**Editorial**

**Mainstreaming the dynamics of African digital cultures, practices AND CITIZEN ENGAGEMENT**

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**Introduction**

The African continent – in its multiple socio-cultural and political complexities – can no longer be blindly characterised as sitting on the cusp of the digital revolution, or indeed be perceived as dumbstruck in the “techno-euphoric moment of wonderment and awe”, characteristic of the mid-1990s and early 2000s (Mabweazara 2015, 12). Despite many obstacles, the rapid connectivity and reach enabled by the Internet and its associated digital media is, in many ways, alleviating some of the problems associated with poor infrastructure and restrictive political spaces. Varying degrees of ‘technological domestication’ are evident across wide-ranging contexts, and fascinating stories of localized appropriations are emerging as individuals and communities harness and adapt digital technologies to their lived realities in hitherto unimagined ways (see Nyamnjoh 2005; de Bruijn, Brinkman and Nyamnjoh 2009). Emerging cases of technological appropriations shed some light on a number of issues and debates, including the need to rethink the widely debated ‘digital divide’ conundrum (van Dijk 2005) as well as the ill-conceived ‘technicist’ understandings of digital technologies, which assumes a straightforward causal connection between technology and society.

A cursory overview points to a number of key areas and developments in the adoption and appropriation of ‘new’ digital technologies: In the context of traditional journalism, new technologies have radically altered virtually every aspect of news gathering, writing and reporting (see Mabweazara et al. 2014), resulting in “differentiated production and innovation processes, and the complex interaction and interrogation between work, life and play” (Deuze 2010, 207). On the political front, the direct interactions between citizens and politicians via social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter are unprecedented. The interactions have broken deep-seated political barriers, and the traditional culture of fear associated with publicly challenging and confronting the political elite has been deflated, albeit in dispersed digital spaces. Equally, civil society institutions and special interest groups are galvanizing and increasingly devoting more time and resources to virtual deliberative forums (Wasserman 2011; Mare 2014; Willems 2015).

The unprecedented diffusion and permeation of the mobile phone across social classes in Africa remains one of the most significant exemplar of the impact of digital technologies on the continent (Moyo 2009; Wasserman 2011). It has proved “critical in shaping everyday life far more than the Internet, which has represented the most widely discussed and perhaps most significant manifestation of the new media” (Mabweazara 2011, 693) across the globe. The widespread use of mobile phone-based text messages (SMS), “undoubtedly, the most potent tool for alternative communication in the developing world today” (Moyo 2009, 556) is equally telling and finds no parallels elsewhere. Likewise, the phenomenon of mobile phone cash transfers has had an unimaginable impact in Africa – mobile phones have literally become ‘banking halls’ and ‘wallets’ for individuals who do not have bank accounts or those who choose to use alternative financial services. Across East Africa, which has taken the lead in this regard, the mobile phone transacts more money than banks everyday thus facilitating positive socio-economic transformation (Etzo and Collender 2010; Wasserman 2011). It is not surprising therefore that the rapid adoption of the mobile phone and its dramatic benefits in Africa “have frequently been described in unrestrained terms as ‘staggering’, a ‘remarkable phenomena’, and a ‘revolution’” (Etzo and Collender 2010, 659).

Traditional social relationships have equally been reshaped by digital technologies, not least the mobile phone, in dynamic ways. This is particularly obvious in the context of a high mobility rate among Africa's populations, which has seen an increasing reliance on new communication technologies, especially Internet-enabled mobile phones to reaffirm and even reconstitute traditional modes of bonding and relations between migrants and their home area (Nyamnjoh 2005). As Nyamnjoh (2005) further observes, poor urban dwellers trapped in townships and informal settlements are using the mobile phone ‘creatively’ to stay in touch with relatives and maintain healthy communications with their roots. Wasserman affirms this point in his observation that interactive technologies “transgress cultural and social borders and hierarchies in the way they refashion identities and […] communicative networks” (2011, 146). Thus, hitherto immutable rituals and rites have become malleable as families and communities adopt new ways of congregating and interacting in digital spaces – meetings and announcements are mediated through mobile phone SMS and social media platforms such as Whatsapp and Facebook.

While the mobile phone’s impact in Africa is largely a result of its widespread accessibility relative to other communication technologies such as the fixed-line telephone, which remains a pipe dream in many parts of Africa (Wasserman 2011), some scholars point to its amenability to local cultural values of sociality, interconnectedness, interdependence and conviviality (Nyamnjoh 2005), which make it possible for those who cannot afford to acquire their own to access mobile phone services. These local cultural values also engender localized appropriations that, on close examination, find no parallels in Western contexts (de Bruijn, Brinkman and Nyamnjoh 2009, Mabweazara 2011). In this sense, the emerging communication practices should not be interpreted as anchored solely in the “transformative power of technology” (Mabweazara 2015, 12) as the technological determinism thesis presumes. Rather, there are multiple levels of *domestication* and *appropriation* that mirror the complexities and contradictions of local contexts, all generally affirming the fact that the adoption of the digital technologies should be seen as having a cultural and social logic that points to the ‘social shaping’ nature of technologies.

It is equally important to note that while the permeation of digital technologies into various social spaces, including the broader everyday cultures in Africa “highlights [the] sheer endless possibilities emerging with the [digital era]” (Mabweazara 2013, 136), several challenges impinge on their appropriation as well as pose a number of unsettling normative dilemmas and threats to established practices, values and ideals. For example, the economics of technological access vis-à-vis bread and butter concerns, and the generally low levels of digital skills are real dilemmas faced by most African citizens in their attempts to effectively deploy new technologies. Other normative concerns relate to “the growing controversy surrounding the invasion of personal privacy in the digital era as well as copyright violations” (Mabweazara 2013, 137). Similarly, the sharing and circulation of pornographic material on social media as well as the incivility and unruliness of comments generated on interactive online spaces, especially “hate speech and tribal slurs” are common drawbacks (Mabweazara 2014, 56). Some of these challenges, however, relate to the general crisis facing the so-called ‘information society era’ – characterised by the rapid proliferation of new digital technologies and their impact on society – globally as widely articulated in the economically developed countries of the North (see Duff 2008).

The foregoing developments deserve close scholarly scrutiny not just as a way of projecting and mainstreaming emerging practices and cultures in Africa, but also as a way of challenging entrenched Western intellectual discourses that have traditionally framed the continent as wallowing in ‘digital poverty’, and thus “passively awaiting external salvation” (Berger 2005, 1). It is also about connecting developments in Africa to discourses and insights emerging from elsewhere. In this light, this special annual issue aims to offer space and opportunity to scholarship that strives to map-out and foreground empirical and theoretical concerns that address the impact of digital technologies in Africa. Its main object, as discussed below, is to contribute to a corpus of scholarship that generally appreciates the multiple complexities as well as the contingent nature of digital developments across the globe – looking at *all* developments and experiences as relevant and important in their own ways.

**Mainstreaming African (digital) cultures, cultivating research connections**

The main agenda of this special annual issue is to contribute to the on-going discourses of ‘de-Westernising media studies’ by challenging an entrenched over-reliance on Western knowledge. It is particularly motivated by the extant exclusion of alternative perspectives in mainstream research and theory and thus seeks to offer space to scholarly insights that invite us to rethink conclusions largely drawn from studies conducted in splendid oblivion of conditions and experiences in non-Western contexts, Africa in this case (Berger 2005). By exclusively using Western yardsticks to assess developments in Africa, we inadvertently run the risk of glossing over issues of vital concern to local African contexts and experiences. This has dire implications on the conclusions reached and the broader efforts to closely understand digital practices and cultures in Africa vis-à-vis developments elsewhere. However, in challenging the entrenched overdependence on Western scholarship, we should avoid the dangers of uncritically lurching to an equally perilous opposite end by blindly circumscribing our locus of analysis to ‘localised’ understandings that prevent the realisation of new new understandings, explanations and depth of analysis reaching beyond local contexts (Alatas 2000).

The agenda set here is, therefore, not predicated on a radical closure of the mind to knowledge from other parts of the world nor is it anchored in “a localized research agenda of separatism” (Atton and Mabweazara 2011, 670) akin to ‘scholarly inbreeding’ or what Waisbord aptly frames as “silo-ized scholarship” (2015a, 585). Far from it, rather, the special issue advocates the assimilation of wide-ranging knowledge from all sources and parts of the world. In doing so, however, as Alatas argues, we need to adopt an independent critical approach that does not lose sight of “our own intellectual heritage” (2000, 27). Thus, while the interest is in highlighting and mainstreaming distinctive digital cultures and practices in Africa, we should equally be guarding against generating “essentialist models of knowledge that view regional studies as *existing in perfect isolation from the rest of the world*” (Waisbord 2015b, 31 emphasis added). This way, we contribute to the consolidation of “an academic community with a shared intellectual core” (Waisbord 2015a, 586) and yet remaining critically aware of the importance of local *context* and cross-cultural, national and regional *differences*.

The point, clearly then, is not the pursuit of “parallel lines of research” (Waisbord 2015a, 585) but to strive towards identifying areas of convergence and divergence, and mapping out of those dynamics theoretical positions that avoid “banalities and stereotypes” (Livingstone 2003, 491) that denigrate or demean constituent elements of comparative research. It should be about showcasing the diversity of digital cultures as it is about connecting and ‘cultivating dialogue’ across national and regional scholarship. As Livingstone puts it, we should not underestimate how much we can learn from “*different cultures* or what can be achieved [through] the combined creative intelligence” of diverse but focused scholarship, sharing “insights and energies” (2003, 481 emphasis added). We should therefore avoid the pitfalls of ‘academic isolationism’ – operating in “research compartment[s] [that are], disconnected from the rest” (Waisbord 2015a, 586) **–** by bridging intellectual divides and contributing to “analytical cross-pollination” (Waisbord 2015b, 31) between Africa and the rest of the World, but especially the hegemonic Western scholarship.

Although comparative research is often seen as ‘theoretically demanding’, and producing “measurement out of context” by asserting “methodological and/or theoretical universalism at the cost of recognising cultural specificity” (Livingstone 2003, 482), its contribution has enriching and far-reaching implications. It opens up new avenues and invites us to address the transnational dimensions of emerging digital cultures and practices. In the words of Livingstone (2003, 478), one could also argue that “the choice *not* to conduct research cross-nationally requires as much justification as the choice to conduct cross-national research” (emphasis original), precisely because digital cultures, practices and emerging online forms of citizen engagement are now far more entrenched and widespread across national boundaries and regions, thanks to the wide-reach of the Internet and its associated digital technologies. For this reason, blindly locking research in one country will not yield fruitful results. If anything, itpotentially “generates claims whose specificity or generalizability are indeterminate without comparable [empirical evidence] from other countries” (Livingstone 2003, 478).

In summary, the propagation of ideas around developments in digital technologies, especially their appropriation in various social settings should not be left to the monopoly or intellectual hegemony of one region. In particular, we need to emancipate our thoughts from the “shackles of [Western] intellectual imperialism” (Alatas 2000, 24). Thus, in keeping with the broader aims of *African Journalism Studies*, the object of this special annual issue is to initiate and facilitate research conversations between (digital) developments in Africa and those unfolding elsewhere. There is, indeed, a case for cross-cultural comparative studies that assess the social impact of digital technologies “between economically developing African countries and the economically developed countries of the North, which offer markedly different socio-economic, cultural and political conditions” for the adoption and appropriation of digital technologies (Atton and Mabweazara 2011, 670).

In cultivating research connections and bridging intellectual divides we should acknowledge the fact that genuine globalisation demands that we be open to North-South conversations. This approach potentially opens avenues for critically assessing “utopian predictions that have been made about the impact of new technologies” in Africa (Atton and Mabweazara 2011, 670), including crude notions of the ‘digital divide’, which tend to essentialise or frame digital technology experiences in Africa as the ‘normative other’, without carefully considering the implications of *localised appropriations of technology* and their possible contribution to theory. In other words, “[r]esearch from wider and varied contexts would provide a backdrop for testing […] predominantly western examples and theoretical frameworks” (Atton and Mabweazara 2011, 670), and thus helping to “refute erroneous generalisations, [and] interpretations” (Alatas 2000, 43) of particular actions and practices.

**About studies in this issue**

In the light of the above, the articles carried in this inaugural issue raise questions as well as theoretically and empirically engage with local and wider developments in the use of digital technologies in Africa. The diversity of issues covered generally points to the thematic heterogeneity of the field itself but also spotlight ideas and issues that have resonance across national boundaries in Africa and are by no means “limited to ‘nation state cultures’” (Hepp and Coudry 2009, 43). The studies equally reflect the complexity of digital cultures and practices in Africa, and indeed remind us of the need to avoid “reductive assumptions” that see African countries, “and their myriad array of cultures, religions and languages” as self-contained or closed “homogenous sets of continent-wide social and cultural [practices]” (Obijiofor and Hanusch 2011, 53). Rather, the countries “comprise multiple cultures, with diasporic and global trends making for a poor mapping of culture onto nation” (Clifford cited in Livingstone 2003, 479).

In general, the thematic interests of the articles carried in this issue focus on a range of themes and issues, which, in broad terms, include the impact of digital technologies on journalistic (newsroom) practices; theoretical explorations that attempt to refine and contextualise existing analytical and normative frameworks; empirical explorations of digital technologies as alternative ‘sites’ for resistance and ‘counter hegemonic’ struggles; as well as a close examination of emerging forms of citizen engagement in cyber space. In the first essay, Mel Bunce’s study closely examines how audience web-data is shaping the selection and development of news stories by East and West African foreign correspondents working for legacy-media outlets such as *The Daily Telegraph* and Reuters. She also explores the influences and implications of web analytics for the nature of stories generated about Africa. The study identifies three distinct categories of correspondents’ attitudes to audience web metrics: first, those that are acutely aware of and base their news decisions on audience data; second, and by far the largest group, those that have little knowledge of audience data but are sometimes guided towards more popular stories by their editors; and finally, the ‘denial-ists’, who constitute the smallest group and have no knowledge about their readers’ behaviour. They also experience very little pressure from their editors. Bunce generally concludes that despite the hype around the ‘click stream’ and concerns about audience metrics shaping news practice, audience data does not seem to be a significant daily feature of newsmaking routines for foreign correspondents in Africa.

Focusing on the appropriation of digital technologies in a broadcast newsroom context, Sally Deffor explores how online newsmaking practices and formats at the South African Broadcasting Corporation (SABC), one of Africa’s leading public broadcasters, are shaped by local factors. She observes that although the approaches to online news production practices are still predicated on traditional broadcasting routines and structures, with no strict attention to routines that work with online news storytelling, there is evidence of various local context interpretations and appropriations. Editors operate on a loose template that guides what is effective on their online operations as well as considering the institutional mandate and audience capacities. Deffor concludes with a warning against making sweeping generalizations about how technological changes are revolutionizing news storytelling across the globe.

Taking a largely theoretical approach, Yemisi Akinbobola poses questions on the extent to which new technology-driven journalism contributes to the regeneration of the Habermasian notion of the ‘public sphere’ in West Africa. She avers that although the lack of good access to technology generally threatens the effective use of digital technologies in promoting free flow of information, their appropriation by news outlets points to a promising future for media freedom and access to information in West Africa. In particular, she notes that the rapid adoption of the mobile phone has enhanced the circulation of information as well as promoted development in real terms. However, as elsewhere in Africa, there are still many constraints and impediments associated with poor infrastructure, human resources and the costs of access to technology.

Focusing on the Kenyan context, George Ogola offers a bold reflection on how the explosion of social media has led to the emergence of new communication practices, including broadening public participation in news. He explores how the ‘new’ communication practitioners on Twitter are constructing as well as enabling alternative participatory forms of civic and political engagement. This development, as he argues, is generating a diversity of voices, styles of discourse, and points of view in the public sphere. All this reflects a growing institutionalisation of social media as a platform for popular expression, and indeed a challenge to mainstream media’s self-serving ‘regime of closure’ to outsider voices in Kenya. Taking a similar approach, Shephered Mpofu explores how the interactivity of online discussion forums appropriated by the Ndebele – an ethnic group broadly conceived as suppressed and marginalised by the political elite in Zimbabwe – is providing alternative space for the discussion of issues rendered taboo by the state. Mpofu argues that online discussion forums offer these subaltern voices ‘safe’ space to discuss, archive as well as memorialise sensitive topics in ways that counter and mitigate the limitations and constraints of traditional mainstream media and public deliberations, which are all heavily censored and controlled by the state. Téwodros Workneh pursues a related theme in the Ethiopian context. Drawing on notions of development statism, he examines the extent to which the Ethiopian digital sphere has become a viable alternative to traditional media. He observes that despite the potential of the digital sphere to promote freedom of speech, it is systematically policed and monitored through state-sanctioned legal frameworks that criminalize online critical speech, a scenario that makes users highly sceptical of the freedoms associated with the digital era. Workneh concludes that the Ethiopian government’s stranglehold on digital platforms should be broadly interpreted as part of its long-term strategies to suppress critical alternative narratives.

The dynamics of emerging forms of citizen engagements have also spawned a number of ethical questions and debates. Last Moyo confronts these debates in a compelling case for reconceptualising approaches to citizen journalism based on data drawn from popular blogs in Zimbabwe and mobile-based citizen journalism practices in South Africa. Moyo advances a moral and ethical critique of citizen journalism, which is not predicated on the moral taboos of established mainstream journalism. He sees most of the negative characterisations of citizen journalism ethics as misplaced and based on critics who hide the fact that their locus of analysis is actually mainstream journalism. Moyo argues that citizen journalism ethics represents something that remains deeply futuristic, where ethics are likely to crystallise around deprofessionalised and deinstitutionalised personal responsibilities. A similarly bold theoretical critique is taken by Phillip Santos and Khulekani Ndlovu in their assessment of the democratic potential of social media in Zimbabwe. Using Facebook, they make a conceptual and quasi-empirical argument that captures the ambivalent realities on social media with particular reference to personal identities and interpersonal interactions. Drawing on Herbert Marcuse’s notion of ‘democratic unfreedom’, they argue that social media platforms are not as free as techno-philics contend, rather interactions and identity projections on Facebook should be seen as a structured form of agency, a duality, rather than a mutually exclusive dualism.

Although these articles are far from providing a representative picture, they collectively illustrate the agency and creativity in the adoption and appropriation of digital technologies across various social contexts in Africa. Similarly, while the studies are rooted in specific African countries and regions, they are, in fact, not blindly confined to the African continent. They are actually in dialogue with theoretical concerns that originate from other regions, hence pointing to the significance of cross-cultural comparative studies that reconnect African accounts with broader normative and empirical positions. In this sense, the studies offer a much more holistic and nuanced picture of the impact of digital technologies across cultures.

In summary, the studies should also be seen as offering a point of departure for a developing ‘field’ deserving its own special space for on-going scholarly explorations that project and mainstream African perspectives into contemporary debates. It is thus generally hoped that the special annual issue will contribute towards a reconstituted vision of African and global communication practice in the digital era – one that realises the value of looking beyond dominant experiences in Western countries (especially the UK and the US) for insights that can enrich our understanding of how new digital technologies are transforming communication practices, cultures and practices of everyday citizenship globally.

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