Decolonizing and provincializing audience and internet studies: contextual approaches from African vantage points

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THE SCRAMBLE FOR AFRICAN AUDIENCES AND USERS

Researching African media audiences and users is urgent more than ever because of the rapidly changing media landscape on the continent in the last few decades. In recent years, media content on the continent has become more diversified as a result of the liberalization of broadcasting, the emergence of private radio and television stations and the growing availability of foreign channels via satellite television. Most African countries have also experienced a rather spectacular growth in access and availability of both 'mass media devices' and digital technologies. In the late 1990s, access to television sets and radio receivers was limited, with 22 per cent of Africans having access to a radio in 1997, and only 6 per cent reporting to own a television set.[1] Although no recent comprehensive statistics are available for the continent, country surveys suggest sharp increases in access to mass media devices. For example, in 2013, 76 per cent of Ghanaians reported to have access to a television while 84 per cent had access to a radio.[2] Access is likely to be significantly lower in rural as compared to urban areas, and newspapers continue to have fairly modest circulation rates and are often only affordable to a minority of urban readers.

Radio, television and newspaper content is also increasingly being accessed through mobile devices such as laptops (frequently via USB modems due to limited broadband access at home), tablets and mobile phones. In the past decade, mobile phone subscriptions in Africa have grown exponentially, from 87 million in 2005 to 685 million in 2015.[3] While only 1 per cent of Africans have access to a fixed landline, nearly 74 percent now have a mobile phone subscription.[4] Internet access has similarly grown significantly, primarily because of the rise of internet-enabled mobile phones. While in 2010, only 14 million Africans had access to mobile internet, this increased within five years to 162 million or 17 per cent of the population.[5] The rise in mobile internet has also enabled a growing number of users to engage on social media such. In November 2015, nearly 11 per cent of the continent's inhabitants subscribed to Facebook, equal to nearly 125 million people.[6] So far, the bulk of academic research on media and communication in Africa has examined the policy and regulatory context of media, or has analysed relations between media institutions and the state, often adopting a normative framework informed by the Western model of liberal democracy (Willems 2014a). This macro-analytical focus — which has been informed by political

economy approaches — has not only indirectly drawn attention to Africa's deviation from liberal democracy and lack of press freedom but has also largely left the question of what ordinary people do with old and new media on an everyday basis unanswered. There is a need to foreground the voices and experiences of Africans with a range of media forms more strongly, while acknowledging the constraints to their agency imposed by the state and/or the market.

A limited number of studies on African audiences and users are available but these have largely adopted a quantitative approach, and have been produced either by market research companies or non-governmental organizations. African audiences and users are increasingly in the spotlight because of the growing scramble for the continent by a range of global media companies which are driven by both economic interests and public diplomacy concerns. In the near future, their growing economic and political clout is likely to provoke a quest for 'better' data on the ways in which Africans engage with different forms of media. Against the background of saturating markets in the West, global broadcasters, mobile phone corporations and social media platforms are all equally keen to take advantage of Africa's improved access to mass media devices and digital technologies. In 2012, China Central Television (CCTV) established its first office on the continent in Kenya, partnering local media to target millions of African viewers with its soft power and charm offensive (Zhang, Wasserman and Mano 2016). Other global channels such as CNN, BBC and Al Jazeera continue to compete for African audiences and have increased the African focus in their reporting in recent years. More than a third of BBC World Service's audience (100 million) is based on the continent, and Nigeria and Tanzania are part of the service's biggest growth markets.[7]

Multinational mobile phone networks such as Vodafone (United Kingdom), Orange (France), Airtel (India), Etisalat (United Arab Emirates) and MTN (South Africa) have a major presence on the continent and compete for customers, while internet corporations scramble 'to connect the unconnected' to the Internet through a range of initiatives. For example, Internet.org — a collaboration between Facebook, mobile phone producers and other companies — introduced a free mobile phone app in 2014 that enables Zambians to access Facebook freely without incurring data charges.[8] Microsoft's 4Afrika initiative was launched in 2013 and provides low-cost smartphones which Microsoft developed with Huawei.[9] Google's Project Link aims to improve and speed up internet connectivity through the construction of metro fibre and Wi-Fi networks in major cities in Uganda and Ghana.[10]

The combination of upbeat 'Africa Rising' discourses and hopes about a growing middle class are increasingly transforming audiences and users into potential markets. With rising numbers of people accessing media content through internet-enabled devices, big data are likely to play a more important role in audience measurement. For now, a number of non-academic research initiatives have attempted to gain a better understanding of African audiences and digital media users, feeding into public opinion polls, providing data to advertising agencies and improving the planning of NGO interventions. These non-academic research initiatives demonstrate that '[a]udiences may be imagined, empirically, theoretically or politically, but in all cases the product is a fiction that serves the needs of the imagining institution' (Hartley 1987: 125).

A 2012 survey identified a total of 18 major media audience research firms on the African continent, with multinational market research companies such as Ipsos Synovate and Nielsen carrying out regular surveys in countries such as Angola, Ghana, Kenya, Namibia, Nigeria, South Africa, Tanzania and Uganda.[11] Smaller, locally owned, commercial research organizations such as the Zimbabwe Advertising and Research Foundation (ZARF) and the South African Advertising Research Foundation (SAARF) have also conducted quantitative annual surveys on newspaper readers, television viewers and radio listeners which has

produced valuable basic data on audiences.[12] In addition to these initiatives, there has been a growth in public opinion research in recent years. Since the early 2000s, the Afrobarometer research project has supported surveys in more than 30 African countries which have aimed to measure public attitudes on democracy and governance on the continent (Bratton, Mattes and Gyimah-Boadi 2004).[13] Public opinion research has also gained in importance because of the work of global market research companies such as Ipsos Synovate in Kenya and Tanzania, which have begun to shape election processes on the continent (Branch and Cheeseman 2005; Wolf 2009; Makulilo 2011).

Finally, research consultancy organizations such as InterMedia and Balancing Act have researched media audiences and digital media users.[14] For example, InterMedia's AudienceScapes programme has produced empirical audience and user research in a range of countries, including Kenya, Uganda, Ghana and Tanzania (see also Power, Khatun and Debeljak 2012). The main aim of their programme has been to provide development practitioners and NGO professionals 'access to empirical research that could help them better target and deliver communication, information and education efforts in a range of activities'.[15] In the 1980s and 1990s, UNESCO's Institute for Statistics collected data on people's access to newspapers, television and radio channels, which was aimed at assisting UNESCO in planning its media interventions and support initiatives. While UNESCO carried out a fresh pilot media statistics survey between 2009 and 2011 (which included at least seven African countries), no comprehensive statistics are at present available.[16]

While some of these projects have produced valuable data, they have largely adopted a quantitative, survey-based methodology. In the wake of the global capitalist crisis which 'has resulted in cracks, fissures and holes of neoliberalism and the logic of the commodification of everything' (Fuchs 2012: 692), there is an imperative to study audiences and users in Africa in a critical manner, moving beyond 'administrative' approaches which are often in the service of commercial of political interests and rarely disturb the status quo.

DE-ESSENTIALIZING AFRICAN AUDIENCES AND USERS

This volume examines the lived experiences of Africans and their interaction with different kinds of media: old and new, state and private, elite and popular, global and national, material and virtual. By offering a comparative, critical and largely qualitative account of audiences and users across a range of national contexts in different regions of Africa, the book examines media through the voices and perspectives of those engaging with it rather than reducing audiences and users to numbers and statistics, ready to be exploited as potential target markets or as political constituencies. The critical, qualitative research adopted in this book enables us to gain a better understanding of how African viewers, listeners and users make sense of a range of media forms; what role these play in their everyday lives and what audience and user engagement can tell us about how citizens perceive the state, how they imagine themselves in the wider world and how they relate to each other. The book argues that the experiences of audiences and engagements of users with a range of media — newspapers, radio, television, magazines, internet, mobile phones, social media — are always grounded in particular contexts, worldviews and knowledge systems of life and wisdom: 'It is akin to the tortoise. The tortoise never leaves its shell behind. It carries it wherever it goes' (Chivaura 2006: 221). African media audiences and users carry their contexts and cultural repertoires in the same way a tortoise carries its shell. Thus far, the bulk of academic research on media and communication in Africa has addressed the policy and regulatory aspects as well as the relation between media institutions and the state (Willems 2014a). While studies on media, democratization and press freedom are invaluable, the ways in which ordinary people make sense of, and relate to, media in their everyday lives are largely left beyond consideration. As Barber (1997: 357) has pointed out, '[w]hat has not yet been sufficiently

explored is the possibility that specific African audiences have distinctive, conventional modes and styles of making meaning, just as performers/speakers do. We need to ask how audiences do their work of interpretation'.

This is important for a variety of reasons. First of all, it is crucial in the wider project of dewesternizing, internationalizing and decolonizing media and communication studies[17], and the subfields of audience studies and internet studies more broadly. Too often, Africa is seen as a giant continental case study, as a place of 'raw data' or testing ground for Western theoretical perspectives. Our approach in this book is to consider the African continent as a set of vantage points onto the wider world, as an epistemological location that can help problematize and provincialize the largely Anglo-American canon of audience studies and internet studies. Frequently also, Africa is treated as a country rather than as a diverse continent which comprises of a large number of countries and is host to a wide variety of languages. The chapters in this volume offer a range of contextual approaches to audiences and users from the vantage point of different regions on the African continent: West, East and South. Following Parameswaran (2003: 316), our goal

> of achieving a radically global perspective need not lead to the mere addition of African, Indian or Malaysian women to the smorgasbord of existing audiences in the canon […]. [R]ather than being a 'guilty' afterthought, ethnographic audience studies in Asia or Africa can engage with questions that are germane to a new politics of audience research that interrogates the modes and practices of global capitalism and avoids essentialized models of the viewing/reading process.

The project of both de-essentializing audiences and users and provincializing the dominant academic canon is crucial given long-standing stereotypes of African viewers, listeners and users as 'primitive' or even 'criminal'. For example, popular discourses have represented Nigerian internet users as '419' advance-fee scammers while visual representations in adverts or documentaries have set up deliberate contrasts between the supposedly 'tribal' nature of Maasai people and their 'modern' use of a mobile phone.

These images are not necessarily new; they build on older colonial discourses which have portrayed African audiences as 'ignorant' or 'gullible'. Colonial officials often deemed African spectators to be incapable of grasping the 'modern' genre of cinema and proposed special adaptations to ensure that colonial film propaganda was effective.[18] On the other hand, ideas of African audiences as passive and easily manipulable have been reiterated in more recent times against the background of a number of key events that have presupposed a causal relationship between hate speech mediated via radio and television and the incidence of violent individual behaviour. For example, in the context of the 1994 Rwandan genocide, both media and academic reports have accused the radio station, Radio Television Libre des Milles Collines (RTLM), of mobilizing Hutu militias to kill Tutsi civilians (Kellow and Steeves 1998; Li 2004; Thompson 2007; Bromley 2011). Most accounts assumed a simple, straightforward relationship between hate speech broadcast via radio and the subsequent killings. However, as audience scholars have demonstrated, the effects of media are more complex and not easily proven (Gauntlett 1998). Furthermore, as Straus (2007: 610) has argued, 'despite the central role regularly attributed to radio, there has been little sustained social scientific analysis of radio media effects in the Rwandan genocide'. The effects were mostly assumed instead of empirically investigated.

Similarly, in the wake of the 2007 elections in Kenya, local language radio stations in particular were accused of hate speech and use of ethnic stereotypes, and were held

responsible for the violent incidents that took place in the country (Abdi Ismail and Deane 2008; Wachanga 2011; Somerville 2011). SMS messages and online forums were also on some occasions considered to have been influential in inciting violence or spreading misinformation (Mäkinen and Wangu Kuira 2008; Musangi 2009; Ligaga 2009) while others emphasized the positive impact of the crowd-sourcing online platform Ushahidi ('testimony' or 'witness' in Swahili) which encouraged Kenyans to submit eyewitness reports of election-related political violence incidents by email or via SMS messages (Goldstein and Rotich 2008; Okolloh 2009). In attributing media with an important role in acts of violence, most studies have, however, failed to carry out in-depth audience research and have instead assumed that such messages would incite people to commit acts of violence. Whilst making strong claims about the impact of media on audiences, analyses have often carried out a textual analysis of media reports but have not employed empirical audience research to gain a better understanding of the ways in which listeners engaged with radio reports.

Echoing the cases in Rwanda and Kenya discussed above, media were also attributed with an important role in fuelling the so-called 'xenophobic riots' which took place all over South Africa in 2008. These outbreaks of violence especially targeted 'dark-skinned' foreign immigrants (but also internal migrants) of Somali, Nigerian, Zimbabwean and Mozambican descent and largely took place in low-income informal settlements in a number of South African cities. Against the background of the unrest, unfounded citizen journalist accounts on social media together with exaggerations of so called 'alien' invasions in tabloid newspapers were singled out as having contributed to the outbreaks of violence. Historically, South Africa's press targeted a minority of middle class, predominantly white readership but since the 2000s tabloid newspapers such as the English-language *The Daily Sun* and Afrikaans-language *Son* have rapidly gained popularity among poor, working-class and primarily black South Africans (Wasserman 2010). It could be argued that the causal relation drawn between media coverage and xenophobic violence in South Africa offered the authorities an easy scapegoat while downplaying the role of more structural factors in causing outbreaks of violence such as high levels of unemployment and inequality. Hadland (2010) usefully queries why tabloid media were implicated in the riots and concludes that '[i]t is plausible […] that the "blame" being heaped on the media in general and on the tabloids in particular for the xenophobic violence has its roots in the suspicion and tension that currently characterize the relationship between media and state in South Africa' (Hadland 2010: 133). While a number of academic studies have analysed the discriminatory manner in which foreign citizens were depicted in the South African press (Ransford and McDonald 2001; Coplan 2009; Nyamnjoh 2010; 2015), none of these carried out more detailed research on the way in which audience members engaged with and responded to tabloid media's coverage of xenophobic violence (cf. Smith 2011).

MEDIA CULTURE AND THE EVERYDAY
Instead of presupposing a linear, causal relation between media content and individual behaviour, there is a need to investigate more closely how African audiences interpret and make sense of media content — not only against the background of dramatic outbreaks of violence but also in the banal context of the everyday. Africa is not merely a continent of war and conflict but it is a place where people live their lives, critically engage with media and increasingly use digital media to participate in a virtual world. In arguing for a contextual approach to audiences and users, this book draws on the recent call by a number of scholars for a move from a 'media-centric' to a 'society-centred' (Couldry 2006) or 'non-media-centric' (Morley 2007, 2009) field of inquiry. For Morley (2007: 200), this involves the 'need to "decentre" the media, in our analytical framework, so as to better understand the ways in which media processes and everyday life are interwoven with each other'. These calls are

part of a proposed shift away from a focus on media institutions, texts or audiences towards an analysis of 'the open set of practices relating to, or oriented around, media' (Couldry 2004: 117)[19] or media culture, which is here understood as the 'thickening of specific patterns of thinking, discourse and practice' (Hepp 2009: 10). A practice-oriented analysis of media culture enables us to situate media, and their uses, within a wider social, political and cultural context. Media as objects, texts and institutions cannot be said to have a universal meaning but gain relevance in different ways in each and every context. Examining media culture is not merely a goal in itself but also a means to understand how people make sense of their identity, relate to others in society, or engage with the nation-state on an everyday basis. It can provide an entry point to other discussions, and shed light on how citizens experience processes of social change or imagine the future.

Within the fields of audience studies and internet studies, we have seen a growing shift in the last few decades from text-based approaches to more ethnographically-oriented methodologies. For example, from the 1980s onwards, reception analysis focused on how mostly television viewers were making sense of particular media texts such as BBC's Nationwide programme or the popular soap opera Dallas (Hall 1973; Morley 1980; Hobson 1982; Liebes and Katz 1990; Ang 1985). It produced empirical accounts which demonstrated that audiences were actively making meaning and interpreting media content in different ways depending on their social backgrounds. It could be argued that the early phase of internet studies similarly adopted a textual focus and examined websites as online discourses. Online discussion fora, listservs or fan communities were primarily approached as texts – not to be interpreted or decoded by audiences but as produced by internet users (Rheingold 1993; Jones 1995, 1997; Baym 1999; Hine 2000). Both audience and internet studies have subsequently made an analytical shift from an emphasis on texts to an ethnographic focus on the wider role of media in people's everyday lives. In audience studies, scholars have for example examined the domestic contexts of television viewing and used television as a lens to gain a better understanding of gender relations, or power relations in the home more broadly (Morley 1992; Moores 1993; Silverstone 1994; Murphy 1999; Bird 2003), while in internet studies, scholars began to study the offline contexts of internet and mobile phone use (Miller and Slater 2000; Horst and Miller 2006, 2012; Slater 2013).

In this volume, we examine media culture in a range of African contexts, and engage with both the early and later phases of audience studies and internet studies. In doing so, we set up a dialogue between text-based and contextual, ethnographic approaches, and between audience studies and internet studies more generally. As other scholars have pointed out, the distinction between audiences and users is increasingly more difficult to make as a result of the emergence of digital technologies. This has led a number of scholars to proclaim the death of the audience, now referred to as 'the former audience' (Gillmor 2004), or 'the people formerly known as audience' (Rosen 2006). Because of the presence of the internet, mobile phones and social media, it is argued that audiences are now able to take part in the creation of their own media content, debate issues of public interest with strangers and connect with worlds beyond their own. This has subsequently shifted the balance of power between producers and consumers of media, creating participatory or convergence culture (Jenkins 2006, 2008; Burgess and Green 2009) and leading some to coin neologisms such as 'prosumer' or 'produser' to reflect these changes (Bruns 2008).

In this book, we critique the idea that audiences (and audience studies) are passé and have been replaced by users. Echoing other scholars (Livingstone 2004; Livingstone and Press 2006), we maintain that text-driven approaches such as reception analysis and virtual ethnography (or the study of virtual communities more broadly) continue to have relevance and are able to make sense of complex digital environments in which audiences do a number of things in relation to media. Internet users do not only produce, upload, blog, or tweet but

also read, view and listen to the web, making sense of a range of media, including written text, sound, photos, and film. Hence, they remain audiences while using digital media. In addition, as previous work has shown, the so-called 'digital natives' who are actively adding content onto YouTube, blogging platforms or social media networks are frequently in the minority, suggesting that many users are in fact acting more like audiences. This is even more the case in the African context where internet access remains at present limited to a small minority of predominantly urban users.

In creating a dialogue between audience studies and internet studies, we aim to show how these two subfields can learn from each other, thereby avoiding reproducing a simplistic dichotomy between relatively 'passive' mass media audiences and 'hyperactive' digital media users. It is important not to overemphasize the agency of digital media users, and to acknowledge that internet users currently operate in highly constrained environments in which they may occasionally participate in content production but at the same time give up some of their privacy and part with personal data (van Dijck 2009). In African contexts, mobile phone users have often been framed as 'active agents' who have appropriated mobile phones in highly innovative and creative ways, for example by giving other callers a missed call in case of limited prepaid phone credit on their phone, known as the practice of 'beeping' or 'flashing' (Donner 2007). Other studies have examined how radically improved access to communicative tools such as mobile phones has enabled radio listeners in Africa to participate in debates broadcast on popular phone-in radio programmes (Willems 2013; Gagliardone 2015). Recent developments have highlighted how social media platforms such as Twitter have allowed African audiences to problematize global media coverage of Africa such as evidenced by the way in which Kenyan internet users invoked the hashtag #SomeoneMustTellCNN to critique the way in which CNN reported a violent attack at a bus stop in 2012.

While these examples have demonstrated the affordances of digital media in important ways, the agency of users — and in this case African users — can only be articulated in the context of powerful, expanding mobile phone companies keen to take advantage of new markets on the African continent, global platform providers such as Twitter and Facebook eager to extract data, or local media companies which are increasingly using data mining as a strategy to extend audience reach, such as commercial radio stations in Zambia (Willems 2013). On the other hand, it is also vital not to exaggerate the impact of digital media in having the ability to radically transform the audience experience. As several chapters in this book demonstrate, even prior to the emergence of digital media, audiences contributed to content production, for example through sending in letters to the editor or audience preferences more generally which strongly influenced the nature of radio programmes (Mano 2005a). While digital media have made audience engagement more widely accessible and arguably faster and more 'efficient', it is crucial to acknowledge that there is a longer history of audience participation on the continent, even in the face of – or possibly because of – strong state intervention in the media sector. To sum up, our book therefore critiques accounts that have in one way or another proclaimed the redundancy of audience studies in the face of emerging digital media. We argue that work on audiences is still able to shed light on the way in which ordinary people engage with an increasing range of media forms on an everyday basis.

In addition, it is essential to conduct audience (and user) research *from* multiple vantage points – including the African continent - so as to produce pluriversal accounts of audiences and users globally which may or may not challenge the often assumed universality of existing research (Mano 2009; Willems 2014b). This should not be treated as an exercise in 'adding colour' or 'creating diversity' but as a matter of justice, as an attempt to make global academic knowledge production more inclusive of a range of vantage points. As

Parameswaran (2003: 332) aptly puts it, '[p]redicting the premature death of audience studies because we believe the field has produced "enough" knowledge of media reception […] reiterates a limited vision of multiculturalism that does not question power differentials'. Irrespective of the rich body of literature on mass media audiences in Western contexts, we contend that the field of audience studies has not as yet reached a level of saturation where few innovative arguments remain to be made, and we hope that the following chapters will prove this.

CHAPTER OVERVIEW

Overall, this volume reiterates the importance of situating media consumption and uses within the wider social, economic and political context of people's everyday lives. As indicated earlier in this chapter, recent work within our field has advocated a re-orientation of the object of study in media and communication studies away from texts, producers and audiences towards media-related practices, broadly defined as that what people do and say in relation to media. A number of chapters in this volume focus on media practices adopting a largely ethnographic approach (Helle-Valle, Pype, Mutch) while others approach media culture through a narrower, text-driven approach that is usually associated with reception analysis (Wasserman and Mbatha, Mare, Heinze) or virtual ethnography (Schoon and Strelitz, Avle).

Engaging with recent work on media practices, Helle-Valle's largely theoretical contribution critiques the analytical focus on individuals in existing work in media and communication studies. Drawing on the work of the late Wittgenstein, his chapter proposes a return to the social and a shift in analysis from a focus on individuals to instead the range of settings, contexts and situations in which individuals consume media output. Practice theory is fruitful because it demands that we approach everyday life in an open and unbiased way, which then serves as the empirical foundation for generalization and further analysis. Thus, instead of assuming that particular instances relate to a cultural order — like *parole* links to *langue* — Helle-Valle insists that we need to leave out ideas about *langue* altogether and study everyday practices without resorting to 'higher order' explanatory principles. Rather than adopting media as primary object of study, his chapter suggests commencing our research with an analysis of everyday life so as to understand what role media play in it. Whilst acknowledging potential uses of the term 'media culture', his chapter also expresses caution given 'that the sense-making preconditions that communicative collectives are based on rarely, if ever, are shaped primarily by media'. Emphasizing the unique and particular about media uses suggests methodologies that are designed to capture meaningful practices that are always part of wider socialities. It also implies studying what particular media content means for specific individuals in specific situations and how the technology is used in given settings. Ultimately, Helle-Valle's chapter sets up an important bridge between practice theory, text-based audience studies and user-driven internet studies.

Discussions on African media have often revolved around relations between media institutions and the state, and concentrated on issues such as freedom of expression and press freedom. While it is vital to understand the policy context of media, these analyses have often largely made the experiences of audiences invisible. Adopting a historical approach, Heinze's chapter examines the complex and dynamic power relations between the state, broadcasting institutions and audiences. He does not only foreground the experiences of radio listeners in colonial and postcolonial Zambia but his contribution also critiques dominant framings of African audiences as passive dupes of state propaganda, and ideas of state-controlled radio stations as top-down instruments of ideology transmission. Challenging recent arguments on the rise of the 'produser', Heinze argues that digital media are not absolute prerequisites for the emergence of participatory culture. Instead, his chapter points to longer histories of

audience participation in the rather unexpected context of state-controlled radio. Radio was central to the production of colonial as well as postcolonial national subjects. But while information officers imagined a modern, middle-class 'African listener', and post-colonial administrators aspired to 'build the nation', audiences found creative ways to deal with the medium and to negotiate identities through it. Identities were not imposed upon nor simply rejected by listeners, but rather negotiated in spaces before the radio set, in letters to the station, or in newspapers. Broadcasters resisted strong state control and acknowledged that listeners' wishes needed to be taken into account if radio's ideological project — the creation of colonial/national subjects — was to be successful. While much of reception analysis research in Europe and the United States has examined audiences in a domestic setting, Heinze's chapter demonstrates the importance of situating reception within the historical and political context of the nation-state.

The gradual liberalization of the airwaves has resulted in bringing new private players into broadcasting and arguably has produced a more diversified media landscape in a number of African countries. In liberal-democratic approaches to media, public broadcasters are often seen as ideally placed to enable citizens to participate in rational-critical debate in a Habermasian sense through a well-functioning public sphere. However, as Wasserman and Mbatha's chapter demonstrates, in contexts where public broadcasters have become mouthpieces of state elites, new commercial, privately-owned players such as the privately-owned television station Muvi TV in Zambia are able to give voice to the perspectives of marginalized communities which have largely been silenced on state-controlled broadcasters like the Zambia National Broadcasting Corporation (ZNBC). Examining how non-elite audiences engage with television news, Wasserman and Mbatha categorize Muvi TV's news bulletins - which have a strong preference for 'human interest' stories – as part of the genre of 'tabloid television'. Tabloid media have often been chastised for depoliticizing the public by fermenting cynicism and lowering the standards of debate, thereby distracting audiences from political engagement, and not contributing to rational-critical deliberation as envisioned in a formal, Habermasian public sphere. However, Wasserman and Mbatha argue that because of their engagement with the plight of ordinary Zambians rather than state elites, Muvi TV's news bulletins have 'the potential of activating political discourses by providing news that has greater proximity and is anchored in the everyday lived experiences of its viewership'.

In neighbouring Zimbabwe, the content of *H-Metro*, which is the country's first English-language tabloid newspaper, is equally deeply connected to people's everyday lives, absorbing the abundance of rumours circulating in the streets of Harare. As Mare shows, the paper does not only incorporate gossip but also provokes commentary, talk and sociality in the city. The newspaper's sensational reporting style has created a moral panic among urban residents who are concerned about the way in which the paper monitors social conduct because unlike tabloids in the United States and Europe, *H-Metro* does not only feature celebrities but also reports on the lives of ordinary people. Mare explains *H-Metro*'s popularity by referring to the primacy it gives to breaking news from high-density suburbs and putting less emphasis on 'political news' in a country where citizens are fatigued with contentious politics. The focus on extraordinary stories about ordinary people and celebrities, and the laughter it provokes, provides welcome relief to readers from the politicized and polarized nature of formal broadsheets. While appropriating reception analysis as key theoretical approach, Mare's chapter also provides a vital critique of this approach by showing the limitations of confining reception analysis to a domestic context (which characterizes dominant Eurocentric approaches) but instead, he highlights the importance of situating newspaper consumption within a larger framework of the political context of the nation-state.

Efforts aimed at influencing audiences are neither exclusive to the colonial period nor reserved for state-controlled media institutions. Increasingly, we are arguably witnessing a broader scramble for the African audience. Global media corporations are keen to reach it, local advertisers wish to understand it better and non-profit organizations vest hope in the ability of media to contribute to behavioural change, good governance or conflict resolution.

Against the background of these new developments, Soleil-Frère's chapter argues that radio has been a key focus of a number of media support projects and programmes in the Great Lakes region. In these post-conflict settings, media have often been imagined as instrumental in provoking conflict and war but have also been considered as crucial in processes of peace building, reconstruction and reconciliation. In her contribution, Soleil-Frère examines the nature of the 'post-conflict audience' in five cities in Burundi, Rwanda and the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) so as to gain a better understanding of how listeners relate to specific radio stations, programmes and journalists, including donor-supported 'post-conflict' broadcasts. While donors and NGOs often imagine audiences as relatively passive listeners loyal to one station, her chapter demonstrates the growing fragmentation of audiences in the context of the liberalization and privatization of broadcasting and the larger number of stations available to listeners. The intensely competitive airwaves offer audiences some leverage as media institutions are competing for their attention. Like Heinze, Soleil-Frère highlights the agency of radio listeners, their role in shaping production contexts, and their enthusiastic participation in the highly popular genre of phone-in programmes. Engaging with debates on cross-cultural comparisons of media culture, her chapter also establishes a typology of the different uses made of the radio medium and audience expectations of local journalists, and crucially spells out how the local context contributes to shaping those uses and expectations. Acknowledging the high degree of diversity between the three countries and the five cities examined in her chapter, Soleil-Frère argues that a nation-centred analytical framework remains relevant so as to be able to account for these differences between a range of contexts.

Focusing on the efforts of global broadcasters to engage African audiences, Abubakar's contribution analyses the transformation of media landscapes as a result of advances in communication technologies which have changed the dynamics of the relationship between media and audiences. With a population of over 170 million, Africa's most populous country, Nigeria, comprises one of the key growth markets in the attempt of global broadcasters such as CCTV, BBC and Al Jazeera to compete for the African audience. Abubakar examines Northern Nigerians' interactions with the BBC World Service, and argues that postcolonial audiences often consider the BBC to be a credible global broadcaster that aids their understanding of international affairs. However, at the same time, Nigerian audiences also expressed a level of 'selective believability' in their interactions with international media, and revealed themselves as critical readers, highly aware of the BBC's positive bias towards 'the West' and negative bias towards the Muslim world and Africa more broadly. According to Abubakar, key to BBC World Service's expansion drive on the African continent are interactive radio programmes such as 'Have Your Say' which have proven to be extremely popular. These programmes respond to the rapid growth in Nigerians' access to digital technologies, particularly mobile phones which are increasingly used to consume a range of media content, including radio programmes. However, less optimistically than Heinze and Frère, Abubakar argues that irrespective of the participatory elements of radio programmes, 'media institutions remain the main deciders of the final output'. As he contends, 'audiences have certainly gained more power than they previously had but they are still not powerful enough to overturn the institutional structures imposed on them'.

Local broadcasters have also increasingly begun to incorporate interactivity and audience participation in their programmes as evidenced by the widespread popularity of the phone-in programme genre across the African continent. While this form of engagement is invited by media institutions, social media have enabled audiences to initiate participation in an unsolicited manner on their own terms at any time of the day. Avle investigates how Twitter users engage with Citi FM, an English-speaking commercial radio station based in Accra, Ghana which largely focuses on business and public affairs and brands itself as an explicitly listener-driven station. Her chapter highlights how listeners' tweets addressed to the station and to other listeners have enhanced the sociality of radio in Ghana. Describing the process in which audiences become users, Avle argues that the Twitter-facilitated interaction between radio stations and listeners feeds off and into a longer history of sociability inextricably linked to the medium of radio. Hence, digital technologies in many ways do not initiate participation or interactivity but are incorporated into already existing sociable practices. However, the affordances of social media do allow for more flexibility in audience engagement as compared to older forms of participation associated for example with phone-in programmes. Listeners' tweets are visible publicly even if they are not read out on radio; other listeners will be able to see them. Hence, as Avle points out, Twitter does not only enable audiences to connect with the station but also with fellow listeners and non-listeners, creating not only vertical but also horizontal linkages.

The final three chapters examine more closely the role of digital media in people's everyday lives, largely adopting ethnographic approaches. They also explore how different markers of identity – race, age and gender in particular – shape and are shaped by uses of digital media.

Before the arrival of social media, MXit was an extremely popular South Africa instant-messaging application used primarily by young people, which also demonstrates that Africans are not merely adopters of technology but are also part of processes of innovation. Schoon and Strelitz explore how in the low-income housing project of Hooggenoeg, in Grahamstown, Eastern Cape province, South Africa, a new generation of young people is able to converse with each other through the MXit app on their mobile phone. Schoon and Strelitz' analysis of MXit chatroom debates reveals that young people are moving beyond apartheid racial categories of 'coloured' and black African, constructing new hybrid identities which allow them to 'live both cultures' or to be 'Mix'. Their chapter explores the contradictory ways in which the mobile phone is woven into everyday youth practices — both facilitating the push towards hybridity and cultural re-invention while at the same time reproducing more regressive and essentialized identities. Ultimately, this proves that it is crucial to take into account the longer historical context of Apartheid when examining uses of digital media in South Africa. As several chapters in this volume have highlighted, African audiences and users are in many ways also postcolonial audiences and users whose media consumption and usage continues to be informed by the legacy of colonialism. Crucially also, Schoon and Strelitz treat the mobile phone not simply as a communicative device that has enabled a micro-public sphere (as their case study shows) but also as an object that communicates meanings in itself.

Echoing a similar material approach to media and communication, Pype examines mobile phones as objects that have not only become part of urban physical environments but are central in the management of family relationships and have provoked new dynamics in intergenerational encounters between the old and the young in Kinshasa, the capital of the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). While mobile phones are often associated with youth culture, Pype's chapter argues that an examination of the life worlds of Kinshasa's elderly cannot ignore the presence, circulation and use of information and communication technologies. Her chapter discusses the way in which Kinshasa's elders use - or do not use -

mobile phones and the role these play in intimate, intergenerational relationships. Mobile phones (and phone credit) have become gifts that elders often expect to receive from children and grandchildren, enabling the younger generations to keep an eye on their parents or grandparents and to indirectly care for their elders. Without adequate economic support, insurance and welfare benefits from the state, parents in Africa frequently look for support from those amongst their children who are gainfully employed. Pype's chapter focuses on the role of brokers who introduce elders to mobile phones or who use them on behalf of old people. Instead of assuming that older people are excluded from digital media, her chapter argues that they are not simply passive actors but often initiate the circulation of mobile phones, while at the same time ceding power to their children or grandchildren who are more accustomed to and knowledgeable about using mobile phones.

Like Pype, Mutch adopts an ethnographic approach to examine the novel ways in which young Zanzibari women use old and new media to negotiate sexual and marital identities and cultural power on an everyday basis. Her chapter explores whether and how digital media impact the agency of women within a predominantly Muslim context, characterized by highly gendered uses of private and public space. She argues that an understanding of the link between gendered space, sexual desire and marriage is needed in order to make sense of how young women use old and new media, and how it impacts on their agency. Public visibility – whether in the mediated public sphere or in physical spaces – is culturally relative and not always considered to be a valuable attribute for young Zanzibari women and girls. Context is therefore crucial in shaping both gender and media use. For women in Zanzibar, the mobile internet – frequently accessed through the private and intimate space of the bedroom – operates as an important source of information for self-improvement and provides helpful advice on careers, marriage or sexuality. Before the arrival of the mobile phone, internet browsing was largely confined to public spaces such as internet cafes as access to personal computers, laptops and fixed broadband internet was extremely limited. The mobile internet has not only widened access but has also enabled people to use the internet in the privacy of their homes. In contexts where movement in public spaces is highly gendered, this has impacted positively on women's agency and their ability to use the internet.

DECOLONIZING AND PROVINCIALIZING AUDIENCE AND INTERNET STUDIES

The bulk of academic research on audiences and users has so far concentrated on the Anglo-American context, which is not unrelated to the equally strong commercial audience research industry and the well-established tradition of public opinion research in Western Europe and the United States. Detailed knowledge on audiences and users is of course vital to a range of stakeholders, including governments, political parties, advertising agencies and media institutions. Understanding the audience is considered to facilitate the process of moulding, influencing and controlling it. In other parts of the world, empirical research has been less prevalent, or is only more recently emerging. For example, in the context of Latin America, research on audiences has been comparatively scarce (McAnany and La Pastina 1994; Lozano and Frankenberg 2009). For some, this is explained by 'the tendency of Latin American scholars to opt for theoretical essays instead of empirical work due to lack of funds and in many cases deficient training in methodological issues' (Lozano and Frankenberg 2009: 168). The broader 'political economy' of in-depth, ethnographic research is also highlighted by Murphy and Kraidy (2003: 3) who stress that '[e]xtended fieldwork is costly, requiring significant institutional and time resources that tend to be concentrated in a select group of elite universities'. This has also been a constraint in the context of Africa-focused audience and user research where the growing dependency on donor-funded research and the

rise of 'consultancy culture' has negatively impacted on the ability of African academics to carry out independent empirical research (Willems 2014a).

As mentioned earlier in this chapter, the need for more – and arguably less Eurocentric – research on media and communication beyond 'the West' has been stressed in a number of calls that have been made since the late 1990s and 2000s to 'internationalize', 'de-westernize' or 'decolonize' the field of media, communication and cultural studies. So far, a number of monographs have applied reception analysis or audience ethnography to television audiences in non-Western contexts such as India (Mankekar 1999), Egypt (Abu-Lughod 2005), China (Lull 1991), Brazil (Tufte 2000; Pace 2013). Scholars have also researched the national or transnational reception of specific non-Western media genres such as telenovelas (Tufte 2000; La Pastina 2004; Werner 2006), Bollywood cinema (Banaji 2006; Rao 2007) and increasingly Nollywood cinema (Okome 2007; Saul and Austen 2010; Krings and Okome 2013; Omoera 2014 and Dekie et al 2015). In the context of digital media, studies have emerged which have examined mobile phone users in China (Qui 2009; Wallis 2015), Japan (Ito, Okabe and Matsuda 2005) and Trinidad (Horst and Miller 2006), digital media users in the Philippines (Madianou and Miller 2011), and internet café users in Ghana (Burrell 2012). Against the background of globalization, a growing proportion of work in audience studies has also investigated transnational or diasporic audiences (Gillespie 1995; Appadurai 1996; Cunningham and Sinclair 2000; Karim 2003; Georgiou 2006; Bailey, Georgiou and Harindranath 2007; Mano and Willems 2010; Athique 2014).

Existing work has drawn attention to the specific Western genealogy of key concepts such as 'audience' and 'public' which may not easily travel and/or apply to contexts elsewhere. Butsch and Livingstone (2014) emphasize the revealing nature of examining discourses about audiences in contexts outside 'the West' which shed further light on the terminology used in a range of languages to refer to those consuming or using media. Takahashi (2009: 88) proposes a dual approach which deploys Japanese emic concepts such as *uchi* (inside, private) and *soto* (outside, public) (or 'us' and 'them') to make sense of audience engagement with 'old' and 'new' media in Japan while at the same time assessing the relevance of Western etic concepts (such as the notion of parasocial interaction or participation) in the Japanese context, thereby problematizing their status as universally relevant concepts.

This volume contributes to the project of provincializing and decolonizing existing debates on audiences and users in the following ways. First of all, a number of chapters have highlighted the importance of colonial histories in shaping how audiences and users consume, make sense of, relate to, or produce media content, suggesting that African viewers, listeners and users could in many ways be seen as *postcolonial* audiences and users.[20] Heinze demonstrates that Zambia's legacy of state-controlled broadcasting - which was introduced by the colonial state - did not always succeed in 'brainwashing' listeners but instead produced a highly media-literate audience. This is also echoed by Wasserman and Mbatha's and Abubakar's chapters which both highlight the critical manner in which Muvi TV viewers and BBC World Service listeners engage with media content as a result of their exposure to a range of news sources with highly divergent ideological foci. Digital media, on the other hand, have enabled mobile phone users in South Africa to challenge and go beyond essentialist identities associated with the colonial legacy of Apartheid, as Schoon and Strelitz argue. In historicizing audience and user experiences, we are able to explain why viewers, listeners and users relate to, or produce, media content in a certain way.

The focus on history has also problematized celebratory accounts of the emancipatory potential of digital media arguably enabled by mobile phones and the internet. Several chapters have shown how mass media audiences participated in content production and were able to shape the practices of radio stations and television stations prior to the emergence of

digital media (Heinze), or how digital cultures of participation such as Twitter use build on existing forms of sociality and radio talk (Avle). This points to a longer history of audience participation and engagement than conventionally acknowledged in internet studies, in a political context which has arguably often been considered as 'authoritarian' and state-controlled in the bulk of available literature. Our book points to the possibility of audience agency within a range of constraints.

Apart from taking into account the historical context, our volume argues for the need to situate audience and user experiences more broadly with certain social, economic and political contexts. Both popular and academic accounts have occasionally essentialized African audiences and users, and presented them as inherently different from their Western counterparts. From the colonial portrayal of African cinema spectators as 'uncivilized', incapable of making sense of 'modern' films, the trend has continued into contemporary times such as in the popular representations of 'primitive' Maasai with 'modern' mobile phones. It could be argued that the tendency to 'orientalise' non-Western audiences is not exclusive to accounts of African audiences. For example, in their cross-cultural reception analysis of the popular 1980s American soap *Dallas*, Katz and Liebes (1990: 54-55) describe the different ways in which viewers make sense of this programme as follows:

> The Americans and the kibbutz members discuss the relationship between the programs and the more intimate spheres of self, family, good friends. The Russian statements are about 'general social categories' – such as women, businessmen, parents, etc., protecting their privacy and aesthetic superiority by resisting potential allusions to self, primary group or ethnic status. The Moroccans, like the Arabs, also contrast themselves with the Ewings – more as Israelis or Jews than as Moroccans.

Instead of 'othering' non-Western audiences and attributing different ways of engaging with media to audiences' inherent 'difference' or 'alterity', this book places an emphasis on the shaping nature of context and examines how different social, political and economic contexts impinge on audience and user experiences. The significance of context has been highlighted previously in audiences studies, for example through Ang's (1996: 250) call for 'radical contextualism' which referred to 'the idea of profound embeddedness of television consumption (and of media consumption in general) in everyday life, and therefore its irreducible heterogeneity and dynamic complexity'.

However, in many Anglo-American accounts of audiences, context frequently refers to the space of the living room, and the impact of gendered and aged power relations within the family on the practice of television viewing. In this volume, we argue for a broader interpretation of context. Whilst we have an interest in the way in which media reflect and shape everyday life, we do not merely consider the domestic aspects of the everyday but argue for a wider analytical framework that situates media consumption and use within specific social, political and economic contexts. As Dilley (1999: 2) has argued:

> Context too involves making connections and, by implication, disconnections. A phenomenon is connected to its surroundings: contexts are sets of connections construed as relevant to someone, to something or to a particular problem, and this process yields an explanation, a sense, an interpretation for the object so connected. The context or frame also creates a disjunction between the object of interest and its surroundings on the one hand, and those features which are excluded and deemed as irrelevant on the other.

It could be argued that the focus on domestic context has to a certain extent depoliticized the field of audience studies, and ignored for example how mass media enable audiences to encounter the nation-state on an everyday basis (Heinze, Wasserman and Mbatha, Mare), how their media consumption or use relates to spaces outside of the living room (Mutch) or to the increasingly interactive approaches adopted by local or transnational media corporations (Abubakar, Avle).

Situating audience and user engagement within the larger analytical context of the state or market enables us to understand media-related practices beyond simply the context of the 'living room' which has often dominated studies of European and American audiences. Such a critical approach helps us to re-politicize audience and internet studies in two ways. Firstly, a naïve, decontextualized celebration of audience and user agency outside the constraints imposed by the state or the market would be at risk of underplaying the growing scramble for African audiences and users by transnational corporations and public diplomacy initiatives. Secondly, a critical approach considers a study of audiences and users not simply as an end in itself but as a critical window onto broader issues such as people's engagement with the state or the growing role of the market. This is not only crucial in an African context where the state is often attracting significant analytical attention but is also vital in Western contexts where democratic systems are increasingly losing legitimacy (cf. Crouch 2004). In our book, the importance of context is not intended 'to add colour' to analyses of the so-called 'non-West' but we hope that the chapters in this book ultimately help to provincialize the decontextualized nature of many Anglo-American interpretations of audiences and users which frequently present themselves as universal, dislocated and non-situated accounts.

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