

## Comment

## The Internet and the African Academic World

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A practice, a technique, an expertise cannot be left unexplored by an account that can explain their basis and organization as well as their objectives. Whether the internet is understood as a practice, or seen as a journey through a space that knows no borders, or cursed as humanity overreaching itself yet again (*hybris*), nevertheless its reality raises questions about our experience of the world (*experimentum mundi*) and explores its nature, giving an exact measure, beyond assumptions, of the relationship between humans and machines. With this in mind a multicultural, multidisciplinary study was set up in the USA through the publication of *Academy and the Internet*, jointly edited by Helen Nissenbaum and Monroe Price (2004). The book sets out to examine the relations between the internet and economic issues, the internet and social problems of equality, politics (the question of public space), the communicative relationship in a virtual world. Interculturally speaking, only the Chinese contribution gives the debate – which is almost tribal since it is American to the core – an off-centre tone. A debate makes statements and analyses, but it also omits and may skate over other perspectives. Africa, which is absent from this debate, almost forces its way in via this paper. What is the position with the relationship between the internet and present-day African experience? Hardly coping as it is with the consequences of the recent introduction of writing, how is Africa experiencing this internet adventure, in which the status of images, words and time seems to be called into question? This brief presentation will look first at the status of technoscience – under which heading the internet is subsumed in Africa – and then at the challenges the internet throws up in the region. Our method will be to examine internet capacities from the viewpoint of oral cultures that are dominated economically.

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SAGE: London, Thousand Oaks, CA and New Delhi, <http://dio.sagepub.com>

DOI: 10.1177/0392192106069018

## The internet in Africa: the problem of technological rationality

### *On messianic expectations*

African society's relationship to the internet should be viewed solely within the general context of the encounter between Africa and techno-scientific rationality. Until the end of the 19th century – the period that coincides with the effective colonization of the African continent – it was understood in Europe that science and technology were uniquely European possessions. Given their low intellectual level, Africans should be content merely with a smattering of science. In this connection a quotation from Georges Hardy, who was involved in colonial education in Senegal in the early 20th century, is instructive. Maynard, an apostolic official – who was to become a bishop in the colonies – said of the Africans that 'we must give a people a moral code before teaching them humanistic knowledge: for pride does not inculcate virtues whereas morality inspires people with the love of work, virtue and knowledge . . . Such people do not need knowledge, they need religious principles, a pure, strict moral code . . .'.<sup>1</sup> In any case the science that was offered was science as conceived by a kind of 19th-century positivism. It was a deterministic science that believed in the idea of progress, a progress that, in the case of the colonized peoples, was destined to take them from a lower to a higher stage. The model of rationality which this science gave colonized people was the rationality of understanding (*Verstand*), a rationality that opts for an instrumental apprehension of relations between subjects and between them and objects.<sup>2</sup> Instrumental rationality had an economic implication in the colonies. Nature and the colonized peoples were to be treated as mere instruments of economic output. With progress and instrumental rationality the techno-science presented in the colonies was to cast off myth in its character of an arrangement of narratives that could not be judged by the criteria of scientific experimentation.

It was in the name of this positivist science that the colonial enterprise constructed a whole hierarchy of civilizations, putting Africans at the bottom of the scale. In order to criticize colonization black African writers took that technological superiority as their starting-point, either to set Africa on the road to progress or to mock the unscientific nature of African civilization. At the second black writers and artists' conference, held in Rome from 26 March to 1 April 1959, Alioune Diop, the publisher and founder of the *Présence Africaine* publishing house in Paris, stated that 'the worst thing we suffer from is our fragility. It has been given different names: inferiority, colonizability, dependency complex, etc. But it is more to do with the fact that the development of technology in the west has got such a big lead that the gulf between our two ways of life has become dangerously hard to bridge.'<sup>3</sup> And Aimé Césaire was sarcastic about Africans' supposed savagery and took aim at the achievements of western techno-science: 'people who did not invent gunpowder or the compass. People who have never managed to conquer either steam or electricity. People who have not explored the seas or the heavens, but know every last inch of the land of suffering. People whose only journeys have been displacements, who have been domesticated and Christianized . . .'.<sup>4</sup>

If we wish to assess the relationship between the internet and African societies we

must not forget that in Africa technology and science are evolving out of a feeling of failure historically. The issue of power has therefore become crucial; the power of whites to discover and tame, power to conquer in order to get free from the category of colonized people.

In the novel *L'aventure ambiguë* by the Senegalese writer Cheick Hamidou Kane there is some discussion about sending young Samba Diallo to the western school after instruction in the Koran. But the family is afraid the boy will forget his own culture and put it behind him in favour of western education and culture. While the family was still debating this issue young Samba's aunt, la Grande Royale, made the decision: Samba must go to the western school. Why? Because he needed to acquire the power of science and learn in particular to use it to conquer, as the colonizers did, 'to conquer without being right'. Towa, the Cameroun philosopher, is also one of those who think technology and science might be liberating. 'Africa will develop a great modern philosophy only if she becomes or moves towards becoming a great modern power which can affirm her responsibility for the fate of the world without raising a smile . . . international capitalism has imposed itself on our societies because of its superior physical power, which it draws from the scientific knowledge of natural elements and processes and the application of this knowledge to military and productive activities.'<sup>5</sup>

What Towa and La Grande Royale do not know is that the mode of science offered in Africa is a triumphalist science which no longer exposes its errors and uncertainties but only its increasing ascendancy. What those two thinkers forget is that on this model of science the famous concept of *development* would be built, with its corollaries *underdevelopment* and *developing*. Thus science becomes the messiah that will save Africa. This messianic conception of the role of science in Africa is realized in the well-known technology transfer. Technologies are transferred to a place where they are unaware of the conditions of production that have brought about their introduction. The internet arrived in Africa amid this messianic euphoria. So the internet is surrounded by this climate of messianic expectation. But what in fact can the internet do in Africa?

### *The issue of public space and equality*

The internet is supposed to promote a new space for citizens. The question of political sovereignty can be considered with reference to the community of citizens. That community is associated with the law and the issue of the social bond. Previously, as Durkheim defines it, religion used to be the basis for social order and hierarchies, but nowadays, with the world's disenchantment (Weber), the nation state is attempting to continue the churches' role, with formal citizenship and equality promoting the reign of the autonomous individual. Thus nations have arisen with political modernity in which king and priest no longer hold sway, replaced by a vague grouping of individuals called 'the people'. Not only does the internet weaken priestly power, it allows the voices of the smallest to be heard. So with the internet we are supposed to witness the creation of forums for public discussion. Each individual at home counts as part of a discussion network. For once the individual's place is clear for all to see.

But in fact the internet raises more questions for democracy than it solves. Nowadays the twin phenomena of economic globalization and worldwide standardization of cultures are proof of the weakening of the nation state, so 'what today is the vital source of a lasting social bond?'<sup>6</sup> For there to be a public space for discussion, 'publicity' alone (in the Kantian sense) is not enough; there must be a genuine education of citizens beforehand. This is not the case with the internet. The burning question is: 'is it possible that the internet phenomenon as a new public space may be moving in the opposite direction, following the tendency to reduce the political space to the level of my agenda?'<sup>7</sup>

First of all personalization of forms of discussion – someone writes and someone replies – ends up confirming inequality of access to information<sup>8</sup> and it has been observed in the context of the USA that the disparity between men's and women's access to verbal expression is notable.<sup>9</sup>

In Africa the internet allows sites of social contact to be created. The cybercafé, regardless of the machines, which may or may not be working, is a place for people to socialize. They come, not to go off into the virtual space of the Web, but to meet friends or strangers and recreate in the communal space of the cybercafé the village baobab or the old folks' veranda: places to discuss, learn, find out about yourself and others. In Africa the knowledge acquired from the internet is not in itself what creates a spirit of citizenship, but the space housing the machine performs that role; people do not come to it to escape from reality into the virtual, they come to meet subjects with their respective experiences.

### Challenges and questions from the internet to the African experience

#### *Memory: the panopticon returns?*

The internet allows my human memory to acquire a stock of information in a short time. Forgetting, whether accidental or deliberate, is one of the great threats to memory. Here the question of memory affects Africa in its different ways of telling its story. With its vast memory the computer could quite easily solve complicated problems of genealogy. Often kinships, alliances and organization of lineage peter out in the gaps in stories. The anthropological result is confusion in the narrative of these genealogies between what is *historical* and what simply falls into the category of *cosmogonic* myth. Having a more or less reliable memory the computer could quite easily help to reconstitute the history of African peoples by making a sharp distinction between *historical narrative*, *mythological story*, *the gap between these two types of narrative* and in particular by showing when and how *history turned into myth* and vice versa. This 'infallible' memory would contribute to social peace in Africa. Indeed a number of conflicts in traditional Africa were fed by the confusion between several types of oral narrative concerning the identity of the first occupiers of a certain space. Resulting problems over land ownership would be quickly solved if there was an instant memory – such as the computer gives us – which could in record time provide us with information on kinships, generations and succession.

Turning this apology for a reliable memory on its head, we could add, as regards

memory failures and in addition to forgetting, Ricoeur's 'excessive memory'. With the computer and the internet we live with the possibility of being generally spied on. Michel Foucault, in his preface to Bentham's *Panopticon*, reminded us that authority's eye – and its disciplinary strategies tended not only to fragment into a multitude of micro-agencies but had also produced political technologies – was particularly concerned to capture and record all our movements. An all-seeing, all-controlling eye, the desire for blanket control – which is not far removed from a totalitarian will and a *hybris* that pays no attention to finiteness – forgets that a good memory is in fact one that to a certain extent allows for a redemptive oblivion. When it is not organized ideologically, forgetting is a sign of the human condition's vulnerability. The internet no longer allows individuals to feel that vulnerability in their nature, they live with the illusion of omnipotence which an infallible memory reinforces. Referring to 'Luis Borges' fable about *el Memorioso*, Paul Ricoeur reaffirms that: 'Forgetting may not therefore be the enemy of memory in every respect, and memory may have to negotiate with forgetting to grope for the right measure of balance between them . . . Could memory without forgetting be the ultimate fantasy, the ultimate figure of that total reflection we fight against in all registers of the hermeneutics of the historical condition?'<sup>10</sup>

*The issue of speech: between what is said and what remains to be said*

The internet liberates *what is said*, it gives a platform to groups who, in that very act, affirm their identity and diversity. What is said does not exhaust the 'saying', which is nourished by speech. Once arrived in Africa the internet might harm speech, if we do not take care. At the grassroots in Africa, speech is the site of *transposition*, it is not just a means of communication. Through the internet we communicate, and the issue of *transposition* is often not raised. In Africa, a word issuing from a complaint formulated by a sick person is transposed from the question of the individual sickness to the more political one of the social conflicts of the group the sick person belongs to. In the 1960s, Victor Turner, an anthropologist, gave a description of a shamanistic cure among the Ndembu in Zambia, and in that cure ceremony the transposition of the spoken word occurred. A sick person who came to a shaman for his back problems complained about the people living in his village. After a short investigation the shaman brought the whole village together so that everyone could have a say. While the villagers were speaking the shaman was pretending to pull out the sick man's tooth. At the high point of the ritual the sick man was cured. It was an opportunity to explore what was going wrong in the village. The role of speech here was to effect the transition and transposition from the simple situation of the sickness to recreating order in the group by bringing to the surface the contradictions and conflicts that were undermining it. Speech opens a space for transposition moving from *sickness* (an organic problem) via *mysticism* (the shaman invoking the spirits) and ending up in *politics* (recreating order by reassessing social conflicts). The *what is said* involved in internet communication does not allow these various transpositions – or rather, might do so only slightly – and in particular there is no room to raise the serious question that inspires and concerns oral cultures: What happens to speech? The

question is not so much 'how fast can we communicate?' or 'who are we communicating with?' or even 'what kind of technical efficiency are we dealing with when we communicate?' – questions that would be relevant to the issue of the internet's unlimited scope. Speech takes us to the heart of the problematic of *gift* and *debt*. In African societies the gift of the word is always accompanied by the affirmation of an *ethos*. The gift of the word is not received or given unless it is enriched by an ethical depth that gives the person who receives or gives it extra meaning, which a simple arrangement of well-chosen words cannot give. The spoken word is associated with a presentation of the self that means the self is always dependent on several narratives making it a being in history and telling stories.<sup>11</sup> The gift calls for welcome, hospitality and transmission. It is in this direction that an authentic speech structures individuals' daily lives in Africa. With the internet, communication puts in quotation marks the fact that speech is a 'gift' and demands of the giver and receiver the duty to transmit that obeys strict rules. This is where we find the close bond between speech and obligation. You speak only by binding yourself and others. The internet does not really create any obligation and gives those who surf across borders – and with no obligation to receive and give speech – the illusion of having words that are not bound by any obligation except that of technical efficiency. But all speech binds, that is the basis of what is specifically human; we say 'I give you my word', he 'does not keep his word', 'I have only one word'; we do not say 'I give you my communication', 'he does not keep his communication', 'he has only one communication'. The fact that the word often stands for someone's *honour*, to the extent that it is the guarantor in the *trust relationship* (believe me, I give you my word . . . ) encourages us to place it prior to and following any communication. In some African cultures such as the Dogon the world emerged from and is supported by spoken words.

African cultures that emphasize speech – ontogenetic speech which makes something come into effect, the curative speech of the traditional healer, an ancestor's speech blessing or cursing – seem to draw attention to this mania for communication which in the long term runs the risk, if it does not make a space for speech, of turning humans into mere beings trained up for a banal exchange. Valère Novarina, the drama theorist, tells us there is difference between speech and communication:

We shall one day end up dumb if we communicate so much, we shall finally become like the animals, since they have never spoken but communicate very well. Only the mystery of speech separates us from them. In the end we shall become animals: trained by images, brutalized by exchanging everything, turning back into consumers of the world and matter for death. The end of history is speechless.<sup>12</sup>

More than communication, which promises us transparency, speech must have its fair share of mystery that is not related to belief but indicates a distance. Speech opens on to the unknown whereas we communicate only what is known: 'communicators only ever say what they know while speech possesses other powers. To be precise every word designates the unknown. Say what you do not know. Give what you do not have. What needs to be said is what cannot be spoken of.'<sup>13</sup> Speech cultivates that paradox and that impossibility, which is nevertheless possible, and this is why, more than simple communication via the internet, speech creates both distance and closeness. Distance is part of the very etymology of the word speech (*parole*):

In French '*parole*' is a contraction of the word '*parabole*' (parable), which appeared around the 11th century. What is a parable? First it is an idea that cannot be expressed directly, a detour of language that has to be made, often using the resources of analogy. But a parable is above all speech with a purpose. It is not delivered merely for the pleasure of speaking or being listened to, or to convey banal information to an audience. A parable is speech that expects change. It is like a detour that can make it possible to reach someone . . . in order to suggest a change. A parable is an appeal.<sup>14</sup>

## Conclusion

The internet raises important questions about African received experience (*Erfahrung*) and lived experience (*Erlebnis*). Beyond the problem of speech the internet revises the conception of time in Africa. The internet's instantaneous time throws out a challenge to the cyclical nature of *time* in African cultures. What happens to the African internet user's experience of time when instantaneous encounters cyclical? The second problem is one of *space*. The internet knows no territorial boundaries and produces a virtual space. What happens when African space, which is generally two-dimensional (visible and invisible), comes up against the question of the virtual? What is a virtual space? By sweeping away the distance between the subject and time, by living a linear time (*receiver* and *sender*), internet users might learn that in Africa time is always available and the right occasion (*Kairos*). That right time and space (*Kairos*) are an invitation to *action* (*handeln*) which is taunted by the internet's mere doing (*machen*).

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Translated from the French by Jean Burrell

## Notes

1. Quoted by Hardy (1920: 57–8).
2. Here readers are referred to the critique of this form of instrumental rationality by Adorno and Horkheimer (1997).
3. Diop (1959: 41).
4. Césaire (1956: 25).
5. Towa (1979: 51–2).
6. Jauréguiberry and Proux (2003: 9).
7. Jauréguiberry and Proux (2003: 9).
8. Nissenbaum and Monroe (2004: 43).
9. Nissenbaum and Monroe (2004: 40).
10. Ricoeur (2000: 537).
11. Ricoeur (2000).
12. Novarina (1999: 13).
13. Novarina (1999: 13).
14. Breton (2003: 19).

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