



GENDER AND CULTURAL STUDIES IN
AFRICA AND THE DIASPORA

Television in Africa in the Digital Age

Edited by
Gilbert Motsaathebe
Sarah H. Chiumbu

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Gender and Cultural Studies in Africa
and the Diaspora

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Gilbert Motsaathebe · Sarah H. Chiumbu
Editors

Television in Africa in the Digital Age

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Gender and Cultural Studies in Africa and the Diaspora

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PRAISE FOR *TELEVISION IN AFRICA* IN THE *DIGITAL AGE*

“This book, as an attempt to bring together a multifarious discourse on 21st century television industry by exploring the digital milieu in the context of the medium in Africa is long overdue. The collection, by addressing the themes of disjunctures, continuities and prospects has made a very bold attempt at illuminating issues around digitization and convergence in African television, the dual role of audience as ‘producers’, the continuous centrality of television as infotainment medium among others, and by so-doing, re-awakened the debate about consumer sovereignty in the context of history and a new technology-driven policy environment. The variety and depth of the chapters make it a compelling reading for University students, Television practitioners and scholars interested in contemporary developments surrounding African television.”

—Professor Muhammed Musa, *Department of Media and Creative Industries, United Arab Emirates University, Al Ain*

“It is not unusual to see scholars from outside the African continent regarding themselves as ‘experts’ on African issues, whether cultural, political, economic or social. This book is a welcome effort in that it presents

us with critical reflections on an important medium – television in Africa – by African scholars.”

—Professor Simphiwe Sesanti, *Faculty of Education, University of the Western Cape (UWC) and Editor of the International Journal of African Renaissance Studies (IJARS)*

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Navigating the Digital Milieu in the Context of Television in Africa: A Synchronic Appraisal of the Disjunctures, Continuities and Prospects

Gilbert Motsaathebe and Sarah H. Chiumbu

INTRODUCTION

Television as a medium has been widely studied. Most studies focus on television effects, representation and television journalism (Sevareid 1991; Phillis 1997; Motsaathebe 2011; Cushion 2012). While there are studies that look at television in the current technological environment, most of these studies focus on the European and American contexts, unlike this book which focuses on television in Africa in the digital age. Since

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its invention, television has been hailed as a medium that offers audiences a range of benefits that other media could not provide. As an audio-visual medium that appeals to sight, aural and emotions, television has become a useful medium for journalism, entertainment, sports and educational content. The credibility of television was, in particular, enhanced by the fact that viewers could see and hear about the events being reported or depicted on television. Hence television is considered an emotive medium because of its visual appeal which makes viewers feel that they are part of the happenings that they see on their screens. A transition from black and white television to colour television in the 1950s, coupled with programming that appeals to mass audiences, considerably enhanced viewing pleasure.

The introduction of serialised programmes such as soap operas on television significantly boosted ratings. The fascination with television was further bolstered by the advancement in technology that made it possible for television journalists, for example, to report events live as they unfolded from the scene. According to Stephens (2000) “Television’s coverage of the assassination of President Kennedy on Nov. 22, 1963, and of the events that followed, provided further evidence of the medium’s power” (p. 5). Cable News Network (CNN) is perhaps the best-known channel which popularised live television reporting. Its live reporting of the Gulf War in 1991 presented a complete revolution in modern television journalism. Viewers could witness the war as it was being fought in the battlefield, from the comfort of their living rooms. That novelty instantly made television an up-to-the-minute medium offering the kind of content, which was too difficult to discredit (Stephens 2000).

Initially, television was not as portable a medium as other media and therefore presented a challenge of not being convenient; hence it remained a household medium. However, technological innovations rescued the medium from this challenge—and today, television too can now be accessed on portable devices such as cell phones. However, accessibility remains a problem in the least developed countries such as those in the African continent with a lack of infrastructure. Yet television continues to be a major source of information, entertainment and a means of relaxation (Nwulu et al. 2010: 1).

Television has had its fair share of criticism. It has been accused of reinforcing stereotypes, promoting violence and labelled a sexist medium (Gunter 1986; Motsaathebe 2009). Some have blamed it for invading their space while others have accused it of having derailed the culture of

reading (Van der Voort 1991). On the other hand, there is a general understanding that if used properly, television can help build society, promote peace and democracy and help eradicate stereotypes and prejudices (Promundo 2016). However, television, like other forms of media, is by itself an inanimate tool, and if anything, the problem should lie squarely with television practitioners who manipulate it. Hence the need for a book such as this one which underscores the importance for television operators to understand this powerful medium so as to use it appropriately to empower billions of people who tune in on a daily basis. It is even more important to understand how television navigates the digital environment in which Internet-based platforms including social media seem to dominate information dissemination and leisure time activities. This is necessary as there is a dearth of scholarship that examines television medium in developing countries such as those in Africa, Asia and elsewhere, in the current digital environment. Therefore by focusing on television in Africa, this book provides insights into its potency and efficacy in the current environment in the context of Africa.

THE CURRENT DIGITAL ENVIRONMENT

Television is operating in a precarious environment characterised by the onslaught of multiple media platforms and digitization of content (Banerjee and Seneviratne 2005). In this new media eco-system, the availability of content on Internet platforms, the rise of on-demand content, streaming and pay per view services continue to transform viewing habits of the television audience, forcing many television stations into an adapt-or-perish mode. For example, subscription-based video on demand (SVOD) streaming services such as Netflix and Showmax, in particular, are becoming very popular in Africa. In this broadcasting landscape, television worldwide has seen a marked increase in the fragmentation of its audience and what some classify as the shrinkage of the television audience. This has complicated the television business concerning content generation, programming and scheduling, as television stations have to find innovative ways to adapt to this changing environment which complicates traditional television programming. This is so because as information becomes increasingly available via online television audience cannot be guaranteed for specific schedules. This means that television stations now have to find ways to compete with these new platforms for audiences.

The television industry is also being characterised by a mandatory digital migration from analogue delivery. All these developments are taking place in a policy environment which means that policies and regulations governing television broadcasting also need to be looked at afresh to ensure that policies support democratic principles in broadcasting while at the same time blocking harmful content, like hate speech, from being distributed through digital platforms. While some have expressed concern regarding the future of television, others believe it will simply adapt and will continue to gain momentum and flourish again. What is clear, however, is that television as we know it will no longer be the same. As such, there is a need to focus on current issues relating to media convergence in the study of television focusing on its current form, challenges and future trends, particularly concerning countries in Africa.

TELEVISION IN AFRICA

Television has been around for many years in Africa and remains one of the most trusted sources of news in addition to providing entertainment and education (Nwulu et al. 2010). Nigeria is credited as the first country to introduce television broadcasting on October 31, 1959 (Nwulu et al. 2010: 1). Rhodesia (present-day Zimbabwe) launched television in 1960, making it the second country after Nigeria to launch such services in the sub-Saharan Africa. The 1960s and 70s saw the establishment of television in many African countries although more than half of the continent was still without television until the 1980s or 1990s (Bevan 2008). Because of its power to reach many people and its visual capacity, television was controlled by the colonial and then the post-colonial state. When African states became independent, television was often used to entrench the new African governments. Between 1960 and the 1980s, Africa television stations were mainly government-controlled, with very little input from the private sector (Bevan 2008). It was only after the liberalisation and deregulation of airwaves in the 1990s that private television stations emerged in Africa (see Moyo 2006; Kupe 2003).

Today, Africa boasts a rich television culture. According to figures from Dataxis (2019), among the 215 million households in the sub-Saharan African region, around 102 million had access to television in 2018. Also, as smartphone ownership and Internet penetration has improved, television broadcasters are increasingly reaching new audiences via online distribution platforms such as YouTube (Thomas 2019). Despite this

high penetration, television still has a long way to go before it can fully become available to all sub-Saharan African homes (“Slow progress for TV” 2019). The price of television sets and lack of electricity in many rural and peri-urban areas means that they are some Africans who cannot enjoy television as the medium is still not available to all Africans. Despite this, television remains one of the most important medium worldwide for disseminating information and providing entertainment (Nwulu et al. 2010).

Initially, television programming was dominated by foreign content which was much cheaper than producing local content but that changed as many African countries invested in the production of domestic programming. Local content was also enforced by licensing condition that required broadcasters to meet local content quotas. There were also problems related to funding, management, political interference, scarcity of spectrum and poor reception in isolated rural areas (see Currie 1991; Cushion 2012; Phillis 1997). Examination of these issues are tackled through the four themes that frame this book, namely disjunctures, continuities, prospects, and regulation and policy.

DISJUNCTURES

The theme of disjunctures speaks to new developments that debilitate old practices. We define disjunctures as massive shifts that change the usual way of doing things and long-standing traditions. With new technology and new formats, it means the medium of television must adapt and shed aspects that have characterised it for years. Features of disjunctures are: change in scheduling and programming, increased availability of content in multiple platforms, the ability of the audience to produce and share content, the decreasing role of mainstream media as agenda setters and information gatekeepers, the shared power of audiences and providers in terms of being able to choose what to watch, how to watch it and what time to watch it. One implication that stems from such disjunctures influences the way the audience consume media content (Wilding et al. 2018). This change has challenged the asymmetrical way in which television broadcasters produced content and dispersed to the audience who were easily targeted and had little access of their own to a mass audience as the equipment and infrastructure to produce television content for mass consumption were the preserve of big television corporations. In the present moment, media content can be produced and distributed by

individuals through digital devices, and this activity can occur anywhere, not limited by country or region.

The disjunctures in the book include new ways of content consumption and this is discussed in-depth by Lindiwe Dovey in chapter “[Entertaining Africans: Creative Innovation in the \(Internet\) Television Space](#)” in which she deliberates on how audiences in Africa and diaspora engage with Internet television and video on demand (VOD) content. Based in the United Kingdom, Dovey describes the landscape of Internet television in Africa and brings an insightful diasporic perspective on the consumption of African television content on the Internet. She finds that “there is a stark difference between the content and viewing experiences that people have access to outside Africa through SVODs, and the ‘supersmall screen viewing’ and short-form content that characterises internet television for the majority of Africans on the continent”.

The second disjuncture concerning content consumption via VOD relates to the proliferation of the American-based television streaming service Netflix. Here Collen Chamberwa (chapter “[Understanding Netflix’s Foray into Original Productions in South Africa: A “Jet Plane” and “Helicopter” View](#)”) based in South Africa explores the (dis)advantages that Netflix as transnational television has on local television stations and their content with specific reference to South Africa. This chapter starts by providing an overview of television stations in South Africa and the nature of competition among these stations before the arrival of Netflix. The chapter argues that although Netflix does not pose immediate threat to free to air television stations, it poses serious threat Multichoice, which is one Africa’s leading multichannel television service provider. The chapter also explores the implications of Netflix’s inroads into local productions, for policy and local television industry.

Then Susan Stos (chapter “[Digital Disruption in South African Television News](#)”) from South Africa focuses on digital disruption in television news and points out that the digital penetration rate in the African continent is less than half of that of North America. She argues that younger generations no longer watch television news and ultimately speculates on how to teach television journalism for the digital age in the African media environment. Lastly on this section, Segun Ige (chapter “[Culturally Reconfigured: Assimilating *Oedipus Rex* into the Yoruba Mythical Universe Through Television Adaptation Processes](#)”) brings another perspective from the African diaspora (USA) showing,

among others, how streaming platforms are becoming viable distribution vehicles which assist in solving the problem of access to African television productions for entertainment and research purposes. This is an important disjuncture as the problem of access to African television content overseas has long been an issue.

CONTINUITIES

The theme of continuities in the context of this book refers to those aspects of television that have endured and continue to thrive in the digital media environment. The main features of continuities that are examined in this book are appetite for good high quality content; the role of television content in providing information, education, mobilisation and entertainment; television aesthetics; continued exclusion of certain audiences that have characterised the television medium especially as far as subscription is concerned. Those people who have been enjoying a variety of television content are those that have been able to afford a monthly subscription and other television services that are commercialised. The majority of the citizens have relied mainly on free to air television services for their television content. With the increased commercialisation of broadcast content through streaming and pay per view services, the poor will likely continue to be excluded.

In this section of the book, Allen Munoriyarwa and Stanley Karombo (chapter “[Strike Fear in the Heart of the White Men](#)”. [Hate Language on Digital Television: The Case of ZBC Television Online News](#)’) provide insights on the enduring hate discourses on Zimbabwe’s online television news. The authors propose measures that can be adopted to alleviate hate rhetoric in public broadcasting—particularly in the period leading up to national elections. Sisanda Nkoala (chapter “[Persuasion Across Platforms: A Rhetorical Analysis of Televised and Digitised News Reports on Economic Matters](#)”) writes from South Africa and focuses on the rhetoric of economic news as depicted in television news bulletins in South Africa. She observes that the news she studied rely on numbers to persuade the viewers about the accuracy of the information reported and use metaphors to evoke emotions. This is an important aspect of continuities as television itself is an emotive medium (Knight 1995). Then, Gilbert Motsaathebe and Sarah Chiumbu (chapter “[Exodus, Access and Inequalities: The Impact of Digital Migration in the Least Developed Countries of Africa](#)”) advance the discussion on digital migration by looking at the

anticipated benefits and implications of continued lack of access in poorer African countries. They point out that digital broadcasting may not necessarily bridge the digital divide but in fact exacerbate digital inequalities in most African countries. They also find that digital migration debates are being overtaken by other technological development related to the Fourth Industrial Revolution (4IR), which is being embraced by some television channels on the continent to engage with audience and convey media content.

PROSPECTS

The theme of prospects looks ahead to how television will adapt and harness potential opportunities in the new media environment. Despite the challenges mentioned in the first section of the collection, digital communication technologies provide opportunities such as better connections, higher quality sound and pictures, and increased spectrum availability that can be used for other services. These technologies also enable audiences to more conveniently search and access information that they need. As Wilding et al. (2018) explain, “digital platforms give news producers access to substantial audiences, while search engines and social media engage global audiences at unprecedented speed” (12).

Other technological opportunities include reimagining new ways of managing television broadcast stations and generating revenue in the new environment. Armstrong (2007) argues that “digital broadcasting greatly mitigates traditional market failures, and, in this context, the market will give people broadly what they want to watch” (p. 3). This point highlights the shift in the way the market has traditionally targeted citizens as consumers with selected content that limited audience choices. However, Armstrong overstates audience choice as consumers can only choose from among the programming that is provided—masking their limited agency to actually watch what they desire. Nonetheless, digital broadcasting holds the potential to address audiences as national citizens—“not just consumers exercising economic choices” (Currie 1991: 10).

From Kenya, Protus Murunga and Rachael Diang’a (chapter “[Digitization of Television in Kenya: Changing Trends in Content and Consumption](#)”) kick-start the section on Prospects by exploring the digitization of television and its influence on the production, dissemination and

consumption patterns. They conclude that the fact that citizen journalism is now playing the information role of the media by posting news on social media before being picked up by mainstream television services signals important prospects for harnessing the popularity of social media to boast not only content dissemination but also journalistic practices. Carolyne Lunga and Rosemary Musvipwa (chapter “[Analysing How Zimbabwe Broadcasting Corporation \(ZBC TV\) and Eswatini TV \(ESTV\) Are Adapting to the Digital Era](#)”) take up the issue of the prospect brought about by digitization of television forward from Swaziland and Zimbabwe respectfully and argue that the Internet has altered how media organisations do journalism. They report on a comparative study of the Zimbabwe Broadcasting Corporation Television (ZBC TV) and the Eswatini TV (ESTV) in Eswatini (formerly Swaziland) and provide insights on how the two stations have embraced new digital media in their news dissemination efforts. Significantly, they find that the online content of the two stations, which are both state-controlled, is still biased in favour of the state and dominated by government officials but argue that there are good chances that this will soon change.

REGULATION AND POLICY

The fusion of digital communication and broadcasting gives rise to a new sophisticated policy and regulatory environment. The online environment in which much of the content is dispersed as well as the blurred lines between producers and consumers beg critical attention. How to ensure that content considered harmful is not freely available, for example, becomes one of the concerns for regulators and policymakers. Policies are, thus, needed to guide how the media and citizens alike engage with these platforms as well as the digital migration process that is currently unfolding in Africa and the world over. Femi Abikanlu (chapter “[Chinese State Capitalism and the Transition to Digital Television in Africa](#)”) from Nigeria joins the conversation on digital migration by critiquing the digital migration process in Nigeria which he says is characterised by the increased expansion of foreign television channels in that country. His chapter examines state capitalism and the implication of financial support, to drive the digital migration, from countries such as China. He argues that China’s investment and intervention in broadcasting and digital migration largely serve the interests of the Chinese state and its attempts to dominate the digital communication markets in Africa.