to speak *with* people and stay long enough so as to create a relationship that brings out the issues with the necessary nuances and contradictions. People hate contradictions, they want linearity and normal life is not linear. What frustrated the McCain campaign a lot was that Obama had no straightforward answer to anything. His experience of life is such that there are no straightforward answers. Somebody who straddles various identity margins can never give you a straightforward answer, because he does not live his lives in dichotomies. Scholarship, everything, has to be complex, (whether) it is telling a story, (whether) it is journalism, research, scholarship – the quality of journalism should be: if you really want to understand the story, let me not rush. Let me sit down so I can tell you the story with all its nuances, it is not something that I can summarize with a few key phrases because that just complicates the matter more than it explains it. Journalism should be storytelling, but not in a hurry – that is why the ethnographic method is important. If you are in a hurry to tell a story, this school of journalism is not for you. Maybe we should have a motto at journalism schools: this is not a place for people in a hurry!

What is your assessment of the state of journalism and media research on the African continent?

Africa Media Review is still being published by CODESRIA in association with the ACCE (the now dormant African Council for Communication Education). The idea was to take it over until such time as ACCE re-establishes itself firmly on its feet, that has not materialised so we are keeping on with publishing it on behalf of the communication community within Africa. It will be a pity for the ACCE to stay dormant because the idea of an ACCE was a very useful one. Maybe necessary lessons can be learnt towards its revival. But if you look at associational life on the continent, the rise and fall of associations, there is a certain predictability which is unfortunate. CODESRIA (Council for the Development of Social Science Research in Africa) covers social science and the humanities. Of course, CODESRIA is there not to replace professional associations or university communities but to support them.

You are also a prolific novelist alongside your academic work. How do the two dovetail, if they do? Or is that a way to escape the rigours of academic work?

No, far from it! Creative work demands far more rigour than the childplay called scholarship! Academic work, once you've mastered the rules, just becomes like child's play, doesn't it? But to tell a story that convinces the reader to read you again is much more challenging. The two actually complement each other, because I write about things I have researched extensively. When you do ethnography you come across material that is much richer than the information that derives from the administration of questionnaires. You interview people at length, you dig at the roots of issues. So when you are finished with your scholarly work you still have a lot of data that you feel you should do justice to by sharing it beyond the confines of a scholarly readership, and that's where my creative writing comes in.

References

Bahree, M. 2008. Creative Disruption: Citizen Voices. *Forbes Magazine* 12 August. Available online: http://www.forbes.com/free_forbes/2008/1208/083.html

Nyamnjoh, Francis B. 1999. African and the Information Superhighway: The Need for Mitigated Euphoria. *Ecquid Novi: African Journalism Studies* 41(3):69-91.

Nyamnjoh, Francis B. 2004. From Publish or Perish to Publish and Perish: What 'Africa's 100 Best Books' Tell Us About Publishing Africa. In: *Journal of Asian and African Studies*, 39(5): 331-355.

Nyamnjoh, Francis B. 2005. *Africa's Media: Democracy and the Politics of Belonging*. London: Zed Books

Nyamnjoh, Francis B. 2008. Journalism in Africa: Modernity versus Africanity. In: Lee, P. (ed.) *Communicating Peace: Entertaining Angels Unawares* Penang: Southbound.