



Converged Radio, Youth and Urbanity in Africa

Emerging trends and perspectives

Edited by
Stanley Tsarwe · Sarah Chiumbu

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This book is dedicated to researchers, policy makers, and students interested in understanding the state of radio in Africa in an era of convergence, but most importantly, in an era where youth in the continent find radio attractive because of the interactivity enabled by digital media technologies. We also give special mention to Palgrave Macmillan for accepting to publish our book, and seeing us through the various peer-review processes.

FOREWORD

We are particularly intrigued by African radio, and we are blessed to have the opportunity to actually assemble a set of empirical chapters not only telling the story of African radio in a converged era, but also how this convergence (together with its contradictions spanning unevenly across the continent) is happening in an era when the continent is also rapidly urbanising, with young people being at the driving seat of these developments. We are aware that our readers—within and outside the continent—are keen to know what has changed since the increased use of digital media devices in the production, distribution, and consumption of radio, and how have these developments set new trends in African radio. In this volume, we take you through a journey of discovery of what lies at the intersection of radio, convergence, youth, and urbanity in Africa.

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PREFACE

This book volume came as a result of deep soul searching into the sometimes taken-for-granted fact that radio still remains one of the forceful channels of mass communication in Africa. We have both written extensively about how mobile phones and the Internet are giving a new lease of life to African radio, but we also became aware that even though Africa is experiencing an almost similar transition in its mass communication ecology, there are various sheds and tints colouring this transition, and that there was a need to produce a more comprehensive, empirical collection of chapters discussing these various sheds of ‘African experiences’.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We acknowledge and recognise the effort and dedication given by the various researchers who trusted us with their chapters in this book volume. They painstakingly worked during a pandemic that claimed close to 6.5 million lives worldwide between 2020 and 2022. This book project commenced just before the world was forced to shut down due to the Coronavirus (Covid-19)—an infectious disease caused by the SARS-CoV-2 virus known for the following symptoms: fever, dry cough, tiredness, loss of taste or smell, sore throat, headache, aches and pains, and many more. As a result of the pandemic, our chapter contributors were differently but severely affected; some directly and others indirectly. The effect was that most chapters never made it for publication in this volume. What a sad loss of rich scholarly insights on converged African radio. Initially, our book volume was structured thematically in four parts, with the following exciting themes: *Structure, Agency and Power: Production and Reception of Converged Radio*; *Agents of Change: Civic Engagement and Political Participation, Identity, Belonging, and Cultural Expressions* as well as *Commercial Imperatives*. After we lost a lot of chapters along the way, the book was forced to content with a collection of loose, but deeply insightful, empirical, and representative chapters that are a groundbreaking tale on converged radio, urbanity, and youth across Africa.

Special mention also goes to Prof Sarah Hellen Chiumbu who—an esteemed radio scholar, co-editor in this volume, and an Associate Professor of Communication at the University of Johannesburg—drove the book project throughout a very tumultuous journey of mentorship, insights, and guidance. We frankly admit that without her easy-going and warm guidance, this book may have suffered. We are greatly indebted to her.

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CHAPTER 1

Radio Convergence and Youth: An Overview on African Perspectives

Stanley Tsarwe and Sarah Chiumbu

INTRODUCTION

The chapters in this book are empirical case studies on how the African radio is converging with contemporary digital media technologies such as mobile phones, computers and the internet in radio production, distribution and consumption. The profound effect of the coming together of these technologies has a decisive and simultaneous impact on re-calibrating the African public sphere on the one hand and, on the other, reconfiguring the relationship between radio audiences and producers towards increased collaboration. As audiences—particularly the youth

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audiences—increasingly participate in the co-production of content, media institutions will have to be content with the fact that the balance of power is shifting and that even though they may still leverage their power by merging, co-opting, converging and synergising their brands and intellectual properties across channels (Jenkins & Dauze, 2008), the emerging highly digital media ecology is disrupting this traditional model and that power may not necessarily reside with these media institutions all the times.

Owing to these changes, this book is again a reminder that as researchers, we must work across the historical divide in academic research between work on media industries and media audiences. The case studies in this book demonstrate that African media companies can no longer be meaningfully studied without understanding how they relate to their consumers, particularly youth audiences. This is particularly true given the role that young people play in Africa's digital cultures and how they shape the production, circulation and consumption of media content in a "hybrid media ecology" (see Jenkins & Dauze, 2008). The invocation of the phrase "hybrid media ecology" is in recognition that the power to produce and distribute content now lies in the hands of multiple hybrids of actors and that traditionally distinct platforms are coming together to form an architectural network of relationships.

This book also appraises how the traditional business models for the broadcast media—notably radio broadcast—are breaking up and reshaping within the context of the emerging architecture enabled by digital media technologies driven by youth consumption cultures. As Jenkins puts it, rather than us talking about media producers and consumers as occupying distinct and separate poles, convergence has resulted in the blurring of what used to be a clear boundary between producers and consumers because digital media technologies now enable consumers to co-create content without necessarily deserting their role of end-users. This convergence between old and new media has led to a situation "where old and new media collide, where grassroots and corporate media intersect, where the power of the media producer and the power of the media consumer interact in unpredictable ways" (Jenkins, 2006: 2). Convergence has also led to re-examining the role and place of Africa's young people, given extant literature that bemoans their exclusion and disenfranchisement from contributing their voice in national discourses.

THE YOUTH FACTOR IN AFRICAN CONVERGED RADIO

Young people are on the cusp of the media transition into a broadly networked and converged radio in Africa. They are an essential constituent for the talk radio format, which has been flowering in most African democracies following the liberalisation of the airwaves in the early and mid-1990s. It is also these young people whose generation grew up during the digital turn of everyday life, enabling them to interact with peers in ways unprecedented to the older generation. Africa's demographic profile is youth dominated. Given the rapid urban sprawl attractive to youth and enables rapid internet rollout and connectivity, young people are key in determining the configuration of converged radio. As the collection of chapters in this book shows, young people are driving the production and consumption of urban radio. At the same time, advertisers are exploring ways of monetising the dividends presented by the continent's youthful population.

The relationship between African youths and radio requires a detailed elaboration, at least to some extent. To begin with, youth literature ordinarily presents them as either actively deviant or passively at risk, and in some cases, as both concurrently. This lack of a clear place and role in society follows the view that youthhood is a delicate liminal period of transition from childhood to adulthood. They struggle to find and develop a preferred identity and life choices. However, in Africa, many socialising institutions help young people develop their identities, including the family, the community, religion, the school and the media, among other powerful structuring institutions. While most of these institutions still play a significant role in shaping young people's identities, contemporary developments of a largely converged, ubiquitous and pervasive digital media seem to bear considerable influence in shaping young people's identities and tastes. Young people live in an era where their daily routines are saturated with different media platforms competing for their attention. Such media include traditional FM radio, online radio and television, networked social media and smartphones. These media platforms are crucial creative learning spaces for developing young people's identities outside a more formal school environment.

Given that radio is one of the dominant communication mediums on the continent, its rapid convergence with the smartphone presents young people with space for self-expression. The convergence between the mobile phone and radio has created a hybrid platform for youth voice, and

talk radio has the potential to enable the social inclusion of young people through participation. As mentioned above, most literature on youth voices concerns how they are disenfranchised or disadvantaged community members. But what is the state of affairs regarding African youth and converged radio in the continent? How are young people using digital media technologies to shape talk radio, and to what extent do these developments shape narratives around youth participation in the context of a long documented history of disenfranchisement and exclusion? These are some of the issues that chapters in the book deal with.

HISTORY OF BROADCASTING IN AFRICA

The history of radio broadcasting in Africa is primarily dominated by case studies in the analogue era, except for the following ground-breaking studies (see Gunner et al., 2011; Tsarwe, 2018; Moyo, 2013). These studies broadly tackle the question: how is African radio managing the transition from analogue to digital? They have a limited scope on the role of youth in all these developments. However, this book moves away from this by foregrounding the youth factor. It broadly answers the question of what role young people play in an era where radio is rapidly converging with digital media technologies such as the mobile phone and internet? It focuses on radio, youth and urbanity in the African context.

This book was written in the aftermath of the democratisation wave that swept across Africa in the early 1990s into the 2000s, which witnessed a call for the liberalisation of the mass media and the internet for the mass market. Following this episode, a few African countries liberalised the broadcasting sector. Most countries retained centralised policies in which the government strictly regulated and controlled respective broadcasting sectors to control ideological perspectives and narratives. The media's partial liberalisation, which followed in the early 2000s, was characterised by a mixed bag of progressive and non-progressive media policies. Increased calls for the liberalisation of the media, particularly the broadcast media, have grown from strength to strength. This recognises the information deficiencies that characterise most underdeveloped and unconnected African communities.

In a continent where governments own and control the largest share of the broadcasting institutions and where ordinary citizens—including youth—struggle to be heard, the unprecedented penetration of digital media technologies signals the “democratisation” of access to information

by the broadening of opportunities for individuals and grassroots communities to tell stories and access stories others are telling. Curiously, the integration of radio and other digital media technologies—broadly known as convergence—is a very complex and contradictory process that affects both producers and consumers of radio in dialectical ways in Africa. On the one hand, convergence can be understood in a technological sense where media convergence is all about integration and interoperability; that is, the coming together of computing networks, information and communication technologies, and digital forms of information that are inherently adaptable, delivered via “intelligent” platforms, applications and devices. On the other hand, media convergence can be understood as a process characterised by a paced marketisation and concentration of global media conglomerates into the hands of a few global players.

In the digital media era, such conglomeration mainly occurs among media technology giants such as Facebook (now Meta), Google, Snapchat, Instagram, LinkedIn and so on. Users are learning how to master these different media technologies to bring the flow of media under their control and interact (and co-create) with other users. Sometimes, these two forces reinforce each other, creating closer, more rewarding relations between media producers and consumers (Jenkins, 2006). Sometimes the two forces conflict, resulting in constant renegotiations of power between these competing pressures on the new media ecology.

However, caution is needed when describing the outcome of media convergence in Africa. We run the risk of glossing over digital media convergence as solely a beneficial process when in fact, what is needed is a balanced scale analysis between what could or is already going wrong as a result of digital technology convergence. To what extent is digital media convergence giving power to audiences, particularly youths who have traditionally been disenfranchised from participation and inclusion in decision-making? Do youth now find voice via digital media, and how is this happening? Are there no instances—perhaps even greater—where digital media technology convergence is simply a consolidation of capitalism where global media conglomerates are solidifying their monopoly over ownership and control and claiming the largest advertising market share? In some case studies of the convergence between mobile phones and commercial radio in Africa, emerging research has already raised this concern about what could be viewed as furtherance of commercial exploitation of mass media audiences, particularly youth who have been reduced to commercial bait for consumer goods advertised by media companies

(see Gunner et al., 2011). Some have even raised concerns about how media organisations, including radio stations, harness consumer biographical data from SMSes and WhatsApp messages sent via digital media technologies (Tsarwe, 2018). Therefore, in some ways, this has concentrated the power of traditional gatekeepers and agenda setters, and in other ways, it has disintegrated their tight control over our culture.

In their seminal research, Jenkins and Dauze (2008) argued that convergence must also be understood as both a top-down corporate-driven process and a bottom-up consumer-driven process, implying that the outcome of digital media convergence is a dual and complex process which should never be simplified. Media companies are learning to accelerate the flow of media content across delivery channels to expand revenue opportunities, broaden markets and reinforce consumer loyalties and commitments (Jenkins & Dauze, 2008; Jenkins, 2006). At the same time, advertisers continue to search for new ways of monetising these dividends with the net effect of not only dumping down the quality of programming but also creating a mass consumer market devoid of agency. In fact, and as Willem aptly puts it, “there is a need to situate these practices within a broader corporate logic in which participation is not merely about adding more voices but also feeds into radio stations’ commercial strategies of increasing revenue and accessing personal data of listeners through SMS and social media”.

MAPPING DIGITISATION IN AFRICA

Admittedly, the massive rollout of the internet in Africa, which began in the early 2000s and continues in the present day, remains rather sluggish, uneven and, in some instances, characterised by both low investment and a strong imprint of state censorship. What is apparent, though, is that the continent’s entrance into the converged world may be shaping and fostering improved audience participation of some sort in democratic processes through radio (Gunner et al., 2011), and this has varying implications on young people’s agency and involvement in matters affecting everyday Africa. For example, the talk radio format has flowered in most African democracies, fostering some “participatory cultures” (Moyo, 2013; Gunner et al., 2011). Chapters in this volume deal with these issues at length.

Most worrying, though, is the mismatch, on the one hand, between the popularity of radio as “the medium of the masses” in Africa and, on the

other hand, the rate at which African governments have heeded calls for the liberalisation of information flows, particularly by licensing more community radios in the hardest to reach rural pockets in Africa. Given that some parts of Africa remain disconnected from the information super-highway, there exist some notable pockets of information gaps that, if not addressed, will continue to be albatross to democratisation and literacy within the continent. A brief history of how African countries entered the convergence period—particularly in the context of broadcast media and internet access and liberalisation—is critical in bridging the continent’s transition from analogue to digital and how radio became part and parcel of these processes.

In Africa, the early 2000s witnessed an almost universal trend towards the market liberalisation of the media, massive internet rollout and increased forward push towards digitisation. This followed well in the silhouettes of technological advancements, including direct satellite broadcasting (DBS), the deregulation and privatisation of telecommunications in the industrialised countries of North America and Western Europe, more robust and stronger regional economic integration, concentration and consolidation of media ownership in a few oligopolies from the West and North America. However, in Africa, these processes were never predictable and straightforward. They primarily unfolded against a fair share of resistance from several African governments whose political careers faced unprecedented pressure from an emerging liberal media that is increasingly giving audiences some leverage of “power” to express themselves outside of the limitations of a controlled press, but also allowing multiple options to access alternative sources of information outside of government propaganda.

For example, while in the era of analogue media, civic societies and media freedom activists had already been pushing for a liberalised and pluralised media which would provide a buffer against the preponderance of state hegemony, this did not yield enough dividends. This is because most African governments continue to supervise and tighten the grip on the media through “legal and extra-legal measures” (Moyo, 2009), such as repressive legislation, online surveillance of activists and arbitrary arrests of journalists and activists. Even though the continent is a signatory to several international and regional treaties and conventions calling for an independent, plural press protected from government interference, most of the continent’s regulatory regimes remain intolerant to press freedom and journalistic autonomy.

Unsurprisingly, the increased heavy-handed onslaught against the media has traditionally manifested and become amplified during moments of intense political contestation, such as during elections. During these moments, most media freedom violations have been committed, with African governments blocking the internet and Short Text Messaging (SMS) by invoking the argument that this helps maintain security and order, while activists and advocates of media freedom claim that is censorship. To effect internet shutdowns, authorities may order internet service providers (ISPs) to block commonly used social media sites. In extreme cases, they can order service providers to block all internet access. Another method is called throttling, which severely limits traffic to specific sites, giving the impression that the service is slow, thereby discouraging access. This method is more subtle because it is difficult to know whether sites are actively restricted or poor broadband infrastructure is to blame.

Cases of internet shutdowns in Africa have been rising. During elections in October 2020, Tanzania restricted access to the internet and social media applications. In June 2020, Ethiopia imposed an internet shutdown that lasted for close to a month after the unrest, followed by the killing of a prominent Oromo singer and activist, Hachalu Hundessa. In January 2021, on the eve of the presidential election, Uganda ordered an internet blackout across the country. Zimbabwe has also seen this kind of mass censorship following mass unrest in the capital city during the aftermath of the 2018 elections and in 2021. Togo, Burundi, Chad, Mali and Guinea will also restrict access to the internet or social media applications sometime in 2020. Uganda and some other states now tax social media to control them and perhaps limit their use by members of the general public who are usually starved by the traditional legacy media, which the government has significant control over. However, Africa is not alone in attempts at either controlling or muzzling the internet. During America's 2020 presidential race, Donald Trump. We have also witnessed increased authoritarian tendencies in Russia and the United Kingdom. Despite these varying levels of manoeuvres against the press, the internet and related digital media technologies and online social media platforms have been driving towards the convergence of different media.

THE STRUCTURE OF THIS BOOK

The book covers four countries—Eswatini, Kenya, Nigeria, South Africa and Zimbabwe. The chapters are organised under country clusters. The first cluster focuses on Zimbabwe (Chaps. 2–5), followed by South Africa (Chaps. 6–9). The last cluster has chapters on Kenya (Chap. 10), Nigeria (Chap. 11) and, lastly, Eswatini (Chap. 12). In Chap. 2, Sauti and Makaripe argue that converged radio has brought a colossal shift in Zimbabwe, which has ushered in youth participation in politics and broadened an understanding of their responsibilities as political actors, access to participate in political processes via converged radio is not accessible for all. There are still glaring restrictive impediments such as high data costs, ownership of technology and digital illiteracies. Accordingly, and beyond technology, there is a need to create political, physical and structural spaces that allow for meaningful political participation by young people.

Podcasting is perhaps the little researched technology-driven broadcasting phenomenon in Africa. The paucity of research in this area is evident because podcasting has not grown in Africa compared to developments in North America and Western Europe. This is surprising given that podcasting, like conventional radio, closely follows Africa’s oral storytelling tradition. However, as a new form of storytelling, podcasting is beginning to shape the production, dissemination and consumption of knowledge about Africa as it enables Africans to produce their own stories. Although podcasting is transforming the mediated public sphere, it is also “intimate,” “individualised” and “unpublic”. In Chap. 3, Sibanda and Ndlovu examine how content creators, community reporters and citizen journalists in Zimbabwe are utilising the opportunities offered by podcasting technologies and platforms to participate and tell the stories of marginalised groups, specifically the youth. Given the repressive political environment in Zimbabwe and the muzzling of the mainstream media, the emergence of podcasting is widening democratic spaces in the country, leveraging on the increasing internet penetration in Zimbabwe.

It is also interesting to note that digital media technologies are recalibrating how young people are modelling their identities creatively beyond their functional uses. The emergence of mobile phone-based wearable devices such as headphones and earphones, as well as these devices’ affordances for consuming radio “on the go,” is being exploited by young people to project certain personalities and ways of being, particularly in urban environments where physical mobility is high. Fashion