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Africa Communicating: Digital Technologies, Representation, and Power

Gado Alzouma, Monica Chibita, Wisdom Tettey,
and Allan Thompson

What follows is an edited transcript of a panel that took place during the 2013 conference of the Canadian Association of African Studies (CAAS), held at Carleton University. This panel, chaired by Professor Allan Thompson, of Carleton, was called: "Africa Communicating: Digital Technologies, Representation, and Power."

Allan Thompson

I teach journalism here at Carleton and also direct something called the Centre for Media and Transitional Societies, which right now has 22 journalism and communications students heading to Africa for eight-week media internships. Most of them will be working with

news organizations but some will also be working with media development organizations.

I also have an interest in digital media because of my involvement with a project called Radio Convergence and Development in Africa, which was looking at the nexus between ICTs – information and communication technologies – and conventional radio.

In a sense, everyone has heard the cliché of *the digital media revolution*, this burgeoning thing that's happening in Africa. We all seem to talk about it, we all seem to hear about it and it is indeed a cliché. But the fact that something has become a cliché doesn't mean that it's not true. It just means that people often use the expression so casually that we can't always be sure what they're actually talking about.

What we're here to do today is to try to give this issue some thought and put a bit of flesh on the bones of the cliché by looking at it more closely, particularly by examining some evidence about what this digital media revolution means in Africa.

We have three excellent panellists to take us through that discussion.

We have Gado Alzouma from the American University of Nigeria. The title of his presentation is "The Rhetoric of ICT4D in Africa." So he will be dealing head on with the cliché, the rhetoric. Gado is an associate professor of Anthropology at the School of Arts and Sciences, American University of Nigeria. He did his undergraduate and graduate studies in France in sociology and his PhD in anthropology at Southern Illinois University.

In addition to his teaching and research he's done evaluation work with such organizations as Care International and the World Bank. In the early 1990s he was a social advisor to Niger's Prime Minister at the time. He also did consulting work for UNICEF and later for the IDRC's regional office in Dakar, Senegal.

He is widely published – as are all of our speakers – in the field of Information and Communication Technologies for Development,

or ICT4D, his primary area of research and the subject of his paper today.

Monica Chibita is from Uganda Christian University. The title of her paper is "New Media, New Representations? Assessing Medial Literacy in Eastern and Northern Uganda."

After nearly 20 years with the Mass Communication Department at Makerere University, in Kampala, Monica took a position last year as Head of the Mass Communication Department at Uganda Christian University. Monica studied at Makerere, holds an M.A. in Journalism from the University of Iowa and earned her PhD in Communication at the University of South Africa.

She joined Makerere in 1994 and was instrumental in the school's research program on top of a heavy teaching role. She's a member of the editorial boards of the African Journal for Communication Theory and Research, and *Ecquid Novi: African Journalism Studies*; and associate editor of the *Journal of African Media Studies*, JAMS.

Our third speaker is Wisdom Tettey, from the University of British Columbia. The title of his presentation is "Mobile Phones, Democratic Citizenship, and the Changing Ecology of Political Communication in Ghana." Wisdom is currently the Dean of the Faculty of Creative and Critical Studies and a professor of Cultural Studies at UBC – the University of British Columbia.

He studied Political Science, Russian, and Communication Studies at the University of Ghana; completed a Masters degree in Political Science at UBC; and a PhD in Political Science at Queen's University.

He has a keen interest in the new information and communications technologies and their impact on society, particularly in Africa. He's also engaged in research on mass media in Africa and their relevance for democratization, hence his involvement as co-editor of the recent volume *African Media and the Digital Sphere*.

His paper today is on mobile phones, democratic citizenship, and a change in ecology of political communication in Ghana.

We will begin with Gado Alzouma.

Gado Alzouma

What I'm going to talk about is this cliché mentioned in the introduction. I would like to first say that there is a discourse, a rhetoric that is clouding the whole issue of ICTs in Africa. Unless we know the facts, unless we go beyond that discourse, beyond that rhetoric, we would not know how it is actually, because what people are telling us right now is that there are changes that are happening in Africa. It's not just that everybody has a cell phone, they have access to internet and so on.

But the real situation is far more complex than that and not so different from what we're used to. It's just that we have this discourse in our mind and we've begun to think that there is something new that is happening.

So the first thing to know is that most of the issues that we actually discuss in our conferences, they are concerned with the preoccupations that are the preoccupations of Western countries. The issues we are discussing actually find their origins in Western countries.

It seems that every ten years, we have presented to us the latest technology that is key for the development of Africa. We had the era of radio, the era of television and then the era of computers.

In the last two decades, it has been thought that computers and internet are transforming Africa, that they are having a revolutionary effect on the economic situation and so on. Now, we see that the focus is shifting to mobile phones. People are no longer talking solely about the internet and about computers, they are now talking about the mobile phone.

And why are they talking about the mobile phone? Because the reality when it comes to the introduction of computers and internet, even though the discourse would let us believe that it is fabulous and amazing, actually, the penetration of the computer and the internet in Africa is still very, very, very low. However, when it comes to the mobile phones, 60 percent of the African population has access to the mobile phone today.

In my view this mobile phone thing is clouding the whole issue of the development of Africa and the information society. And what I want to talk about is to show that, even when it comes to the mobile phone, the situation is not really what it is said to be. Having access to the mobile phone does not mean that people really use mobile phones the way, for example, they do in most Western countries. So I want to talk about what I call the mobile divide. In the same way that there was a digital divide, today there is a mobile divide.

What do people tell us when it comes to the internet, computers and mobile phones? They say that they have the ability to provoke economic and social development. That's what we call informing development, and these technical objectives are presented as having some qualities and potential that are different from all other technologies that have been introduced in Africa before.

There is no doubt that there are changes that are happening in Africa right now, and those changes are very important. For example, the average economic growth rate was around 5.5 percent between 2001 and 2010. The expected growth rate is 6.2 percent in 2013, and the six countries out of the ten that have the highest growth rate in the world are African countries. For example, countries such as Angola, 11 percent, Nigeria 8.9 percent and so on.

So six African countries will be among the world's ten fastest growing countries before 2016. And over the next five years, the growth rate of the African economy will outpace Asia. (All growth

figures I'm presenting are from the International Monetary Fund, Regional Economic Outlook: sub-Saharan Africa, 2012.)

So there is a lot happening in Africa and there is no doubt that the changes are positive. For example, there are more African children in school than ever before, there are more democratic elections, and while war still exists, it is not so prevalent, is less deadly than it used to be and there are fewer countries affected than there used to be in the past.

And there is no doubt that ICTs have greatly contributed to this change. For example, more than 600 million Africans have a mobile phone today. So no other technology has been so rapidly and so widely made available to Africans in history. A 2004 study the International Telecommunication Union noted that "Africa is the fastest growing mobile phone market today in the world."

Providing ICTs is one of the sectors where the difference between developed and developing countries is the most reduced today. And in some sectors, such as, for example, mobile banking, Africa appears to be more advanced than most developed countries in the world. People are using mobile phones in very innovative ways, things that we don't find, for example, in countries such as the United States or Canada.

And there is no doubt that ICTs have greatly contributed. Many studies have shown that there is a link between the development of ICTs and the GDP growth in Africa. And there is also a link between the development of ICTs and income generating activities. Millions of Africans are today employed in the sector of ICTs in Africa.

So I'm not going to have some kind of dystopian discourse, I'm not going to tell you that ICTs are not useful, that technology is not useful. Of course, technologies are useful and the computers, the internet and cell phones also are a positive change that we have to support.

But once we have said that, does that mean that we have correctly assessed the situation? Is the introduction or the physical availability of mobile phones, for example, the whole story?

Shouldn't we go beyond that? Some of the questions we have asked ourselves are the following: Did Africa really enter the information society as has been said? What other opportunities and solutions to development problems are we missing by focusing solely or mainly on ICTs, because this is today the trend or the tendency in development projects. In United Nations development agencies, in NGOs, everywhere the focus is today on ICTs.

But what are we missing by focusing mostly or solely on ICTs? In what ways are ICTs reinforcing or weakening existing inequalities? Because some of the things that are never talked about are, for example, inequalities in Africa.

When we think about Africa, we tend to think that it is some kind of uniform world where everybody is the same. But actually there are class differences in Africa, and when it comes to access to ICTs there are also inequalities, even when it comes to access to mobile phones.

It is difficult to think that such a tiny object as a mobile phone could be the object of some kind of socioeconomic differentiation between people, but actually there are differences, when it comes to the appropriation and the use of mobile phones in Africa. There are differences between people and that's what I'm going to talk about.

What I want to say is that we should go beyond the fact of equipping people with the technology. We should see beyond that, what is actually happening in societies, between people, in their relationships, between groups, for example, between men and women, poor and rich and so on. What is actually happening when it comes to technology and the introduction of technology.

So my main arguments are the following: The first one is that the rationale behind the rhetoric of ICT4D is to equip people with technologies, not to empower them. The emphasis is on technolo-

gies, always on technologies, not people. What I mean is that the whole human dimension of the relationship between technology and people is most of the time forgotten in that discourse, and when faced with a development problem, the reflex is to seek a technological solution. For example, in countries such as Canada and the United States, of course, the more developed countries, the question of illiteracy does not exist, but actually in our countries, in countries such as Niger, think about this, more than 60 percent of people cannot read and write in Niger, more than 60 percent, and 80 percent of women cannot read and write.

So the question of illiteracy is the fundamental question when it comes to the appropriation of ICTs in Africa. But in this rhetoric, the rhetoric of ICT4D, it's like there is only one side of development, the lack of technology. People always tend to see the problems in the prism of technology and only technology, mostly ignoring the many other sides of development, for example, lack of education, a lack of basic amenities and so on.

Are ICTs or mobile phones all encompassing? I would like to give you some figures: According to the Internet World Statistics' website (2012), Africa has only 7 percent of the internet users in the world today. We are bringing together a whole conference with hundreds of people here, talking about ICTs, how they are important in Africa but actually who are the users of the internet in Africa? Seven percent of the population; that's it. That's it, 7 percent.

And some countries such as Burundi have only 1.7 percent users, Chad 1.9 percent, et cetera; it's a very, very low use of the internet.

So when people talk about the ICT revolution in Africa, what they are actually talking about is the mobile phone. So this discourse is not really about ICTs, because ICTs are not only the mobile phone, but also the internet, computers and so on. So this is not only about the introduction of the physical availability, it is about

how to use computers. Digital literacy for example is something very, very important.

Actually, when it comes to landline phones, the internet, computers and all other technologies, Africa is lagging very far behind the rest of the world.

So are ICTs all encompassing? It is worth glancing at some of the research about mobile phones. All kinds of problems are said to be being solved. It is as if there is some kind of magic effect of the mobile phone, just because they introduced the mobile phone it will improve access to education and foster democratic election campaigns. That's how things are often presented today.

So let's look at the actual effects of mobile phones. One of the authors, for example, has this to say in a study titled "Sociology of the Mobile Phone", Geser wrote: "By being adopted, irrespective of education and family background, the cell phone bridges at least some gaps between different social classes" (p. 6). Meaning that the differences between social classes can be erased through the use of cell phones.

And because the poor and the rich, all of them equally have access to mobile phones, the differences are erased? Is that true? No. If you look more closely, you see that people without a university education use mobile phones less often and differently than those with a higher level of education. This group of users also spends more of their net worth on their mobile phone than the others.

Having a mobile phone does not mean that people are using it, and having a mobile phone does not mean that people equally use it, and that they have access to all the functionalities of mobile phones.

According to a survey of the Institut National de la Statistique (2009), in Niger the expenditure in mobile telephony is higher in urban areas than in rural areas. Mobile phone expenses also account for a larger share of rural household budget meaning that it weighs

more on the rural and poor people than it does, for example, for city dwellers and people who are better off.

So something also that is said is this: yes it's true that Africans may not have access to the internet and computers, but because they have a smartphone now, it will be possible for them to have access to the internet thanks to smartphones. But who has a smartphone, and who can use a smartphone?

Think about sending an SMS. If you are illiterate, how would you write or send an SMS?

What do illiterate people do with the cell phone? They don't do what people who are educated do with the cell phone, they just call and receive calls, and sometimes they don't even call.

Don't think that because they have a cell phone that they are calling. They're not calling because they don't even have the money to call. They usually beep. Beeping is when they call people and they wait to be called back.

Think about this: According to a study by Aker and Mbiti, "the price of the cheapest mobile phone in Niger is equivalent to 12.5 kilograms of millet, enough to feed a household of five for five days" (2010, p.5). That's the price of a mobile phone.

So what would people do in that case?

I read a paper by somebody from Burkina Faso about the so-called innovative uses of mobile phone. It tells us about a person who is working in a village in a rural area. Every day he has to climb a tree to make calls, and this is presented as a positive innovative use of the cell phone. Or using the phone as a radio is presented as innovative and positive.

But the question we have to ask ourselves is the following: Who are those people who have to invent "innovative uses" of cell phones? They are, essentially, those people who are poor because they don't have the means—they don't have the means to pay for the technology.

These are the people who are having those “innovative uses” that are being currently celebrated in the literature. Yes! Africans are using mobile phones in “innovative ways”, but who are those people who are using the mobile phones in “innovative ways”, climbing trees, and using second-hand cell phones, et cetera?

Actually, they are making virtue out of necessity—just because they cannot do otherwise. Poverty explains the innovation. The innovative solutions are actually a mark of inequality and differentiated use of mobile phones.

So my conclusion is the following: The rhetoric of ICT4D tends to obscure the above-mentioned problems. I call for integrated development projects.

What are integrated development projects? Not just giving cell phones and computers to people, but also educating them because somebody who’s educated better benefits from the use of ICTs than somebody who is uneducated.

And think about the social network of somebody who has a higher education and all of the things that somebody who has a higher education can do with cell phones and computers.

And on the other side, think about somebody who is illiterate. What can he do with a cell phone? He can just call out and receive calls; not more than that.

So we have to educate people in order for them to benefit more from the use of technologies. We have to educate people in order for them to better benefit from the use of technology, meaning augmenting their social capital.

This is what I have to say. Thank you.

Monica Chibita

My presentation will be in two parts. I will first share some general thoughts on what has been said for and against ICTs and their worth in African society and then I’ll go to data from a study