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Emerging Gender, Media and Technology Scholarship in Africa: Opportunities and Conundrums in African Women's Navigating Digital Media

Audrey Gadzekpo, Paula Gardner, H. Leslie Steeves

Over the past decade and earlier, much of the academic and grey literature has painted an optimistic picture of rapidly increasing access and growth of digital technologies in Africa. Industry statistics put internet penetration in Africa close to 40 percent and growing, even though the continent still lags behind the world average of Internet users (Internet World Statistics, June 2019). Some estimates predict that by 2025 the sub-continent will add 167 million mobile subscribers to its existing 456 million (GSMA Report, 2019). Mobile devices, especially, have assumed centrality in the lives of ordinary people and provide prospects for Africa to leapfrog into the modern digital world. Smart phones are enabling millions of Africans to share news and information more easily and to tap into all kinds of essential services, much like elsewhere in the world.

Scholars have attempted to track and analyse these developments by directing attention to the multi-faceted ways in which digital media technologies are being appropriated and how they are impacting people and institutions. The bulk of the emerging literature confirms that digitization is creating unprecedented opportunities for Africans to network locally and globally, influencing their daily interactions on personal as well as formal levels and enhancing their ability to access a wide range of services – from health, to education, banking, markets, and entertainment (Mabweazara, 2015; Nyamjoh & Brudvig, 2016; Willems & Mano, 2016). The literature also shows that, although transformative in many ways, the digital landscape is not egalitarian; rather it is marked by marginality and privilege and reflective of deepening divides among different

demographic groups (Willems & Mano, 2016; Nyamjoh & Brudvig, 2016). This status quo invites academic attention that focuses more critically on the multiple intersectionalities of digital encounters occurring at the macro, micro and meso levels of society. We need to deepen understandings of how different users experience media and information technologies. As new forms of digital devices emerge, questions of how factors such as gender, sexuality, socio-economic status, livelihoods, locations, religion, age, etc. determine access and consumption remain pivotal.

While the corpus of studies on gender and digital technology is growing, much of the research remains Eurocentric. Thus, there are still striking gaps in our knowledge regarding how non-Western women, particularly from the Global South, appropriate and negotiate digital technologies in meaningful ways. Feminist research on media technologies have often revealed the power relations, inequalities and vulnerabilities, as well as advocacy and agency, that result from women's increased dependence on digital technologies (van Zoonen, 1992, Antonio and Tuffley, 2014). Still we must examine the configurations of marginality and advantage that mark different African societies when it comes to ICT access and use. For example, it is important to ask questions such as: How does ICT use in a rural village in Kenya differ from the gendered experiences of rural dwellers in the Democratic Republic of Congo that is emerging from conflict? It bears reminding that Africa, the world's second populous continent, is a complex continent of 54 countries with a population of more than 1.3 billion people from varied ethnic groups. Though rich in natural resources, with a growing middle class, the continent is also the world's poorest where the majority of people live on less than $1.90 a day (https://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/poverty/). The 2017 gender statistics report of the UN indicates that globally, there are 122 women aged 25 to 34 living in extreme poverty for every 100 men of the same age group (https://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/poverty/). It is important to probe the ways in which Africa's income disparities influence women's access and use of media and information technologies.

Recently, in a bid to accelerate progress in its 54 countries, the African Union served notice that it aspires to "digitally connect every individual, business and government in Africa by 2030" and has drafted a digital transformation strategy for the continent (African Union, 2019). Whether or not this ambitious plan is achievable is up for debate in light of the difficulties many African countries have faced in achieving other lofty developmental goals such as the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Still, the idea of digitally-connected African citizens must provoke us to ask how proposed regional and national digitization strategies address issues relating to women and marginalised groups. We know that African women and men have different (and sometimes similar) access to and control of resources, including digital resources. A working paper by UN Women (September 2019) reports that the digital gender gap has grown rather than shrunk, especially in Africa, where, in 2016, this gap stood at 23 percent. These reports often show that within countries the digital divide is not only gendered, but also reveals disparities by age and the urban-rural location. It is realities like this that signal to us the importance of interrogating the conditions under which shades of access and affordability, as well as empowerment, innovation and creativity, occur in women's relationships with digital technologies.

This special volume of Ada is focused on studies that feature cultures of media and technology in African environments in furtherance of an inclusive feminist agenda aimed at contributing more authentic African experiences to research knowledge. The articles in this special issue recognize gender as a socio-cultural construct that must be conceptualized and researched with the peculiarities of culture and specificities of different societies in mind (Oyewumi, 2011).

The essays in the volume document the varied ways in which media technologies are accessed and appropriated in different locations on the continent. They force a re-think on how digital technologies are restructuring gendered power relations and challenge us to consider re-constructing gender narratives to account for this. The authors have approached questions of how gender operates in African environments and cultures of media and technology using different methodological approaches -- ethnography, content analysis, contextual analysis, and quantitative methods.

Kwami's essay sets the tone by providing a broad analysis on gender and ICT practices, policies, developments and academic research in Africa and an exhaustive critique of what has or has not worked. The essay discusses the interplay of marginality, mobilities and social networks in women's use of mobile devices and suggests that,

despite the opportunities they present, ICTs also "reinforce existing social inequities and in some cases exacerbate them." Her analysis offers several recommendations on addressing the challenges inherent in African women's access and appropriation of media and technology and hints at a research agenda worth considering.

Atuhura's contribution opens up critical new ways of interrogating narratives of victimhood and agency. Her re-reading of Ilja Kok and Willem Timmers' documentary on Ethiopia's lip-plated Mursi women offers an oppositional interpretation of the exploitation and commodification of Mursi women's bodies by global tourists by pointing to the various enactments of agency embedded in seeming acts of powerlessness represented in media texts.

The need to re-examine narratives of victimhood and agency also informs Jaksch's case study on an African feminist, community-based intervention for maternal health. Jaksch shows how the participatory research practice of Photovoice (PV) empowered women in the Hakuna Kama Mama project to share their experiences and resulted in the deep insights researchers gained from localized understandings of maternal mortality and morbidity in Zanzibar, Tanzania. As she argues in her paper, innovative approaches to knowledge production can "serve as a corrective to the over-representation of African women as hapless victims, which robs them of their agency."

Additional insights into how power and authority manifest in the use of technology emerge from Komen's case study of the gendered uses of mobile phones in the rural community of Marakwet, Kenya. This paper enlightens us on the multifarious and beneficial ways both men and women experience mobile phones and the manner in which digital devices help to disrupt power relations by enabling women to circumvent household arrangements that exacerbate their powerlessness. Like Jaksch, Komen's examination of the term maendeleo, which has long been used by ordinary Kenyans to describe their own development, highlights the importance of foregrounding localized understandings into conceptualizations of Western terms accurately capture non-Western experiences.

Mohammed's case study of a twitter campaign in Ghana, #WearYourDrossNow, uses critical framing analysis, in the context of social media practices in Ghana, to reveal the religious, generational, and class based characteristics of the "WearYourDrossNow campaign conducted by culture celebrity Mama Zimbi. The hashtag activism shames sexually active young female middle class university students, and deploys marriage as a reward available only to those engaging in heteronormative and abstinence practices.

Mohammed argues that the practice infantalizes young adult women, while also recuperating 'feminist activism' in the service of patriarchal religious systems, where it functions, regressively, to deny sexual choice to young women. Importantly, the article points out that not all women's social media activism is feminist and may seriously undermine many other historic and ongoing campaigns to empower women.

Interesting questions continue to be raised on how gendered bodies are represented, signified and given meaning in African contexts. Nyanoti's comparative study of unequal photographic representations of female and male Olympic athletes in Kenya feeds into existing studies on the gendered coverage of elite sports women (Sherry, Osborne, & Nicholson, 2016). Using semiotic analysis to study two leading dailies in Kenya, the study shows how Kenyan media construct sports as a male domain and represent women's sporting prowess and achievements as less significant than that of men.

Vanyoro's essay allows for scholarly interrogation into the seldom studied subject of how males who engage in sexual activity with members of the same sex are represented in media texts in the context of Africa. The study deploys discourse and semiotic analysis to examine the dominant language and images that normalize gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex (GBTI) masculinity among men on the QueerLife Website. The findings indicate that the construction of gender-based binaries of masculinity and femininity, long the subject of feminist critiques of mainstream media texts, have been replicated in GBTI media texts. The discursive frames used masculinity and femininity representations in GBTI texts betray the abiding influence of patriarchal frames determine a particular masculine attributes as desirable, while conversely framing those considered feminine as undesirable. Importantly, Vanyoro's analysis problematizes broader power relations implicated in other identity markers such as race and class, which form the basis of inclusion, exclusion and mis-representations of the "other," even within marginalized groups such as Africa's GBTI community.

Conclusion

The essays in this special volume are by no means exhaustive of the gendered nature of media technologies in Africa; however, they strongly suggest Africa as "a rich site 'of new knowledge and ways of knowing and being'" (Adebanwi, 2016 quoting Comaroff & Comaroff 2011). The range of issues that arise from the articles demonstrate how media and technologies can simultaneously enhance and exacerbate gendered life situations. Access and affordability are significant factors in how these technologies are experienced, but so are existing social hierarchies that have long structured power relations in communities. Emerging scholarship on Africa must thus avoid universalizing women's experiences and take into account the contexts within which these technologies are deployed in order to better illuminate how they disrupt inherent inequalities and provide opportunities for women to innovate their way to empowerment.

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Citation

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