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The Digital Village Square: Indigenous Political Communication in the Age of Artificial Intelligence

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Abstract

This paper examined how indigenous political communication changed with the rise of artificial intelligence, using the village square as a metaphor. Today, digital platforms like social media, live streamed town halls, and online forums act as the new "digital village squares," facilitating public debates and political conversations. However, these spaces are influenced by algorithms, data mining, and surveillance, which weaken the transparency and trust that are crucial to indigenous communication systems. This study, adopting Jurgen Habermas' Concept of Public Sphere, looked at the conflicts between communal reasoning and the data-driven logic of modern digital settings. It argued that AI-enhanced platforms offer promises of access, but also split audiences, commercialise user data, and hide accountability. The paper asserted that reclaiming the essence of the village square requires a process of digital decolonisation. It concluded that the credibility of the digital village square relies on its ability to maintain communal discussion, protect data dignity, and balance technological advancement with the moral values of African communication traditions.

Keywords: political communication, digital village square, artificial intelligence, indigenous political communication, and democratic participation

Introduction

Deliberations, consensus and politics should usually be characterised by participation. Several African cultures encourage such participations, and allow for a communal engagement in deciding how a society is run. This communality in indigenous politics and political communication brings to the fore, the metaphor of the "village square". Communities, for a long time, resolved and still resolve issues related to



politics and political outcomes. In doing this, they utilise local, indigenous media, some of which have now been formalised with the advent of technology.

Particularly, these societies employ their indigenous languages, verbal and non-verbal arts (Akporkherhe & Udi, 2022) in their communication of indigenous and non-indigenous political events as they unravel. By this, individuals, who are members of such communities, make sense of daily political events. Consequently, they are aware, armed with sufficient information, of the various choices before them, including according to Revalina et al. (2022), among the products offered, or proposed idea. Political choices are then made from a place of better judgment.

These processes, however, have now been integrated into the new media, including social media, blogs, live streamed town halls, vlogs and podcasts etc., which now informs the phenomenon of the digital village square. In a world that is increasingly experiencing a technology surge, concepts such as the digital village square do not appear strange. It is considered by Gao et al. (2025) as the application of informatisation, networking and digitisation in rural operations and designs. This concept, presupposes the infusion of technology in hitherto 'crude' activities of rural communities. Worthy of note, however, is that while rurality largely portends archaism, this phenomenon acknowledges an interface between indigenous and technological media in political communication.

The implication, therefore, is that the new media, through all of their offerings and unfettered possibilities, now function as the digital village squares, yielding themselves to a digitised process and form of 'tradition-rooted' and indigenous, culturally dependent activities. For the purposes of establishing a common ground, connection and visibility, indigenous political communication systems are combined with the tools offered by technology. This collaboration is, however, strange and averse to the submissions of Nnaemede (2018), who argues that African indigenous communication systems are left to ruins while modern communication systems continue to improve and advance. The author does not appear to concur with the submission of indigenous-new media interface.

The above notwithstanding, media productions or communication activities achieved with sophisticated technological tools, often bear elements of indigenous media and communication systems. Artificial intelligence, as is the rave of the moment, seem to also create a level of room for elements of these indigenous systems, allowing a feel of indigenous political communication despite fast-paced AI tools' adoption and usage. The issue, nevertheless, surfaces in the infiltration of algorithmic surveillance, data mining, and perceived political manipulation. Scholars in the quarters of Onebunne (2022) and Christiano (2022) worry that algorithms sustained by artificial intelligence preserve the tendency to impinge on electoral capabilities of individuals, possibly undermining the "deliberative potential of a democratic society" (p.109).

Hence, the burning question this raises is about the survival of indigenous principles of openness and trust within communication ecosystems controlled by artificial intelligence. The attributes of indigenous communication systems and process, which propel indigenous political communication, may not be sustainable given the biases of artificial intelligence, which largely depend only on the data used in training it. The process then loses nuance, suppresses several contents and accentuates others based on manipulated elements.

With this background in view, the overriding position that we detail in this paper, is that the contribution of artificial intelligence in the digital village square is fettered, and inhibits the quality of communication and its effectiveness of indigenous political communication. This paper, in the succeeding units, argues that change can occur; improvements can be obtained too.



Traditional Political Communication Practices

Supposedly marked by openness, traditional political communication, according to Josefsen and Skogerbø (2021), works differently in different places. In some places, the standing of an ethnic group, as either majority or a minority, influences its level of participation in political communication. The authors report that in the Nordic countries, a lack of recognition and oppression subsist in the participation of indigenous citizens and citizens of the ethnic majority. This suffices that despite the expectation of openness in the traditional political communication scene, recent practices have deviated from this norm, yielding to classism and similar characteristics.

Despite this, open debates continue to mark the traditional political communication space. Members of communities engage in an exchange of ideas, allowing a cross-fertilisation of individual opinions on issues of communal and community concerns. In this case, face-to-face communication, even if lightly mediated, largely allows for the free expression of opinions. Participants can refine or challenge the thoughts and opinions of one another. The result of this is the creation of richer, more inclusive perspectives as they pertain to political matters in the community.

Moreover, Mojaye and Lamidi (2015) consider crossbreeding of ideas an essential element in a communication system that works towards entrenching the principles of democracy. This further cements the promise that the presence of open debate holds for the success of traditional political communication practices, as it gives room for counter-narratives, which in turn makes for a more robust and vibrant conversation, a key to moving society forward.

The traditional political communication scenario is further characterised by participatory councils. Through participation, Schiller and Wet (2016) observe that it connotes people's involvement in development that involves their control. These councils are usually a fair representation of families and groups, without marginalisation or the seclusion of any. The results are generally acceptable outcomes; such participatory engagements yields an endearing and enduring political outcome. In addition, Abdulai et al. (2023) highlight that through such participatory councils, cultural constructs are retained in decision-making, which in turn promote information for rural development. Robert and White (2009) believe that participation made the system work well enough for British colonial administrators to reckon with. This is healthy for political communication, and remains a point where several African scholars disagree with frameworks and models that are largely reflective of the Global North.

Moreover, elders and mediators are also attributes of the traditional political communication system. Particularly, conflict resolution lay on their shoulders, and they were trusted to make rational decisions and judgements that reflect impartiality. Their work, Zhomartkyzy (2023) notes, provides a platform for dialogue in such a way that facilitates "balanced and sustainable solutions" (p. 222). The outcomes are not lopsided, and do not appear mysterious or defy human understanding, unlike several present-day court decisions turn out to be. It prevents the imposition of ideas from above and encourages a sense of ownership among participants.

The implication for indigenous political communication suffices several branches including the reinforcement of participatory traditions, preservation of social harmony and legitimacy, sustenance and transmission of cultural values and norms, sustainability through collective ownership, as well as adaptability in the modern era. The indigenous political communication system still holds promises for present-day practices, including in an AI-laden political communication scenario.

Mediation and Modernity as Bane of Traditional Political Communication Systems

While the traditional political communication systems benefitted communities in many ways, supposed improvements in communication brought mediation along with them. These modern systems such as



radio talk shows and social media town halls mostly put away direct and participatory feature of the indigenous systems, which allowed for face-to-face dialogue. Their systems, apart from being mediated, are top-down in nature. Despite the adoption of phone-in programmes and the perceived democratisation of communication availed by social media platforms (Barroso & Barroso, 2023), access remains asymmetrical. More power still lies in the hands of the sender.

The impersonal and abstract setting of mediated, modern systems – the studio and social media town halls – erode the communicative contexts of indigenous communication systems. From physical communal spaces to technologically mediated spaces, which impinges on the nuances of cultural environments where norms, language and customs define communication, with enriched meanings. The interface between the ‘old’ and new media has not necessarily solved this problem; much of the symbolic richness of the indigenous systems are diluted.

While the adaptability of traditional African communication cues (Wefwafwa, 2014) is not in doubt, their erosion is eminently obvious. Among many people are the use of westernised media of communication, which takes little to no account of existing indigenous systems, cultural contexts and nuances, and norms that define most African societies. While most scholars recommend blending both systems, Wefwafwa (2014) highlights that the African communication system have not been fully harnessed. In turn, this limits the possibilities that they could contribute to modern day communication.

Furthermore, while the indigenous systems thrive on collective ownership of messages and ideas, the modern media largely have institutional ownership, with a few persons – the journalist, broadcaster, and/or politician – determining what is said and how it is said. This impinges on media ownership and information flow, eroding the community ownership of messages, and transferring control to a smaller percentage of society. Additionally, contemporary media do not conform to the value of communal welfare and social harmony as indigenous political communication would, but are rather driven by visibility, influence, and persuasion.

With artificial intelligence, the issue is now more problematic than ever. The dynamics have replaced communal visibility. Artificial intelligence thrives on data training, most of which leaves it open for bias, incompleteness, lopsided responses, that obviate cultural nuances. While AI presents merits of speed and relative access, Hohenstein et al. (2023) observe that algorithms have modified languages and social relationships. These modifications are based on the limited data available to AI tools. Hence, AI is argued to lack human touch, which remains an essential element of human communication, further hampering indigenous political communication.

Scholars such as Nokulunga et al. (2025) decry the non-integration of indigenous knowledge with artificial intelligence. This further shows how the new systems ignore existing systems and channels of political communication. In essence, cultural relevance and inclusivity are relegated, making long-held interactions and community-developed systems irrelevant in the present scheme of things.

Modernity, therefore, despite its advantages, impinges on the quality of information available to even researchers, making it impossible to have access to holistic information, as available data only comprise limited resources, which are not all-encompassing. This cripples traditional political communication practices, as they cannot match up with the spate of artificial intelligence development.

Theoretical Framework

The Jurgen Habermas’ concept of the public sphere suffices for this study. The concept, according to Chukwuokolo and Jeko(2025, p. 3), advances the “promotion of fundamental human rights and political participation through public debate or public discussion”. Habermas’ contribution to public opinion is conceptualised as an ideal operation of society. However, the society does not seem to operate ideally.



The reality is a sharp contrast from the postulations of the concept of public sphere, which holds, according to Almuqren (2023), that in the description of the public sphere, dialogue is a constant feature from which opinions are generated to affirm or challenge the decisions of the state government.

That notwithstanding, the concept of the public sphere, in the context of our contribution, underscores the place of incorporating indigenous political communication nuances and practices in modern media and tools, such as artificial intelligence. By this theory, we argue that the development of artificial intelligence tools should integrate more nuances than they presently consider. The indigenous perspective, alongside the peculiarities of the modern tools, should have a prior place in their development.

Meanwhile, despite its Eurocentricism (Ibrahim, 2024), the public sphere concept is applicable to contemporary, local situations, the goal of the theory is to explain how public discourses are arrived at, thus, individuals from different places and backgrounds, contribute to conversations that form public opinion. It brings to the fore, the pursuit of an inclusive and decentralised participation in all communication processes. Thus, the development of tools that would, in any form, affect the complex process of sending signals from one point to the other, at any level, considers the germaneness of cultural, content-based and contextual realities.

The concept, according to Susen (2011), proposes the dependence of individuals on their environment, arguing that the environment influences socialisation process, hence the opinions they hold. The author further avers that individuals can assert their privacy only in relations to... the existence of other individuals. This provides, therefore, that as environment changes, including the media environment, which is now belied by artificial intelligence, individuals and communities should not be left out of contributing to agenda setting. This, if achieved, meets the public sphere's ideal of participatory democracy, albeit in media development. Media systems, therefore, should be community-oriented, all-encompassing and participatory, allowing individuals actively engage in development of tools and content that will shape not only their lives, but also the global village.

Digital Village Square vs Communal Village Square: Contrasting Traditional Transparency from Digital Opacity

Although human beings are subjective in their submissions and contributions to discourses, one of the hallmarks of face-to-face and other forms of traditional communication is transparency. The nuances of traditional communication are all laid bare before the participants in a communication situation. Thus, facial expressions, tone of voice, speed, and non-verbal situations can all be perceived. The phenomenon of the digital village, as it is presently shaped, erodes these contexts. Technical gatekeepers now biasedly exclude very relevant contexts that would rather enrich communication events and processes.

In light of the above, Chagas and Da-Costa (2023) argue that while digital options of communication are advantageous, they pose a limitation of opacity in political communication especially. According to the authors, while privacy is attained, misinformation circulates uncensored, unchecked and unhindered, following largely unchecked distribution of pieces of information across platforms. There are mainly no questions asked or checks put in place to balance the conditions of traditional communication. The process of digital platforms, while fast, is marred by opaque traditions, with the intent of the source largely unfathomed.

Arguing further on the opacity of digital media, Eede (2011) opines that our use of information and communication technologies is situated in a world. This world convenes not just the tool as a tool, but also with equipment and its totality. This raises issues with the blind side of these tools. Largely, not many people understand the usage of technological tools, despite the reported increase in their usage across the globe. They still lack the embrace of openness, participation, trust and transparency that



traditional media often provide, thus, they are skewed towards creating certain realities, consciously or unconsciously.

In a sharp and critical tone, Stohl et al. (2016) term as a paradox, the idea of transparency in the digital age. The authors opine that higher visibility, as often touted, does not equate transparency, not of an individual, nor an organisation. This also manifests in political communication. Behind the texts and videos are more gatekeeping than can be imagined. Unconsciously, the design of digital media propels the accentuation of certain aspects, stories, keywords, over others. The rendition of events are, therefore, opaque in many senses, leaving many questions unanswered.

When media corporations and political actors embark on public engagement, especially via digital platforms, they inadvertently exploit audience data. The American government has on several occasions, sanctioned large media corporations for ‘mismanaging’ users’ data. The issue, usually, is that the extent of this mismanagement is unknown. The convergence of different media formats in the age of the digital village yields to uncontrolled and unrestrained letting of individual information, which are used to shape conversations on these platforms, leaving out other instances that could enhance each communication Engagement. While Papathanassopoulos and Giannouli (2025) submit that the digital media allows for a more horizontal and decentralised form of interaction, especially as regards political communication, communication theories such as the Spiral of Silence, indicate the possible erasure of nuances that could shape the conversations better and more transparently. When, according to the theory, individuals for fear of being seen differently, succumb to mass idea or opinion, we lose the transparent evidence that could have been present in more traditional contexts, either via non-verbal cues such as facial expression and body movement, or by vocalised reactions.

In the age of artificial intelligence, targeting becomes skewed, biased, and incomprehensive. Mergen et al. (2024) observe that these machine models simply reinforce societal biases. Worse is that these machine regurgitations lack empathy, “innate human capacity for ethical reasoning” (p. 1), as it runs on encoded data, thus, it denies the inclusion of other contexts that are not fed to the machines. It also goes against the obtainment of truth, ethics and accountability that indigenous communication offers in community-based, traditional political scenarios.

The overarching argument in this contrast is an acceptance of humans’ subjectivity, in addition to the higher chances of obtaining environmental conditions that makes communication better understood in a traditional communication setting. This makes for transparency. However, it is not the case when considered within the context of digital media. Transparency is rather lost in many ways, given that behind the keypads of phones and computers are unspoken and unknown nuances that could unmask further contexts about the conditions of the source of a message, which more or less, influences how a message is understood.

The Interface: Call for “Digital Decolonisation” of Communicative Spaces

The implication of our submissions is a call to decolonise the digital communicative spaces. In essence, producers and users of digital spaces, wherein the village is now converged, have to work beyond merely operating on the speed lane of technology, but also consider accuracy, empathy, and other issues that would enhance digital media governance. Particularly, there is need to integrate the indigenous principles of accountability, inclusivity, open debate, collective wisdom, etc. in the operation of these tools, especially, with regard to political communication.

For Chauhan and Kumar (2025), an overdependence on ‘corporate controlled social media’ has yielded a high possibility of data manipulation and algorithmic suppression, among other ills. Thus, they suggested alternative platforms. However, we reckon that while alternative platforms that emanate from indigenous communities may be useful in containing some of these issues, their implementation does not obviate the



instances biases and suppression concomitant with western-developed tools. Hence, the need to review artificial intelligence-based and other digital tools and platforms for more inclusivity.

In the pursuit of this, Wanjiku and Palino (2023) opine that the process must begin with the affected communities themselves. We agree to this, and add that it should first begin with the awareness that the digital space is laden with data from the west, and only a minute fraction emanate from indigenous communities. Therefore, indigenous communities must first admit this deficiency and consciously increase their contribution to the data with which the digital platforms are trained. They must contribute to designing the algorithms to ensure they are not simply skewed or biased towards a particular opinion.

In agreement to the above, Zhang (2025) submits that practices such as community-driven algorithm auditing, participatory design approaches, and transnational digital solidarity networks will contribute to resisting the endemic bias usually experienced with digital platforms. We believe that this will in turn, improve the contexts of AI-driven political communication, as it would embrace the local realities, as well as the values that guide indigenous communication across endeavours, politics inclusive.

Our call includes a national transformation in the handling of data, especially for African communities. Data should be made available and accessible on digital platforms. The availability of these data, we believe, contributes to a near holistic training of artificial intelligence platforms, improving the scope of its nuances and generating responses for both researchers and other forms of users. Moreover, for media practitioners at all levels, ethical codes that are motivated by indigenous practices should be designed. This technically aligns professional practices in a way that they ‘naturally’ provide data in structures that integrate the indigenous means and contexts of communication.

Method

This paper adopted the desktop research method, with data collected from textbooks, journals, and documents. The majority of studies and publications cited in this paper are not more than ten years, except for a few that proved very important in buttressing the arguments advanced in the paper. Data were gathered from already existing information, and the authors did not collect or analyse any primary data.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The digital village square has the potential of attracting and sustaining legitimacy, but this is only possible if it integrates, updates, sustains and preserves communal rationality. Furthermore, the safeguard of citizens’ data, among other things, supplies the oxygen needed for all-encompassing digital revolution that takes into account indigenous realities. Political communication in the AI age will be more or less an inclusive endeavour.

In addition, as we have argued and submitted, a fusion of technological advancements, including artificial intelligence and other emerging media, with indigenous communication ethos, will set the tone for a long-lasting and enduring digital platform use for political communication across board – political actors, media, and the citizens, as they alternate within the communication cycle, and contribute to setting agenda.

Consequently, our recommendation follows that designers of artificial intelligence tools that are amenable to political communication should have a holistic consideration of users and the possibility of such tools to influence communication. Furthermore, indigenous knowledge should be in view while making decisions for the components and content of an AI tool, especially the large language models (LLMs).

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