

BOOK REVIEW

Title: *Fundamentals of Communication Research in Africa: A Contemporary View*

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We should write not for ourselves but for our readers. Many scientists would do well to heed this advice. A clear and understandable manuscript is more likely not only to draw citations but also to be accepted for publication at the first instance (Araka, p.521). But communication outside of academia can be difficult and perplexing due to the sheer number of options available. So where should the researcher in Africa who wants to get their message 'out there' begin?

Fundamentals of Communication Research in Africa: A Contemporary View engages with the complex and dynamic landscape in contemporary Africa by exploring the various relationships between foundations of research, its essentials, processes, and guidelines on writing techniques. This scholarly primer by Jeremire Araka is a template of the basic handbook of do's and don'ts of social science research in Africa. The reader provides a deeper explanation of the foundations of communication research, technoculture and ethics. It deals with the issues of cultural policy, localism and globalisation, and globalization, a perfect indigenous African media and communication text. A common theme running through all the contributions to *Fundamentals of Communication Research in Africa* is the debate regarding forms of social science research much more congruent with the local African cultural, socio-political and philosophical traditions.

The author draws from continental philosophers, Kenyan Joseph Nyasani who distinguishes African philosophy from the Western philosophical systems because Africa is intensely communocratic, and Congolese Tshiamalenga Ntumba who identifies with the wider ontological significance of the Ego 'I' in the light of the "other-ness". He also taps from Malawian Thomas Msusa's African worldview is living as one family. 'I am because we are', or in local dialect kiChichewa "*kali kokhankanyama, tiliawirintiwanthu*" (when you are on your own you are as good as an animal of the wild; when there are two of you, you form a community) (freireproject.org, 2008).

The author contends that this book has been written "with a particular audience in mind – those lone researchers in the African wilderness who are specifically seeking African answers to African questions in the African perspective by conducting small-scale—as well as large-scale—research. This text sets out to explore the principles of constructing research projects, the ethical and political issues in the design and conduct of the research process, and the relationship between qualitative and quantitative methods" (p.v). This is an assessment with which I agree, as Araka has written a text that is extremely easy to read and therefore accessible to both non-academics and academics across the arts, humanities, social and natural sciences.

Araka also makes a persuasive case for the view that it is possible to present research to a lay audience which does not distort the complexity and nuance of scholarly endeavour. His key message is therefore an optimistic one: academics can maintain high standards whilst at the same time recognising the diverse needs of an often very plural

audience. However, he notes that “obtaining evidence relevant to the research problem broadly entails specifying the type of evidence sought to test a theory, to evaluate a program, or to accurately describe a phenomenon.

We can often begin our investigations far too early, before we have thought critically about what information is required to answer our research questions. Without addressing these issues early, the conclusions drawn risk being weak and unconvincing’ (p.286). The use of the word ‘*contemporary*’ in the book’s title reassures those readers who may be under the impression that research communication involves the use of an invariable and universally applicable set of procedures that metastasized in time. On the contrary, Araka’s reservations about metrics, together with their injunction those readers should appreciate “Thus, it would not be possible to choose a best interpretation from among the many available, because no technique or interpretation is ‘epistemologically privileged” (p.279).

Professor Araka offers an in-depth and insightful preview of adoption and adaption, drawing on more than his four decades in the academia across Africa to explore how African culture takes on different meanings in different regional contexts. He captures this in the preface when he states that “. . . This came as somewhat of an intellectual shock because most, if not all, of the books I had read, including postmodern ethnographies (i.e., those that emphasise reflexivity, subjectivity, and the impossibility of objectivity, and reject cutting a culture up into subsystems), had offered relatively coherent and homogeneous renderings of culture” (p.v).

Therefore, this book and the approach it advocates would be useful and informative for scholars and practitioners from a variety of disciplines. The author has organised the book into four main parts. He succeeds in covering all the bases: from the process of making scientific claims, to argument and research methods, to procedures of collecting data and to final research report writing with everything in between elaborately and expertly presented.

Part 1 explores the foundations of research. The three chapters discuss the forming of argument, methods of knowing, and philosophical perspectives of the three paradigms.

He contends, of course, that rules for what qualifies as scientific data, methods, categories and theories are subject to change, i.e., the discussions and critiques that trigger such change are a basic task of scholarship. The four chapters of Part 2 delve into the essentials of research. This section introduces the reader to communication across the different cultures, the conduct of communication research, and approaches to systematic communication research.

It’s Araka’s argument that a moment’s reflection should show that *of course* there are other ways of knowing—depending on what exactly our context of ‘ways’ and ‘knowing’ is. It is on this account that the author casts his philosophical position from what are known as ontology and epistemology, both of which are concerned with knowledge and the way we develop knowledge. Ontology is concerned with articulating the nature and structure of the world while epistemology is concerned with questions about the *way that we learn*—the approaches we use to gain knowledge, hence, the *validity of the knowledge* (Yair& Weber, 1993, 220).

From the African perspective, this questions whether the highly Anglo-American libertarian ethic—individualistic, combative, appealing to empirical objectivity as a ground of consensus—is the best journalism for the development of African societies.

This reflects the tensions between the tendencies of globalisation, localism and glocalisation.

Part 3 of eight chapters is discourses the basic processes of communication research, i.e., research approaches, exploration models, choosing research designs, procedures for collecting and analysing data as well as research ethics, and using simple statistics. He explicitly suggests that the practice of research involves much more than philosophical assumptions which must be combined with broad approaches to research and implemented with specific methods. Therefore, research designs are plans and the procedures for research that span the decisions from broad assumptions to detailed methods of data collection and analysis. Accordingly, a framework is needed that combines the elements of philosophical ideas, strategies, and methods into the three approaches to research.

Focusing primarily on locally-based initiatives, Araka presents a compelling picture of how culture (philosophy) interacts with statistics, glocalisation, and development to create a technocultural regime that is uniquely African. He thus, provides a framework for understanding practice, discourse, and implementation in global contexts. He asserts that a proposal is the intellectual scholastic contract between a researcher and intended readers. The author's position is that a research proposal's developer needs to consider three framework elements: philosophical assumptions about what constitutes knowledge claims; broad procedures of research called strategies of inquiry and detailed procedures of data collection, analysis, and writing—called methods.

The last part comprises three chapters, in which he maintains that an academic research report is a genre of writing that emphasises the combination of personal insights and secondary material gathered through focused research and investigation of a particular topic. It is a culmination and final product of an involved process of research, critical thinking, source evaluation, organisation, and composition, i.e., the essence of a research paper is to combine primary and secondary information, guided by a provable claim, to arrive at an or enlightened conclusion. This section provides guidelines on writing techniques, generating a research proposal, and, compiling a research report. The reader has an extensive glossary of English, Latin and French terms commonly used in research methods, the media and journalism, statistics, management, business terms, as well as a bibliography. Throughout the book, the author provides a compelling rationale for this technocultural approach to conducting continental-level research initiatives.

The book successfully blends the theoretical with the practical. It is for this stylistic reason, as well as for the interesting, relevant content, that *Fundamentals of Communication Research in Africa: A Contemporary View* should be read by anyone with an interest in research. This is an excellent book that can be read from cover to cover or used as a reference text. For most studies, he says, "proper research reports follow established guidelines and standard formats. Finally, Jeremire has successfully endeavoured to present *Fundamentals of Communication Research in Africa* in short paragraphs, crisp sentences, copious white space, extensive spread of side bars and relatively liberal use of colour. This has rendered the 750-page volume effortlessly readable and readily understood.