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MEDIA AND DEMOCRACY IN AFRICA

**Goran Hyden, Michael Leslie,
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8

Alternative Small Media and Communicative Spaces

*Debra Spitulnik**

Introduction

A discussion of communications and democratization in Africa is incomplete without references to the manifold ways by which people on that continent exchange information of political significance without relying on the formal mass media. If there is any aspect of the media that has been forgotten in the literature on democratization, it is the whole set of alternative small media that are significant in helping people create meaningful communicative spaces for themselves. This point takes on special significance since, as Hyden and Okigbo in chapter 2, Ogbondah in chapter 3, and van der Veur in chapter 4 have indicated, the formal media are still not wholly free. In fact, in many countries, restriction of the media remains the rule.

This chapter, therefore, is about how people gain expression in contexts of strong media repression. A major objective is to evaluate the vehicles by which marginalized groups and individuals can gain access to the channels of communication and how they engage the state in various discourses that are pertinent to the ideas, messages, and purposes for which such marginalized groups represent. Increasingly, in different parts of the globe, people are utilizing "small media" – such as graffiti, flyers, underground cassettes, Internet listservs, slogans, jokes, and rumors – to establish alternative spheres of communication, especially in challenging state power. Despite research on indigenous media in Africa (Barber 1987; West and Fair 1993), one could assert that the study of small media Africa remains underrepresented.

In this chapter, I first introduce an analytical framework for studying small media drawing on several African cases. I begin with a discussion of the general nature of small media as a type of alternative media that individuals and small groups can access and control. The purpose of the discussion is to achieve both a working definition of the term "small media" and a framework which helps define an agenda for research. My work draws upon Sreberny-Mohammadi and Mohammadi's (1994) important theorization of small media and their case study of its role in the Iranian revolution in the late 1970s, but it extends and re-contextualizes their work in several respects by emphasizing the importance of comparison. The cases considered here include: (1) the use of electronic mail discussion lists by Africans living abroad; (2) the use of the Internet in Ogoni activism (Nigeria); (3) the underground circulation of audio cassettes in religious and political mobilization (Nigeria and Kenya); and (4) the humorous reworking of state discourse in jokes and slogans (Zambia).

Secondly, my approach focuses specifically on how technological parameters and cultural influences factor into small media production and circulation. Part of this involves teasing out the differential effect of variables such as technological access, verbal culture, literacy, class, and gender in small media mobilization. And finally, in line with the overall aim of this volume, I address the range of political functions and motivations that enter into small media use.

I argue that small media do have a significant potential to mediate state and society in contemporary Africa, but that like other small-scale forms of communication, they are not always in *direct* dialogue with agents of the state. In many cases the communications produced in small media are not very visible and public, and they are not explicitly formulated and followed through as if they were part of a direct engagement with the state. While this directness and openness are commonly held as basic criteria for institutions and communication modes to 'count' as public sphere phenomena (Habermas 1989, Harbeson et al. 1994), I agree with Karlström (1999) that the more productive route is not to simply apply an objective-categorical conception of civil society or the public sphere to African contexts, but rather to focus on the context-specific emergence and existence of conceptual and institutional structures that do mediate state and society.

While it is extremely difficult to generalize for the whole of Africa, and across such a broad range of communication media (e.g., from the Internet to audio cassettes), I would claim that overall the new communicative spaces created by small media can be best understood as vital and pervasive undercurrents and reservoirs of political commentary, critique, and potential mobilization. In many cases, the communications that emanate from small media are in diffused dialogues, not direct dialogues, with the state. Sometimes these communications do make incursions into more public political arenas, with the effects of increased democratization or conflict. Sometimes they do not. Regardless of outcome (and the measurability thereof), it is vital to take small media as a crucial part of civil society and the public sphere, understood most broadly, as the arena where citizens and citizen-based associations discuss state authority, political accountability, and representation.

It is also important to recognize that small media are not always stable or localized in one territory—they operate in cyberspace, in virtual spaces, they sometimes extend outside of the nation, and their sources or authors are not always locatable. The new communicative spaces created by small media thus range across nation-states and across continents and in fact challenge the very notion that processes of civil society always occur within the physical boundaries of the nation-state.

Before turning to the specific cases "in" and "out of" Africa, it is useful first to lay out more explicitly some of the defining characteristics of small media, the kinds of communication modalities they draw from and intersect with, and how they differ from mass media.

Situating "Small Media" in Theory

Is there an opposite of the term "mass media"? Technically, the conventional definition of mass media has been formulated in contrast with the conventional definition of interpersonal media. Originally, the idea was that the media of mass communication differed dramatically from interpersonal modes of communication in terms of the scale and scope of production, distribution, and consumption (or reception). For mass communication media, we assume these have three principal characteristics:

- a. communication is produced for mass publics;
- b. communication is distributed for mass publics;

- c. communication is consumed by mass publics.

For interpersonal communication media on the other hand, we also assume three key opposing characteristics:

- a. communication is produced for interpersonal or individual consumption;
- b. communication is distributed in limited interpersonal channels;
- c. communication is consumed by limited publics, usually on interpersonal basis.

There is a range of communication media, however, that fall outside the confines of traditional mass mediated or interpersonally mediated communication. Examples include the use of political graffiti, leaflets, cartoons, underground cassettes, Web pages, Internet listservs, jokes, and other verbal genres of critique and commentary. In general, these discursive genres of communication are identified as small media, personal media, popular media, and community media.¹ What these media have in common, and what is most relevant for a consideration of communication and democratization in Africa, is that they function as alternatives to state-run media systems. As Sreberny-Mohammadi and Mohammadi say, “[W]hat has been crucial is a notion of these media as participatory, public phenomena, controlled neither by big states nor big corporations” (Sreberny-Mohammadi and Mohammadi, 1994:20).

As is the case with several other types of alternative media—for example, independent newspapers, community radio, and private radio—small media have political content and they have a potential emancipatory function. But what distinguishes small media from these other alternative media is the fact that small media do not use the same communication technologies as the dominant media. Following Sreberny-Mohammadi and Mohammadi (1994), one could argue that small media appropriately describes the qualitative differences between these forms of communication media and traditional mass communication media. One should not conflate small media, however, with the inference that they are relatively small scale or that they have small impacts.²

One should note, however, that small media present problems for the strict, rigid division between mass and interpersonal media, as they are usually a kind of hybrid of the two modes. Moreover, in

contrast with the linear, one-to-many model of transmission implied in the mass communication process, with small media, producers of messages are also often the consumers; receivers may act as distributors; and there may be multiple sites of (re)production and (re)distribution (table 8.1).

While small media do not use the same communication technologies as the dominant media (e.g., broadcasting, satellite, and photo-offset printing), many of them do employ new electronic technologies such as videocassette and audiocassette recorders, personal computers, telephones, and facsimile machines (table 8.2). As demonstrated by Sreberny-Mohammadi and Mohammadi's (1994) discussion of religious cassettes and leaflets in the Iranian revolution, small media may utilize new technologies, but they are actually most effective when they draw upon established communication networks (e.g., interpersonal networks in neighborhoods, the workplace, or religious spheres) and established genres of communication (e.g., existing oratorical traditions, song genres, and parodic styles). Because they occupy this intermediary position between “new” and “old” (or mass and interpersonal), small media are “reminders of the postmodern condition,” according to Fischer and Abedi (1990:338).³ They blend texts and graphics that derive from both local and transnational sources; and they engage the themes of tradition, modernity, and identity.

Small media are powerful means of establishing communicative space in repressive media environments, and they also function more generally as expressive devices in the formation of group identity, and community or subcultural solidarity (Spitulnik 1996). Small media have numerous types of uses and impacts, ranging from the critique of state power to the mobilization of political revolutions, and from playful humor to the carving out of creative pockets of dialogue and resistance. Furthermore, small media may be public and visible, in direct dialogue with agents of the state, or they may circulate more surreptitiously and invisibly, using less overt networks of communication to achieve their political goals.⁴

Because they fall across the entire spectrum of visible and invisible, small media pose a very serious challenge to the conventional understanding of the political public sphere as an *open domain* where individuals can collectively and openly discuss state authority and political accountability. For example, Habermas (1989) defines the

Table 8.1
Media Typologies and Their Properties

	Mass Media	Small Media	Interpersonal Media
Scale	mass scale - production - distribution - consumption	smaller scale - production - distribution - consumption	individual/ interpersonal scale - production - distribution - consumption
Mode	“modern” electronic and mechanized technologies and communication formats established and stable innovative within bounds	“postmodern”? a blend of new & old technologies and communication formats less established innovative sometimes transitory	“traditional” oral and non - mechanized technologies and communication formats established and stable often innovative
Direction	non-face-to-face primarily one-way flow vertical communication	<<- both ->> Multi-directional flow vertical & horizontal	Face-to-face Multi- directional flow Vertical & horizontal
Production Structure and Participant Structure	Producers are dis- tinct from consumers Receivers may act as distributors Minimal participation Centralized sites of production and distribution	Producers are also consumers Receivers may act as distributors Often participatory Multiple sites of production and distribution	Producers are distinct from consumers Receivers may act as distributors Minimal participation Centralized sites of production and distribution

Table 8.2
Alternative Media and Their Properties

	Use of conventional <i>mass media technologies</i>	Limited or no use of <i>mass media technologies</i>
Visible, public	Take over of state broadcasting institution	Mass protest, boycotts, strikes
In dialogue with agents of the state	Independent press private-run radio	Writing letters to politicians
		Small Media
		Posters
		Flyers
	Community Radio	Graffiti
		Independent videos
	Community newsletters	Web pages
		Facsimiles
		Internet listservs
		Cassette tapes
Less direct dialogue with agents of the state	Pirate (clandestine radio)	Jokes Parodic or cynical genres
		Radio trottoir
Less visible	‘Underground’ newspapers and magazines	Rumors

bourgeois public sphere as an openness (*Öffentlichkeit*) to political discussion that is a precondition for the ideal democratic society, one with popular participation. In repressive media environments, state media, for the most part, inhibit rather than foster any kind of bourgeois public sphere in this sense. But with the growing availability of small media technologies, however, individuals and groups are increasingly able to produce communications that engage, run up against, challenge, subvert, and even recast the forms and messages of these dominant media.

Small Media and Political Communication in Africa

In the early 1990s, there was a wave of democratic renewal in several African states, and a corresponding opening up of mass media to a limited extent. This democratic renewal has produced a flourishing independent press in several countries, including pluralism in radio ownership, allowing for the emergence of privately owned broadcast stations in a number of cases. Although these alternative independent media are increasing in numbers, they typically require large amounts of investments of capital and professional expertise. They also fall under the constant scrutiny of the state. As Joseph points out, most African states in this decade have practiced "liberal democracy as virtual democracy" (Joseph 1997). He argues that despite the constitutional declarations of democracy, there exists a continued insulation of decision-making from popular involvement and a continued restriction placed on the expression and discussion of oppositional viewpoints.

This does not mean, of course, that oppositional viewpoints do not exist or do not get debated elsewhere. Sometimes they thrive in communicative spaces "outside of" Africa. But even inside repressive media environments, absolute media hegemony does really not occur in a Frankfurt school type of scenario where passive audiences simply absorb dominant ideologies. People talk back to their TVs and radios, and they are constantly reworking and resisting media messages (Spitulnik 1996; also 2000). While Mbembe (1992) concludes that the culture of political critique in most African contexts is just a sign of passive coping with semi-authoritarian regimes, I argue that particularly in the case of small media, we see very active, dynamic modes of critique and mobilization that can serve multiple social and political functions. Using a range of sources, the

following discussion introduces several African examples, including one case from preliminary research on a Zambian listserv and another from a more extensive study of the circulation of media discourse in Zambia.

African Public Spheres in Cyberspace

The existence of the Internet—and especially the increased availability of inexpensive server links and affordable personal computers—has enabled a dramatic proliferation of completely new ways of communicating, networking, forming community, and maintaining diasporic identities (Jones 1995, Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1996, Turkle 1995). Gathering places for posting messages and having discussions about Africa have proliferated dramatically over the last few years, and take many different electronic forms such as email listservs (Ugandanet@bible.acu.edu; Kenya-net@AfricaOnline.com), Usenet groups (soc.culture.african; soc.culture.nigeria) and Web page guest books and chat forums. As with other forms of computer-mediated communication (CMC), the quality of communication and commitment of posters differs from site to site. Some sites are highly focused and tightly knit while others feature minimal reciprocal interaction and coherence (Baym 1995, Lotfalian 1996). Below I consider cases that fall into this former category (high commitment and coherence) with the aim of assessing their implications for the possible formation of public spheres in and through cyberspace.

A methodological note is in order, however, before turning to the data. The existence of the Internet gives rise to a challenging set of political and ethical issues involved in the documentation of small media. Small media, by their very nature, often have sensitive political content and therefore it is imperative for researchers to use circumspection to protect the identity of individuals. In writing the following, I have withheld some information as confidential or I have rendered it as anonymous when I have been asked by individuals to do so. In cases where this was not made explicit, I have made judgments about which material to remove or alter (e.g., by replacing definite identifiers with more general non-traceable descriptions). Such actions reflect the standard, universally accepted ethics of all social scientists. The difficulty in doing cyberspace research, however, is that the boundaries of "public" and "private" communication are often blurred. For example, how does a researcher treat in-

formation and conversations that may not have the status of published material? Is it ethical to quote the material without consulting the individual first? Such intellectual property and invasion of privacy issues are particularly problematic in documenting the postings of Internet listservs. I have made the decision here to keep all posters anonymous, to use direct quotes only from subject headings, and to provide brief paraphrases of discussions. There are no direct quotes from individual postings.

Electronic Mail Discussion Lists (Listservs)

African listservs on the Internet cover the spectrum from the very open Togo-L—which is run by a non-profit educational and service organization called the Friends of Togo, Inc.—to private listserv networks for which one must be specially cleared before gaining access. An example of the latter is a list for prisoners of conscience of a particular African ethnic group who found refuge in Western nations after a period of political repression in their own nation. As an Internet-mediated diasporic community, they use the list to discuss politics, exchange information, and keep in contact with friends and family. Members are extremely protective over access to the list and over the external relay of what has been discussed on the list. The Togo-L discussion list, by contrast, has open membership to all who wish to subscribe. Members include Togolese nationals, diplomats, aid workers, business people, and Peace Corps volunteers who have worked in Togo. The list functions more as a bulletin board for announcements, news, and information requests for people interested in things Togolese than as a forum for debating politically sensitive issues (Muehl 1997).

The Zambia-list falls somewhere between these two poles. Subscription is open, but the list is used primarily by Zambian nationals living abroad for political discussions and news exchange.⁵ Of the roughly 250 subscribers to the list, seventy individuals are regular weekly, if not daily, posters. The majority of regular posters are men, but there are a small number of regular women posters, a few of whom are very outspoken.⁶ 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. The list is run on the Mississippi State University server and well over 60 percent of the regular listers

are based in North American or British universities. Other posters are in universities in Japan, Belgium, and South Africa. Approximately 15 percent of the postings are from servers located outside of educational institutions (i.e., non-EDU servers such as “com,” “org,” and “net” servers). A very small number of the posters are in Zambia. Occasionally non-Zambians post on the list, and their postings sometimes generate a response or two, 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.

Like many listservs, Zambia-list functions as a bulletin board for information, addresses, and reconnecting (Zamnet 1997). 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*. But most of the postings, and certainly the most extended discussions, revolve around just a handful of topics: Zambia politics, the Zambian economy, soccer, Zambian identity, humor, and religion.

Indeed, the Zambia-list does function for many people as a forum to discuss the politics and economic policy, as well as the future of the nation. One of the most concrete products of Z-list debates took the form of a collective letter of protest that appeared in the *Post*, Zambia's leading independent newspaper. The letter was drafted and revised on the Z-list over a period of several weeks. Entitled “Special Report: A letter to President Chiluba from Zambians living abroad” (the *Post*, no. 340, Nov. 8, 1995), it is an extremely detailed declaration of “dismay and disappointment at the current state of affairs in Zambia.” Signed by forty different individuals, the letter carefully diagnoses the state of the nation—including inter-party violence, the nose-diving economy, and political corruption—and calls on President Chiluba to “curb the culture of political intolerance” and to “create moral standards for civil servants.” The letter concludes by reminding the president that he is accountable to the Zambian people. While the letter had little direct effect (its placement in the *Post* was poorly timed since it actually appeared when Chiluba was out of the country), it clearly demonstrates how political discussions in small media can be consolidated as a collective voice in a more visible mass media arena. Although not directly referenced, many of the themes raised in the letter subsequently recurred in the *Post* editorial columns, letters to the editor, and other “Special Reports,” and in that sense the letter joined a loud chorus of other voices in the independent press.

A more recent example of collective action by Z-listers is the thirty-five signatory letter to the editor of the *Post* on the severe deterioration of academic standards and academic freedom at the University of Zambia (UNZA) (the *Post* no. 757, June 30, 1997). Using the UNZA situation as a microcosm of "the current crisis in academia" across the nation, the authors of the letter elaborate several areas of concern (e.g., resource development, corruption, low morale, and staff retention) and "suggest policy initiatives that can correct that situation."

The Z-list case raises a whole host of questions regarding the gender, class, and expatriate dimensions of Internet usage, and the way that such factors may be related to the political impact of different electronic discussion lists. Like the posters to Z-list, most African Internet users are nationals living abroad. Living abroad, they occupy a fairly unique position of privilege (and often one of relative protection) in their use of small media for political ends. They form a special class of professionals and students who have access to computers and the Internet—which is extremely rare for those on the continent—and their political discussions are often quite open and unconstrained. One key question for future research is whether this particular combination of factors—out of country residence, computer access, and privileged class background—are necessary for collective critique to be viable, respected, and effective. The trend in Zambia is that, with such collective letter writing facilitated by the Internet, Zambians living abroad have been able to establish a much more active role for themselves in civil society—one which is increasingly publicly acknowledged and appreciated.⁷

These cases also highlight the need for more extensive research into the gender nature of small media use. For example, what accounts for the fact that Zambian men use the Z-list more than Zambian women? More Zambian men than women study and work abroad, and therefore have more computer access. But the predominantly male use of the Internet cannot be explained simply as a by-product of this demographic fact. Political, cultural, and linguistic factors need to be addressed as well. Several issues merit further research, for example: Are Zambian men more inclined to be interested in computer technologies? Or are they more attracted to Internet discussion lists because of their similarities to certain indigenous cultural and linguistic patterns, which differ from the communica-

tion modalities that Zambian women use for collective discussion?⁸ Politically oriented intellectuals in Zambia tend to be men and men are more likely to be viewed as legitimate speakers when it comes to matters of politics, but the national political arena is not an exclusively male dominated domain in Zambia.⁹

Such gender and class dimensions of African Internet usage have been studied extensively by Bastian in her research on Nigerian discussion groups. In a detailed historical discussion of the emergence of these groups, Bastian argues that they play a very important role in building community and "the virtual nation" (1996). In the early 1990s, the first major Nigerian group of Internet users formed on the MIT-based Naijanet.¹⁰ Bastian documents how Naijanet functions as a "national lifeline," linking up Nigerian immigrants who are often isolated and alone (1996:13). Characterized by frequent postings in in-group linguistic codes, for example, Nigerian English and pidgin, the list builds a kind of virtual nation as it fosters a strong sense of "responsibility and proprietorship" toward Nigeria and simultaneously contains all of the internal contradictions and divisions that exist in the real Nigeria (1996:13). Naijanet currently thrives with over 600 subscribers, and since its formation several other listservs and Usenet groups have branched off from it, including: Oduduwa (the Yoruba net), ANA-net, Naijawoman-net, soc.culture.nigeria, Rivnet (a net for people from Nigeria's Rivers State region), and Igbo-net.

The history of these various offshoots is itself a very revealing illustration of the divided nature of the Nigerian public sphere, as it often cleaves along gender, ethnic, regional, and political lines. For example, the more politicized ANA-net spun off from Naijanet in June 1993, shortly after the results of the recent Nigerian presidential elections were declared invalid. The political debate was becoming too heated for some Naijanetters, so ANA-net (part of the newly formed Association for Nigerian Activists [ANA]) was created as a forum "for people who wanted to discuss possible action against the military regime" (Bastian 1996:7). During a tense period of border disputes between Cameroon and Nigeria, ANA coordinated between ANA-netters, Naijanetters, and members of Camnet (the Cameroonian network) to compose a collective letter to the leaders of the two countries, appealing to them to work out a mutually acceptable diplomatic solution.¹¹ Analogous to the stories of the Zambia-listers' letters discussed above, this example shows how individuals and

groups can join together across cyberspace—and even across different email lists and across different nationalities—to use new media technologies for targeted political statements and actions.¹²

*The “Heavy Artillery” and the Combined Forces of Small Media*¹³

One of the most striking examples of political mobilization in cyberspace is without question the numerous Web pages supporting the interests of the Ogoni people in Nigeria (also referred to in chapter 5). Ogoni activists and supporters have used the Internet since early 1995 to protest the disastrous environmental and economic effects of Shell Oil drilling in the Ogoni region, to urge the boycotting of Shell Oil, and to denounce human rights abuses by the Nigerian government and by Shell. This use of the Internet in formulating an international appeal intensified dramatically after the Nigerian government’s November 1995 execution of nine Ogoni activists, including Ken Saro-Wiwa.

The various Ogoni-related Web sites exemplify two crucial processes that underlie many other highly political uses of small media: (1) a multi-sited circulation of small media across *different* media technologies and communicative spaces and (2) the important role of international organizations and/or international audiences in making small media communication more visible and effective.

In terms of this first process, much of what appears on these deeply moving and distressing Ogoni Web pages are elements from other small media such as protest rally leaflets, images from banners used in demonstrations, texts of speeches, and transcripts of interviews from independent videos. With this textual and iconographic intertextuality, the Web pages do not stand alone. Rather they join in, in a sense, with the combined forces of other small media such as leaflets, demonstration banners, videos, and Internet discussion lists.¹⁴ This intertextuality across different communication media, especially the recycling, repeating, and invocation of key media artifacts, is instrumental in the consolidation of communities and communicative spheres (Spitulnik 1996). The full effects of this multi-sited and multi-media appeal by and on behalf of Ogoni people is still in the process of being documented by others, including anthropologist Misty Bastian (2000).

Some of the Web pages employed by the Ogoni as discursive realms to further their cause include “Factsheet on the Ogoni

Struggle” which begins with an image of the Shell Oil Company logo dripping blood (Earthlife Africa 1997b). This detailed nine-page site documents the Ogoni struggle against Shell and the Nigerian government and includes lyrics from Ogoni protest songs. The site is linked to another Web page that tells the story of Saro-Wiwa’s execution, exposing many human rights abuses by Shell Nigeria (Earthlife Africa 1997a). Readers are urged to “BOYCOTT SHELL TODAY” and the same image of the Shell corporate logo with blood dripping over appears below the ominous slogan: “SHELL ON EARTH.” This image of the modified logo first appeared on a banner at a protest rally and “eventually gained very wide currency at other rallies around the world.”

Other sites include those of Robin Houston, a student at Wadham College, Oxford. For example, one site reproduces a leaflet that was circulated in protest rallies with the headline “Ken Saro-Wiwa: Murdered by Shell’s Silence” (Houston 1995a). Another details various protest actions targeting Shell Oil, such as demonstration marches, and letter writing and phone campaigns (Houston 1995b). The London-based Ogoni Freedom Campaign has put up “The Ogoni Freedom Site” which is linked to a calendar of different events in the United Kingdom marking the first anniversary of the executions (Ogoni Freedom Campaign 1996).

Besides Earthlife Africa, other Green organizations such as the Sierra Club and Greenpeace have pages supporting Ogoni causes and many of them involve direct collaboration with activists from the Movement for the Survival of the Ogoni People (MOSOP). For example, the Sierra Club has put up a MOSOP document with the four resolutions adopted at a recent meeting of the MOSOP-USA chapter (Sierra Club 1997). Another page, hosted by Greenpeace, features a transcript of an interview with Ken Saro-Wiwa’s brother Owens Wiwa, which appeared in a video made by Greenpeace and MOSOP members (Greenpeace 1995). Central to these processes of small media communication is the fact that international environmental organizations such as Earthlife Africa, Greenpeace, and the Sierra Club possess the technical resources to publish extensive web pages with detailed texts and graphics.¹⁵ Compared to other forms of small media such as Internet discussion lists, flyers, and graffiti, these sophisticated web pages require higher levels of capital investment and professional expertise in order to be realized. In addition,

the positioning of the publishers, both outside of Nigeria and as international organizations, lends greater degrees of recognition and protection to the voices that expose, oppose, and condemn the actions of Shell Oil and the Nigerian government in the Niger Delta. Ultimately these pages have different audiences as well. They are interlinked to the organizations' home pages and other sites on human rights and environmental issues in a multiple manner; they call for boycotting and demonstrations in major cities across North America and Europe. The communicative space that is constructed through these web sites is therefore a kind of hybrid that exists both inside and outside of Africa, with both African and non-African voices and interests.

Circulation of Audio Cassettes

In recent years, there has occurred a different kind of collaborative and collective mobilization in certain African contexts through the small media of audio cassettes. For example, audio cassettes of political opposition speeches, former political leaders, and subversive songs figured quite prominently in the growing "informal 'culture of defiance'" (Sabar-Friedman 1995:433) that emerged in Kenya in early 1990. Such audio tapes had multiple sites of reproduction and distribution, including street vendors and music stores, even after the government ban on their sale in mid 1990.¹⁶ Some of the most volatile of these tapes included reproductions of recordings of the early speeches of Kenya's first president Jomo Kenyatta. In urban areas, such cassettes found captive audiences in the form of *matatu* (private mini-bus) passengers. Drivers of *matatus*, the primary mode of public transportation in urban Kenya, played tapes of songs in the Kikuyu language such as: "Problems That Befell the Poor People of Muoroto," "Matiba's Tribulations," and "Who Killed Dr. Robert Ouko?" (Haugerud 1995:28-30, Sabar-Friedman 1995:433). The first song is about a very poor area of Nairobi where residents were violently evicted, houses bulldozed, kiosks demolished, and land seized for the overtly stated purpose of eradicating urban poverty. The second song honors Kenneth Matiba, a prominent businessman and former cabinet minister who was detained, along with colleague Charles Rubia, after a press conference where they demanded constitutional changes which would enable Kenya to become a multi-party state. And the third focuses on Kenya's for-

eign minister, known for his critiques of government corruption and mismanagement, who was mysteriously murdered after returning from a diplomatic visit to Washington, DC.¹⁷ Significantly, these songs accentuated themes that were being debated elsewhere throughout Kenya, and which formed the major platform for demands for government reform during this period: the various injustices and irregularities in government activities, people's rights for representation, the government's failure to address urban poverty, censorship, corruption, and violence.

As Haugerud writes, these songs became "crucial symbolic weapons in active struggles for political transformation" (1995:29). Significantly, many of the songs were in the Kikuyu language, and played into the intensifying ethnic dimension of the multiparty movement (Samper n.d.).¹⁸ But even after President Moi banned all informal street vending and the playing of any type of music in *matatu* vans, people found ways to dodge state scrutiny. For example, "some [*matatu*] drivers silenced the music while loading passengers, only to play it at high volume once on the road" (Haugerud 1995:30). Moreover, the cassettes continued to be played and reproduced in bars, shops, and private homes.

It is crucial here to recognize how the audio cassette *technology* itself enables this kind of popular and oppositional usage (Manuel 1993, Sreberny-Mohammadi 1990). The audio cassette is small and thus easy to transport and even conceal. It is relatively inexpensive to reproduce and it is inexpensive to power and play. And finally, it is oral, thus allowing the medium to be accessible to both literate and non-literate users. All of these features contrast greatly with the technological parameters of other small media such as personal computers and the Internet discussed above, which require both print and computer literacy, and a fairly high level of investment or a professional job allowing one to obtain computer access. The commonality, however, is that these small media are all—in Ganley's terms—technologies "over which an individual can exert control" (1992:xiii).

At the same time, however, it is important to note that while the technology is relatively new, the functions and even the contents of such audio tapes are not new at all. Songs, praise poems, and other media expressing political critique in African cultures date back to colonial and pre-colonial times, or the first democratization wave,

as Hyden and Okigbo refer to it in this volume (see for example Furniss and Gunner 1995, Vail and White 1991). In fact, the cultural and linguistic influences of such oral traditions on contemporary audio cassette song genres is most likely quite significant and deserves further investigation.

In Nigeria, the use of recording technologies for popular representation has developed mainly in the religious-political sphere. As Larkin reports, religious leaders' use of small media such as audio and video cassettes in northern Nigeria is crucial in the competition to build up constituencies. It also figures prominently in processes of political resistance and critique (Larkin 1996, Larkin p.c.). While radio and television programs with Qur'anic exegesis are pervasive in Nigeria, some Islamic leaders are excluded from speaking on the major media because their views challenge the state. Pro-Shiite preachers, for example, advocate the creation of a Nigerian Islamic state and are opposed to military rule. In this region, nearly all prominent religious leaders disseminate their teachings on audio and video cassettes, but the preachers with anti-state ideologies are the most dependent on small media because of their exclusion from the mainstream media.

The Re-Working of State Discourse

Our final illustration of small media in Africa demonstrates that critical and oppositional forms of communication do not always bypass dominant media; they also may directly use and rework material from mainstream media in processes of political (or politicized) expression.¹⁹ In the context of many African societies, one very striking feature of modern life is that people are continually seizing state discourse for both playful humor and political contestation. For example, state discourse such as the MMD party slogan in Zambia "The Hour Has Come!" is pungently reworked as "The Hour is Sour!" to express disillusionment over the ruling party's failure to do good on campaign promises. As discussed elsewhere (Spitulnik 1994), this recycling and reworking of public discourse is part of a very dynamic verbal culture of popular critique that operates on "the 'poaching' of meanings" (Mbembe 1992:8).

While the specifics of these verbal cultures differ from context to context—for example, they may have roots in different performance forms such as theater, song, joking, and oratory—the commonality

among them is that they deploy devices such as word play, word substitution, metaphorical extension, and altered intonations to produce political commentaries which are humorous, cynical, and even oppositional. In the form of slogans, jokes, rumors, and parodic phrases—what Triulzi calls "street buzz" (1996)—these dynamically circulating small media exemplify a fairly diffused, but extremely pervasive undercurrent of communication that functions as a key constitutive and integrating feature of the national community and the national public sphere (Spitulnik 1994, 1996).

One of the most common targets for critical redefinition and reworking are designations from state discourse or other dominant institutions (e.g., multinational or donor organizations) that denote important programs, places, or technologies. For example, in Zambia the World Bank's Structural Adjustment Program (SAP) is reinterpreted in ChiBemba and ChiNyanja as "*Satana Ali Paano*" ("Satan is here"). This is an extremely straightforward comment on what Zambians perceive to be the disastrous effects of economic restructuring. Along similar lines, the name of the large Zambian government trucks manufactured by the IFA company (of the former East Germany) has been rendered in new ways to reflect their dangerous effects. Because these vehicles are involved in so many fatal road accidents, the acronym is interpreted as designating "International Funeral Association," "International Funeral Ambassadors," or a very closely related word in ChiBemba, *imfwa* "death."

Words for places and events that are ordinarily held in high esteem or that would usually merit great circumspection over their use, are also appropriated as subtle commentaries and parodies on precisely the opposite: the absence of power and greatness. For example in the final days of Mobutu's Zaire, the newly printed currency (the 100,000 zaire note) was so undesirable as cash that the bills were called "prostates" after the cancer which had stricken President Mobutu (French 1997). In addition, the area in downtown Kinshasa where underground money-changers run their businesses is known as "Wall Street" (French 1997). While not a glamorous place, perhaps fortunes may be made there. In a similar vein, an area of Lusaka with extensive potholes in the roads is known, during the rainy season, as the "The Great Lakes Region" named after that region in central Africa. Those who are adept in maneuvering on such treacherous roads qualify for degree of Ph.D. ("Pot Hole

Dodging"). And unfortunately for Fisho Mwale, the current mayor of Lusaka who has otherwise done a lot to improve conditions in the capital city, some road signs have recently appeared with the graffiti "Fisho Pond" pointing to these water-filled holes.

Significantly, small media such as slogans, parodic phrases, and innovative acronyms derive from a common pool of highly accessible and visible public words; they are often not localizable since their circulation is multi-sited and their authors are multiple. As such they are one of the best examples of a highly participatory small media, one that constitutes an ongoing and often fairly low-grade "buzz" of commentary in the public sphere.

Some of the most far-reaching illustrations of this from the Zambian context are the various re-workings of the country's national motto, "One Zambia, One Nation," during President Kaunda's rule. Up until Chiluba defeated Kaunda in the 1991 presidential elections, this slogan was uttered on the national airwaves at least thirty times every day.²⁰ Like most national mottoes, the slogan "One Zambia, One Nation" emerged in the context of political struggle and contained within it the force of multiple speech acts, a force mobilized in varying contexts of use: as a nationalist rallying cry, a leader's promise, a national pronouncement, a designation uniquely identifying Zambia in the community of nation-states, and a national boast. During the final years of President Kaunda's government, however, many Zambians rejected both the national community emblemized by this motto and the role of "the public" proffered to them through state broadcasting (Spitulnik 2000). In part, the slogan's simplicity—just declaring a national unity—was its very undoing.

A different rendering of the national slogan proved to be extremely potent during the 1991 transition to a multi-party democracy. It also builds on the trope of number to make its point: "One Zambia, One Hour." The difference, however, is that it does not measure material conditions like the other phrases, but it quantifies the symbolic duration of the nation itself. Time is ticking away, and time is short.

The political countdown during this period was actually first heralded by another slogan, "The Hour Has Come," introduced in 1991 by the major opposition party, Movement for a Multiparty Democracy (MMD). As MMD gained momentum across the country during early 1991, some MMD sympathizers began to reformulate the "One Zambia, One Nation" slogan during government rallies. In

response to the opening calls of "One Zambia," they metonymically alluded to their own slogan by answering: "One Hour." "One Zambia, One Hour." The national motto was thus hijacked to challenge the durability of the state and to allude to the opposition party's threat: "The Hour Has Come." By telling the time, MMD supporters got two portentous slogans for the price of one. In this case, we see how a small media genre of reworking state slogans is elevated from the status of "a weapon of the weak" (Scott 1985) to the status of a weapon of the strong. That is to say, the popular genre of parodying and cannibalizing state discourse was exploited by an opposition party in the course of its successful bid to become the nation's ruling party.

Overall, the range of examples considered here illustrates how poaching and parodies of the tropes of the nation state are quite multi-faceted in their power and their functions. This material highlights the need for a careful rethinking of Mbembe's (1992) view that such phenomena are fairly parasitic and ineffectual. Mbembe argues that these parodies and burlesque hijackings of state discourse are part of the convivial relationship that subjects have with authoritarian regimes. On this account, such small media are not signs of resistance, but they are signs of the impotence of postcolonial subjects who are still captivated by and hungry for the majesty of the state. By contrast, scholars such as Banc and Dundes (1986) and Scott (1990) argue that parodies and jokes about political slogans and personalities are some of the most common forms of resistance in repressive environments. While the question of what is or is not resistance is extremely complicated (Comaroff and Comaroff 1991:31, Gal 1995, Ortner 1995:175), what is clear here is that the small media of recycled public words operate as an ongoing "buzz" of political commentary and entertainment. Their functions and effects are multiple. In some cases they express cynicism and apathy, and in some cases they open up further possibilities for public discussion and mobilization. They can be creative elements in processes of political transformation and they can be playful and humorous forms of critique. Functions and effects also vary according to contexts and users. For example, an expression functioning as a mildly humorous quip between friends can assume the character of biting satire—and grounds for dismissal—when aired on national television. And finally, such modes of critique have the potential to actu-

ally shift in import, for example when mainstream political actors co-opt their use and their meanings in bids for power.

Small media need not always have political functions, however. The term "small media" can be productively used to denote small, popularly utilized technologies that serve other expressive or educational functions as well, for example, in the form of pirated music videos or audio cassettes, independent videos, and fanzines (Jenkins 1992, Manuel 1993). One common issue which definitely merits further study for both these politicized and non-politicized cases, is the extent to which the production and circulation of small media draws upon pre-existing communication networks (e.g., neighborhood, kinship, ethnic, religious, or professional networks) and communication genres (e.g., oratorical styles, parodic sensibilities, or iconographic modes). Extrapolating from the cases considered here, and what we know about the hybridity of similar modes of expressive culture in contemporary societies (Appadurai 1990, Lull 1995), the probability is quite high that small media of all kinds will exhibit very strong influences from indigenous or local cultural forms as well as from transnational genres and idioms.

Conclusions

It is now time to return to our opening questions about the political and the communicative dimensions of small media. We have seen that small media play a significant role in mediating state-society relations and that they are an integral feature of civil society, particularly in contexts where explicit criticism of the state is extremely risky. In terms of the communication modalities that they draw from and intersect with, small media represent highly innovative blends of mass media and popular or interpersonal media. Many use print or electronic forms, but they also draw heavily upon established communication networks and indigenous communication genres. In all cases, small media do not operate in isolation of other communication forms, rather they exhibit significant intertextual relations with other media, forging a kind of communications overlay that is instrumental in the consolidation of communities and communicative spheres (Spitulnik 1996).

Small media in Africa join a much larger and rather vibrant culture of political critique that manifests itself in varying contexts and traditions across the entire continent (see for example Barber 1987,

Fabian 1990, Furniss and Gunner 1995, Vail and White 1991). In this regard, they are to a great degree nothing particularly new or unique. From the perspectives of both the ethnography of communication and the study of political culture, small media are new to the extent that they use *new media technologies* and circulate across *new populations, spaces, and locales* which may otherwise have minimal communication contact. The sociocultural processes exemplified by small media are nothing new, however. Throughout Africa, there are numerous sites of popular resistance, critique, and commentary that both precede (historically) and interact with small media, for example, the praise poem, popular theater, sculpture, and musical traditions.

Given that there are ongoing currents of political critique in diverse forms and contexts, one very critical issue arises for the study of contemporary African politics, namely: by what criteria do we assess the presence or absence of a communicative democracy in a given situation? Should we look only to the mainstream media, the independent press, and community radio for signs of open public debate, diverse political representation, and absence of censorship? Are these always the sole and legitimate arenas of the construction of civil society? In many cases these arenas are dominated by the literate, the urban, the elite, and the male. They are also strongly influenced by Eurocentric models of what counts as democracy, development, and freedom of speech. I would like to propose here that by turning more attention to the role of small media in political expression, critique, and mobilization, media studies scholars can actually carve out a new communicative space for the field, one which bridges the high-tech with the popular and which more accurately captures the multi-sited and multi-channeled nature of people's mediated lives in contemporary societies. Such a focus is especially relevant in societies, like those in Africa, where the threats of state repression to the mass media are still real and people are inclined to find alternative ways of expressing themselves. It is for this reason that such studies are also of direct interest to those studying democratization.

Notes

1. There is no particular disciplinary or theoretical consistency in the use of these various phrases. For example, the phrases "minor media" and "small media" are used interchangeably in the field of community health education. In international studies, "personal media" and "small media" are used in synonymous fashions. The key difference, however, is that in the international communication literature, these media are distinguished for their crucial political and often oppositional functions. By contrast, in the area of public health studies this is less often the case. Rather, the terms denote small-scale education outreach materials. For an excellent discussion of definitional issues, see Sreberny-Mohammadi and Mohammadi (1994). For specific discussions of "small media," see Santelli et al. (1995), Sreberny-Mohammadi (1990), and Sreberny-Mohammadi and Mohammadi (1994). On "minor media," see Fischer and Abedi (1990) and Preston et al. (1988-89). Regarding "personal media," see Ganley (1992) and Ingle (1986).
2. Other labels such as "minor media" and "personal media" share this drawback, and present even more problems because of their connotations of "insignificant" and "individual," respectively. It should be noted, however, that while the phrase "personal media" has its disadvantages, Ganley's definition of personal media is very much in accord with the definition of small media employed in this chapter. She writes that personal media are "media to which individuals and small groups have meaningful access and which they can use to acquire, create, store, and/or disseminate information" (Ganley 1992:xiii). In opposition to dominant media, they are technologies "over which an individual can exert control" (1992:xiii).
3. Fischer and Abedi explore post-revolutionary Iranian small media – e.g., "jokes, songs, tapes, leaflets, graffiti, posters, cartoons, insignia" and certain kinds of genres of verbal critique such as cynical commentary, jive, and aggressive humor – as "revealing indices of consciousness, world historical locus, and sociological positioning" (1990:339).
4. For an extensive treatment of these less visible forms of resistance and critique, see Scott's (1990) discussion of "hidden transcripts."
5. Data for the following discussion was collected over an eighteen-week period (February - June 1997) while I was a subscriber on the list. Two regular list users were also interviewed in person, and several Zambians living in country were interviewed via email and in person (during their visits to the U.S.).
6. Assessing the gender of Internet users is problematic for several reasons. Addresses and signatures do not always contain gender-specific personal names. Abbreviations and nicknames are frequent and often lack indicators of gender identity. Additionally, in computer mediated communication (CMC) people can "misrepresent" their identities. A further complication arises in studying African CMC in contexts where some personal names are not gender-specific. This is the case for numerous Zambian names. My conclusion that the Z-listers are primarily male is based on a name count of those names which are gender-specific, combined with an impressionistic assessment of posters' gender identity based on third person pronoun reference ("he" or "she") by other listers and the use of other gendered forms of reference and address (e.g., "my wife," "brother," "Madam," and "*bashikulu*" ["grandfather" in ChiBemba]).
7. Occasionally Zambian expatriate opinions are criticized as being out of touch or too arrogant. But the trend seems to be that this is less and less the case, because accelerated communication, multidirectional communication, and immediate access to the Zambian dailies – all afforded by the Internet—enable out-of-country Zambians to formulate responses that are extremely well-informed. It should also be noted that elites and intellectuals living outside-of-country have been instrumental in numerous other contexts of political resistance and critique, both in Africa and elsewhere (e.g., see Anderson 1991, Mudimbe 1992).
8. The literacy rates for men in Africa are higher than those for women, thus one might predict that there are corresponding gender differences in the use of small print media vs. small non-print media, but I believe it is inaccurate and misleading to draw simple gender dichotomies about small media use such as "men use the Web" while "women use radio trottoir or gossip." In addition, contrary to the received wisdom, lack of reading skills is *not* always an obstacle when it comes to getting the message from print media. Newspapers, leaflets, and graffiti are often read out loud to non-literate people, frequently in group settings particularly organized for that purpose (Sreberny-Mohammadi 1990).
9. This important issue of the gendered nature of the Zambian public sphere urgently demands research. Currently, one of the most visible and effective political commentators in the country is lawyer Lucy Sichone, chairperson of the Zambia Civic Education Association (ZCEA). Her most recent statements have denounced the loss of political accountability and the lack of a genuine civil society in the nation. In addition, the political impact of women's collective expression in Zambia, as in other African nations, has been great throughout history and it continues up to the present (see for example Hinfelaar 1994 and Tripp 1994).
10. This information and the details which follow derive from Bastian (1996).
11. While there has since been some mediation, border conflicts still trouble the region. Bastian reports (p.c.) that the main effect of the Cameroonian—Nigerian collective letter is that it alerted the Nigerian government to the electronic organization of expatriate Nigerians who were outspoken on political affairs. Since this time, there has been some concern over government plants participating in the Nigerian discussion lists.
12. Of course, not all communication in these small media forums moves into external domains, for example, where there is dialogue with the political leadership. Listserves exhibit a range of topics and goals as diverse as life itself. In addition, the collaborative work on these listserves is not always for political ends. For example, in the case of Igbo-net "people have supplied poems, proverbs and stories in Igbo and worked collectively on translations" (Bastian 1996:10).
13. The phrase "heavy artillery of small media" derives from Sreberny-Mohammadi (1990:357).
14. One of the most prominent and most chilling of the small media that circulated among Nigerian nationals in the U.K. and North America during this time were pirated video tape copies of the television program "The Drilling Fields" (shown on Channel 4 in London), which was later repackaged as "Delta Force" (shown on CBC, Canada). The television program documents the Ogoni people's struggles against the environmental and economic exploitation of their land, and the violent conflicts that they have had with the Nigerian state and Shell Oil. Significantly, the documentary also builds on other small media material, as it incorporates amateur Ogoni video footage made by Movement for the Survival of the Ogoni People (MOSOP) activists, including footage depicting "the outrage of Ogoni dead, left limbless and without proper burial" (Bastian in press). A website with a full transcript of the video can be found at Catma Films (1994). Similar to other situations where small media that are used for indigenous rights activism have a cross-cultural transnational circulation (Ginsburg 1993), an informally circulated tape of "Delta Force" is now circulating in Venezuela as a tool to educate people about environmental hazards (Cory Kratz p.c.).

15. The Greenpeace site, for example, has high resolution color photographs of the environmental destruction in the Niger Delta and audio accompaniments in real-time sound.
16. The material for this discussion derives from the sources cited as well as from media monitoring, personal experience, and conversations with Kenyans while I resided there for two months in February and June 1990. For an in-depth discussion of the circulation of these cassettes, their packaging, their song texts, and their effects see Samper (n.d.).
17. Dr. Robert Ouko's murder remains a mystery to this day. Many Kenyans believe that his death was linked to the government's fear of him as a popular Luo statesman who was being groomed by foreign powers to assume leadership.
18. It should be noted that the multiparty advocates Matiba and Rubia are Kikuyu and that the bulldozed slum of Muoroto was predominantly comprised of Kikuyu people from the same district that they are from. As several sources point out, the calls for political change were coming from diverse voices across the country, including church leaders of different ethnic backgrounds, but the greatest threat to the government was that of a possible Kikuyu-Luo alliance (Haugerud 1995:38ff; Sabar-Friedman 1995).
19. The data for this discussion derive from field research in Zambia (1988-1990), and from subsequent media research and interviews with Zambians (living in-country and abroad) from 1990 to the present. Field research was supported by Fulbright-Hays and NSF fellowships, and facilitated by the Institute for African Studies at the University of Zambia. My deepest thanks goes to these institutions and to the numerous Zambian media professionals, families, and individuals who have contributed to this research.
20. It was pronounced at the beginning of all the Zambian language newscasts, which run three times daily in seven different languages (a total of twenty-one newscasts), and also at the onset of the English language *Main News* (four times daily) and *News Summary* (five times daily).

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