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INTRODUCTION

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New media and processes of social change in contemporary Africa

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Within the last two decades, many Africans, like most people around the world, have experienced dramatic changes in their access to and use of new information and communication technologies (ICT), including traditional mass media. Since its slow-paced introduction in the 1990s, mobile telephony has achieved remarkable and unprecedented popularity around the world. In several sub-Saharan countries like Botswana, Ghana and Kenya, mobile phones have reached almost every corner of society; while in other countries like Burundi, Angola and Malawi mobile phones are increasingly popular although not yet common household items.¹ Smartphones and cheaper Internet-enabled phones together with mobile Internet options have introduced new additions

1. According to statistics from the International Telecommunication Union (ITU), mobile-cellular telephone subscriptions have increased dramatically in all African countries over the last 10–15 years. However, this mobile phone revolution comes with significant regional differences. Subscriptions per 100 inhabitants in 2005 and 2017, respectively, were 30 and 141 in Botswana, thirteen and 127 in Ghana, thirteen

and 86 in Kenya, two and 55 in Burundi, eight and 45 in Angola and three and 42 in Malawi. The numbers of subscriptions should be distinguished from the penetration of mobile phones at personal and household level because for various reasons many people use more than one subscription. However, the dramatic increase in subscriptions does indicate a similar increase in penetration.

2. The statistics on radio and television penetration in sub-Saharan Africa are less systematic than those applying to mobile phone subscriptions. But numerous national censuses, local surveys and especially Afrobarometer surveys from 37 countries add up to a motley picture with significant national variations and a few general characteristics. Afrobarometer provides an online data analysis tool with data from their surveys (<http://afrobarometer.org/online-data-analysis/analyse-online>), and according to a data analysis conducted by the authors, in 2005/06 radio in most countries had a household penetration of 70–80% in rural areas and 5–10% higher in urban areas. These figures only increased marginally from 2005/06 to 2016/17. When it comes to television penetration, the national and urban–rural differences have been pronounced. In 2005/06 only 4% of rural and 26% of urban households in Uganda had television, whereas the same was true of 22% of rural and 56% of urban households in Ghana. By 2016/17 penetration had increased in all the

to people’s media diet, and an increasing number of Africans are now able to use Facebook, WhatsApp and Twitter. However, compared with the rest of the world, sub-Saharan Africa is still lagging behind in terms of Internet access and use, being one of the least wired regions in the world (Poushter et al. 2018).

Simultaneously, the number of Africans with access to an expanded supply of radio and television has increased,² following the liberalization of national media markets in many African countries and the advent of affordable radio and television sets and (in some contexts) satellite and digital television. Consequently, in their everyday practices, most Africans now have new ways to access and distribute information and to communicate within a variety of different locally specific new communication ecologies (Gustafsson and Nielsen 2017).

These dramatic changes in access to and use of ICTs across sub-Saharan Africa do not take place in a vacuum, because the relationship between society and technologies is dialectic. Developments in the ICT sector are therefore interlaced with society at large (Nkwi 2009: 51). This recognition has produced certain influential lines of thought concerning the study of the interrelationships between new media and social change processes. Some of these central lines of thought that are further unpacked in the succeeding paragraphs include the following five points:

1. a focus on changes in the dynamics in the political and socio-economic spheres,
2. appreciation of the importance of context and the dynamic relationship between broader societal developments such as state policies and the role of the market in furthering new media developments and their use,
3. recognition of the importance of media ecology and everyday life perspectives in unpacking the role of new media in social change processes,
4. the importance of theoretical frameworks that recognize the primacy of context and the aforementioned everyday life and media ecology perspectives,
5. the important (but often under-emphasized) need to recognize that the interlinkage between new media and social change in the context of broader interrelated developments implies that social change is often accompanied by recurrent stasis.

To start with the first point above, the political consequences of the current ICT developments come in many forms and have changed the dynamics between the different actors in the sphere of politics. The emergence of new local, national and transnational private broadcasters has provided a variety of news sources and diminished the dominance of government-controlled news, thereby weakening direct political control over the mass media.

Additionally, the proliferation of the Internet and social media has provided politicians and civil society groups with opportunities to present and discuss their views – although not always without the risk of reprisals by the government or harassment by opponents (Kelly and Cook 2011). Furthermore, more people now have access to social media, offering them new ways to engage and partake in the political debate. This is particularly relevant during election periods, with social media helping ordinary citizens to express their political views, organize and mobilize in support of various causes, and closely monitor and shed light on electoral malpractices (Bartlett et al. 2015; Smyth 2013). However, due to the unequal distribution of access to the Internet, only a small minority (often with an urban base) are able to engage in online political activism; and the impact of social media on political issues is still uncertain and debatable.

In more general socio-economic terms, one significant and well-documented example of the economic impacts of new media technologies in sub-Saharan Africa has been the popularity of mobile phones and mobile phone-based money transfer services. In several African countries, mobile phones and mobile money transfer have created new job opportunities, as the demand for services connected to mobile phones has grown (Aker and Mbiti 2010; Ndung'u and Waema 2011: 119; Morawczynski 2009). These services also assist existing businesses by making it easier to communicate with both consumers and suppliers (Munyua and Mureithi 2008: 18). Mobile money transfer services also allow millions of previously unbanked Africans to store money, send money to loved ones and pay school fees (Aker and Mbiti 2010).

Second, both the state and the market have been central players in shaping the scope of new media available to sub-Saharan Africans, and in many respects the possible uses of the new technologies as well. On a macro level and in alignment with UN and World Bank policies, which express great belief in the impact of new ICTs on socio-economic development (Helle-Valle 2019), many African governments have developed national media and ICT policies. These often include the significant liberalization of traditional mass media and ambitious plans to extend the reach of ICTs to all corners and sectors of society (Sey 2011; Zeleza 2005).

Government policies have led to a new sense of dynamism and a stronger market influence, with various market forces propelling current developments in the ICT sector. Major global corporations including network providers (e.g. Vodafone, Airtel and MTN) and hardware and software providers (e.g. Huawei, Samsung, Facebook and Google), in collaboration with a host of small and medium-size local entrepreneurs, have been the driving forces behind the increased penetration of mobile technologies. Major regional corporations (e.g. MultiChoice and CanalSat Afrique) have taken advantage of the deregulated broadcasting policies and provided increased although still fairly limited access to transnational television thanks to the improved penetration of cable, satellite and digital technology (Willems and Mano 2017: 2). Finally, in several countries, private radio and television stations have mushroomed and provided new voices in the public sphere.

Consequently, the often politically deregulated and widely market-driven ICT developments in African countries have caused a paradigm shift from a supply-led system towards a partially demand-driven system, with users being addressed both as citizens and to a greater extent as consumers. The new service providers have overcome some of the previous structural barriers to ICTs (political control, networks, limited power supply, prohibitive costs), and can cater to a variety of needs for communication, connectivity, information, education and entertainment, and the demand for ICTs has been overwhelming. However, costs are still prohibitive for many low-income families, and many people spend a considerable amount of their disposable income on ICTs, even 'using money set aside for essential items such as food to buy airtime' (Wasserman 2011: 149).

Third, the provision of significantly diversified communication and media services has meant that in their everyday routines (in both rural and urban areas in sub-Saharan Africa), ordinary Africans now use more than one medium to serve their various needs. From an academic perspective, this reality underlines the importance of adopting a communication ecology and everyday life perspective in understanding the relationship between new media and processes of social change.

According to Altheide (1995), the concept of communication ecology provides a key to comprehend the interrelationship between communication

countries, although there were remarkable national variations: 9% of rural and 55% of urban households in Uganda had television in 2016/17, whereas the same was true of 55% of rural and 90% of urban households in Ghana. These figures show that television is a new medium for many families.

and sociocultural changes: '[T]he ecology of communication is intended to help us understand how social activities are organized and the implication for social order. Very few routine activities remain unchanged in the face of drastic changes in information technology and communication' (Altheide 1995: 9).

The biological metaphor (ecology) is a contrast to any sense of technological determinism and implies a focus on dynamic processes, interdependence, complexity and the coexistence of various communication technologies. This coexistence and interdependence suggests 'that a change in any portion of the process is likely to influence another portion' (Altheide 1995: 11). Furthermore, Fuller specifies that the media ecology concept 'also refers to the multiplicity of meanings associative to the constituent binding relations of information objects contained within the ecology' (2005: x). Finally, the holistic concept pays attention to 'communication-related aspects of the contexts in which the people we were studying operate, which nevertheless were in turn imbricated in other structural, social, economic and cultural contexts' (Tacchi 2006: n.pag.).

One important context when discussing media use that is also aligned with the media ecology perspective is everyday life. To approach media from an everyday life perspective requires us to explore people's experiences of media and what they do with media on a daily basis. It centres our attention on how media use is interlaced with the mundane and normal aspects of everyday life and related to identity formation, societal norms and power structures. Media practices and media routines are rarely fully conscious practices – instead, they are taken for granted and are just something people do. However, examining them more closely makes it possible to understand the meanings ascribed to media use and why and how these practices become normal and are taken for granted in the first place (Markham 2017).

Fourth, the recognition and appreciation of media ecology and everyday life perspectives as important entry points in unpacking the relationship between new media and processes of social change carries with it theoretical implications. These implications are evident in the ways in which central theoretical perspectives on media and social change scholarship have evolved over time. Amongst these central perspectives are uses and gratifications theory, domestication theory and mediation theory.

Uses and gratifications theory emphasizes that audiences are active and use media to fulfil certain needs. It shifts the focus away from what media do to people, concentrating instead on what people do with media. However, by focusing too strongly on individual media consumption, this approach overlooks structural aspects which influence and restrict the ways in which people use media (Moore 1993).

Domestication theory, on the other hand, acknowledges the dialectic relationship between society and ICTs by considering the contexts in which ICTs are used and experienced (Silverstone and Hirsch 1992). It tries to understand the process whereby a new technology becomes domesticated and interlaced with people's everyday life and the meanings and roles which are ascribed to technologies. Originally, domestication theory was closely associated with the home setting; but in recent years it has been used more frequently as a framework for understanding the appropriation of new media technologies beyond the home (Hahn and Kibora 2008; Haddon 2006: 196).

In an increasingly media-saturated world, people largely experience and learn about the world around them through media. The theory of mediation explains how media technologies transmit content across physical distance, thereby transcending time and space (Silverstone 1999). Mediation can also be perceived as a symbolic process which allows for (re)circulating, (re)constructing

and (re)consuming meanings across and within societies (McCurdy 2013). It thus potentially facilitates the creation of meaningful connections between people by decreasing geographical, cultural and social distance (Silverstone 1999).

All the above theories try to understand the uses of media and communication technologies and the implications they may have on people's everyday life. But they also all originate in western academic thinking and are based upon empirical studies in western societies (see Livingstone 2007). So they cannot simply be applied in non-western contexts without modifications which take local circumstances into consideration. As some scholars have noted, when ethnocentrically biased 'Western' communication research/theories are applied in a non-western setting, they tend to be short of proper comprehension of 'other cultures, their values, belief systems and communication models' (Khiabany 2003: 415). For this and related reasons, scholarship focusing on new media and processes of social change in sub-Saharan Africa has also highlighted the need to de-westernize the field.

The complex and contested concept of de-westernization is far from new, but it is still immensely relevant in this field – as underlined by Willems and Mano (2017), who call for a de-westernization of audience studies in the introduction to their edited volume *Everyday Media Culture in Africa: Audiences and Users*. They criticize the prevalence of long-standing stereotypes built on colonial discourses that present African audiences 'as "primitive" or even "criminal"'; and they maintain that in recent studies African audiences are often regarded as 'passive and easily manipulable', as in the case of the Rwandan genocide, where a simple causal 'relationship between hate speech broadcast via radio and the subsequent killings' (Willems and Mano 2017: 5) was assumed without being properly empirically investigated:

Instead of presupposing a linear, causal relation between media content and individual behaviour, there is a need to examine 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.

(Willems and Mano 2017: 7)

Willems and Mano's appeal for more contextualized and sensitive audience studies that abandon a linear, causal relation between content and individual behaviour, and for studies of the everyday use of ICTs, is commendable and in line with the aim of this special issue. However, their call for the de-westernization of audience studies raises questions about the meaning of de-westernization especially in the African context. The specific appeal for contextualized and sensitive audience studies can hardly be seen as de-westernization, because it complies with what can be referred to as long-standing 'Western academic standards' for well-researched communication and audience studies. The Anglo-American canons within domestication theory (Haddon 2006) and audience studies (Livingstone 2013; Morley 1992) for instance have long contextualized communication and audience studies and abandoned linear, causal relationships both in reception studies of specific media texts and in studies focusing on media ecologies. Furthermore, Willems and Mano explicitly suggest that we should draw on recent turns in western media studies in 'a move from a "media-centric" to a "society-centered" (Couldry 2006) or "non-media-centric" (Morley 2009) field of inquiry' (2017: 7). In other words, we are still faced with a fundamental

question: in the study of new media use and their implications in sub-Saharan Africa, does de-westernization imply more than a properly contextualized and sensitive use of available and relevant methodologies and theories? Willems and Mano (2017) make a reference to Barber, who points out:

What 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.

(1997: 357, here quoted in Willems and Mano 2017: 4)

In accordance with this, Ngomba (2012) has summarized some of the arguments in favour of a de-westernization of African communication research.

African scholars have thus been urged to work towards the further de-Westernisation of social science research (Ndlela 2007: 329), in order to come up with what Balagangadhara and Keppens (2009: 66f) call 'alternative descriptions of their cultures and societies'. African social scientists have been urged to specifically develop alternative theories and 'their own social science tradition that will enable African societies to fully understand the nature of their problems and provide solutions to them and that will contribute towards the correction of the distortions of African society and its culture perpetrated by many years of Western world views and interpretations'.

(Mlambo 2006: 172; Ngomba 2012: 165)

Ngomba further argues: 'With specific reference to communication studies as a whole in Africa, the incessant calls for its articulations notwithstanding, there are currently hardly any "pure" Afro-centric theoretical perspectives which are coherent, empirically tested and thus useful to research' (Ngomba 2012: 165–66). Ngomba ends up arguing for a heuristic approach that 'involves the circumnavigation of mainstream Afrocentric discourses of de-westernization. It implies selecting useful existing "Western theories" and their critical utilisation in research, in a way that offers contextually relevant extensions of such theories' (Ngomba 2012: 166). The articles in this special issue mainly use this pragmatic heuristic approach.

In a critical review of the state of comparative political communications research, Norris argues that many editors of comparative political communications volumes only provide 'loose theoretical and organizational frameworks' for contributors. Norris argues that this tendency ends up problematizing the generation of 'interesting generalizations' in the field (2009: 337). In many ways, this critique from Norris finds resonant echoes in relation to this special issue. We, as editors, have not provided a pre-selected theoretical, methodological or epistemological perspective for the different contributors to engage with. However, contrary to Norris' argument we find this eclectic theoretical and organizational framework as vital and reflective of the heuristic perspective that informs this special issue and which we argue, should inform media and social change scholarship broadly.

The final line of thought is the important point about the almost simultaneous (and at times paradoxical) coexistence of social change and stasis. Epistemologically, this dualism between instances of new media-facilitated social change and recurrent vestiges of stasis suggests that in thinking about

social change conceptually, we ought to be wary of the obsessive focus on progressive or major changes.

All societies continuously undergo social changes; and as Lewin emphasizes, social change coexists with social stability:

Periods of social change may differ quite markedly from periods of relative social stability. Still, the conditions of these two states of affairs should be analyzed together for two reasons: (a) Change and constancy are relative concepts; group life is never without change, merely differences in the amount and type of change exist.

(1947: 13)

As much scholarship on new media and social change has documented, sometimes media-facilitated, progressive sociocultural or politico-economic developments have, at least momentarily, interrelated with ground-breaking changes in the dynamics in the political sphere – as was the case with the so-called Arab Spring (Eltantawy and Wiest 2011; Khondker 2011) or the socio-economic transformation fostered by mobile money transfer. However, at times these disruptive changes have reified the boundaries of inequality or marginalization, and reconfigured dominant power structures.

For instance, the mobile phone revolution might be seen as partially bridging the so-called digital divide in countries like Botswana, Ghana and Kenya, where penetration on a household level is close to universal. However, the distribution of ICTs in terms of smartphones, televisions and access to the Internet is still uneven, and the digital differences are constantly being reconfigured in new forms along well-known socio-economic, gender, rural-urban, Global North–Global South and regional lines (Gustafsson and Nielsen 2017).

Furthermore, although technical innovations like mobile money transfer services partly transform the financial landscape by providing ordinary people with access to banking services, they do not necessarily fundamentally change the economic structure or remove inequalities. For instance, some studies have demonstrated that although mobile phones and mobile money transfer services have increased women's financial autonomy, women's power within their families has not improved accordingly due to prevailing cultural norms (Kyomuhendo 2009; Gustafsson forthcoming).

Besides the more disruptive social changes taking place at present, other very important social change processes are occurring relating to the dominant everyday uses of new technology. Greenwood and Levin point out that 'the change process has an open starting point and often no absolute ending point' (2007: 17). These gradual changes are less spectacular and often harder to identify, because they often take place over a period of time and are characterized by complexity and ambiguity in a constant oscillation between change and continuity. For example, as Gunner et al. point out, new radio stations 'produce new social meaning, shift subjectivities and have huge affective power' (2011: 5).

Radio and television are often regarded as old mass media compared to mobile phones and social media. But as mentioned above, for many people in sub-Saharan Africa television viewing – especially multichannel television, is a totally new experience, and the broadcasting markets provide multiple new popular opportunities for both radio listening and television viewing in everyday life (Frère 2011). In a study on the recently popular phone-in interactive talk shows in Zambia and Kenya, Srinivasan and Diepeveen describe how

these shows provide 'a contestable space tied to varied imaginaries of the audience-public' and 'also contribute to broader arguments about how the audience operates as a public' (2018: 405). In a comparative study of the reception of state-run and commercial television news in Zambia, Wasserman and Mbatha conclude:

Tabloid television news in Zambia has the potential to activate political discourses by providing news that has greater proximity and is anchored in the everyday lived experiences of its viewership. This news particularly draws on familiar idioms and personal narratives that reflect the everyday life worlds of non-elite publics.

(2017: 88)

While call-in shows and tabloid news relate to local social and political aspects of everyday life, television also opens windows to global and regional entertainment, as is the case with the popularity of South and Central American telenovelas and Nigerian films and series from Nollywood. Audience studies in Senegal (Werner 2006), Ivory Coast and Mali (Touré 2007) and Ghana (Tindi and Ayiku 2018) have established that the reception of telenovelas through identification with characters and oppositional readings of these texts results in negotiations of contested domestic spaces.

An analysis of social media availability and use in relation to political communication can also shed some light on the pertinent dynamics between changes and continuities. When assessing the impact of developments in social media use on political discourses, it is important to bear in mind that the previous extensive political control over the mass media did not necessarily secure state control of information and communication flows, as shown by studies on pavement radio (Bourgault 1995; Ellis 1989; Nyamnjoh 2005; Ekström et al. 2012) and popular music (Cloonan 2006). Pavement radio, or radio trottoir in French, is the circulation of informal, inter-personal communication, news and rumours side by side in African towns. As Ellis aptly noted:

Although pavement radio is a controversial medium, often mistrusted, feared or despised by politicians, journalists and academics, there is no doubt of its pervasive existence. Any inhabitant of Africa, familiar with the fact that the most important political news is often gleaned not from official news media but from conversations with friends and acquaintances, will recognize this.

(1989: 321)

Based on their analysis of blogs and social media sites immediately after the Gongo la Mboto blasts in 2011 in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania, Ekström et al. (2012) argue that the use of social media on this occasion could be seen as an extension of the oral tradition in pavement radio.

Rather than illustrating a new phenomenon that has occurred with the coming of new media and communication technologies, we argue that our case study serves as an example of how Tanzanian engagement in 'new media' can be seen as an extension and amplification of traditional modes of information sharing and news production.

(Ekström et al. 2012: 172)

Despite the obvious similarities and the fact that pavement radio and social media now coexist, there are also significant differences between pavement radio and social media. First of all, the relation to space is different because pavement radio consists of overlapping confined spaces; while social media are potentially omnipresent, although currently confined by lack of access, and include diaspora and users from unidentified places – thereby providing extended space for information sharing. And the people communicating by pavement radio are physically present; whereas social media offer the possibility of anonymity, which often has an amplifying effect on the character and tone of information sharing (Mäkinen and Kuira 2008; Santana 2014).

The example of pavement radio and social media above highlights the importance of shedding new empirical light on current developments as far as new media and social change processes in sub-Saharan Africa are concerned. It reminds us that things that may seem *new* in terms of media-related practices are grounded in many ways in *old* patterns.

The overall aim of this special issue is to shed some light on some of these central processes in contemporary sub-Saharan Africa. Grounded largely in a users' perspective and informed by a critical understanding of the relationship between recent ICT developments and social change, this special issue seeks to unpack the ways in which ordinary Africans use various forms of new media and how these patterns interrelate with a range of sociocultural and political changes in the region.

In order to achieve this goal, the special issue seeks to highlight not only the ways in which the use of new media alters and redefines structures, norms and practices in the region, but also how these structures, norms and practices are being reified. With rich empirical data analysed critically and with astute awareness of the importance of contextualization, the special issue presents some useful and interesting insights that challenge mainstream thinking with regard to the interplay between new media and processes of social change in contemporary sub-Saharan Africa.

OVERVIEW OF ARTICLES IN THE SPECIAL ISSUE

The special issue consists of six articles that empirically and theoretically examine the interrelationship between recent changes in access to and use of ICTs and processes of sociocultural change in everyday life and the ways in which social media is used for sociopolitical discourses in sub-Saharan Africa.

In the article 'Advocating causal analyses of media and social change by way of social mechanisms', Jo Helle-Valle argues that to improve our understanding of the relationship between media and social change, it is fruitful to adopt a perspective focusing on social mechanisms. Focusing on social mechanisms makes it possible to talk of causality yet avoid the kind of simplistic explanations that characterize many of the quantitative studies in the field. In order to achieve this, substantial ethnographic knowledge is needed – something which he exemplifies in his analysis of media use in Botswana.

In her study 'New media use among young Batswana: Everyday concerns and consequences', Ardis Storm-Mathisen is inspired by Helle-Valle's call to use social mechanisms as an analytical lens. Drawing on multi-methodological fieldwork and focusing on four young Batswana, she situates their media use in relation to their life concerns. She demonstrates that the mobile phone functions as an intermediary, an enabler and a facilitator, and discusses these functions in relation to mobility, social capital and education.

She concludes by suggesting that if we want to understand the indirect connections between social change and new media, we have to focus on the everyday-life concerns of people and how these concerns are connected to wider social processes.

In the article entitled 'New media coming to Kapkoi', Jessica Gustafsson explores how the introduction of new media technologies changes media ecologies in a small rural village in Kenya. This is an ethnographic study which aims to explore how the introduction of new media technologies influences a small and fairly enclosed community and those living there. It argues that new technology enhances connectivity between a rural setting like Kapkoi and the world beyond but simultaneously highlights the rural/urban divide. Similarly, increased access to and use of ICTs have altered the lives of most of the villagers and made their lives easier – but also reinforced cultural norms and divides.

'Quotidian use of new media and sociocultural change in contemporary Kenya' is an explorative study written by Poul Erik Nielsen that examines the interrelationships between the use of new media among ordinary people and processes of sociocultural change in Kenya. Through semi-structured interviews with 40 interviewees in Usain Gishu County, Kenya, it offers an interpretive bricolage of people's everyday media use and suggests that age, gender, knowledge and power are constantly being challenged, negotiated and reproduced. The article concludes that the relationship between social change and media use is characterized by complexities, ambiguities, continuities, ruptures and inertia.

The last two articles empirically analyse how organizations and individuals utilize social media to engage in sociopolitical communication. In her article, Cecilia Strand explores how the Lesbian, Gay, Bi-, Trans-, Queer and Intersexual (LGBTQI) community in Uganda uses Twitter for activism. In the study 'Navigating precarious visibility: Ugandan sexual minorities on Twitter', Cecilia Strand, focusing on how Sexual Minorities Uganda (SMUG) used this platform during the period of the general election in 2016, and drawing on affordance theory, illustrates that this organization mainly used Twitter to communicate with people within the LGBTQI community by repeatedly highlighting SMUGs resilience and agency. She therefore concludes that SMUG neither uses the controlled visibility afforded by Twitter to disseminate alternative narratives to a wider audience nor to question the homophobic perception of the LGBTQI community in Uganda.

In 'Pan-Africanism as a laughing matter: (Funny) expressions of African identity on Twitter', David Cheruiyot and Charu Uppal explore the negotiation of African identity on Twitter. Focusing on #IfAfricaWasABar, they examine if it is possible to suggest that a new type of Pan-Africanism is developing on Twitter. They argue that though the hashtag encouraged Twitter users to imagine the African continent as one, an imagined community, it provided only temporary solidarity among engaged users. Twitter afforded instant connection among Africans spread across the globe, and facilitated the use of humour to address common regional, economic, political and sociocultural matters. However, the interaction was not found to take any specific measures to either define or establish a new Pan-African identity. The study also highlights the risk of stereotypes and generalizations, as well as the over-representation of anglophone countries owing to the fact that Twitter is largely dominated by the English language.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

That the media landscape in sub-Saharan Africa is undergoing fundamental transformations is indubitable. In this special issue, the focus has been to put together articles that separately and collectively and with varying levels of emphases, use these transformations in the media landscape in sub-Saharan Africa as take-off point to address these core questions: How has the prevalence of new communication technologies changed existing communication ecologies? How are Africans using the different new media available to them? And what are the social, cultural and political implications of these changes?

Two core analytical perspectives and empirical indications emerge from the different articles in relation to these questions:

1. The notion of new media is relative (Gustafsson 2019) and people, in their everyday life, use a range of different media to attend to what Helle-Valle and Storm-Mathisen in this special issue refer to as 'concerns'. In an earlier and related argument, Helle-Valle pointed out that 'in real life, various media are used side-by-side and should therefore be analytically treated as interdependent parts of the same social reality' (2017: 28). Most of the articles in this special issue elaborate on this pertinent assertion with Nielsen for instance finding that in Kenya, there is a 'simultaneous and seamless integration of the different new media' by ordinary Kenyans in their everyday life.
2. Social change – irrespective of the layer in analytical focus (gender and generational dynamics, family, community, national or continental levels) is indeed characterized by transformation and stasis. Thus, while social media has provided avenues for sexual minorities in Uganda to gain some visibility, the overriding structures of homophobia are still omnipresent (Strand 2019). Similarly, Cheruiyot and Uppal demonstrate how social media facilitate new ways of expressing and negotiating national and regional identities. Likewise, as shown in the case of Botswana (Storm-Mathisen 2019; Helle-Valle 2019) and Kenya (Gustafsson 2019; Nielsen 2019), the increasing participation of women in the public sphere and their improved socio-economic situation, at times, thanks in large part to the affordances of widespread mobile and digital media, is taking place alongside continuous vestiges of gendered hierarchies. As Nielsen argues in his chapter, this blurred image of change and stasis 'calls for a new media studies paradigm where continuity and inertia are more seriously taken into account when assessing the fundamental interrelationships between new media and long-lasting processes of socio-cultural change'.

Nielsen further provides some pieces of an understanding of this paradoxical coexistence of change and stasis in relation to new media and social change anchored in the notions of what can be called a *CACRI framework*: Complexities, Ambiguities, Continuities, Ruptures and Inertia. In its outline, this framework captures the essential narratives around the debate on change and stasis concerning new media and social change scholarship. The framework hints at the underlying perspective raised above, that the introduction of new media produces among others, complexities in communication ecologies. These complexities tend to produce ambiguous outcomes seen for instance in ruptures of elements of existing structures, practices or norms in a context of resilient continuities and inertia concerning particular aspects of these same structures, practices and norms.

Beyond the two core points above, articles in this special issue also address essential theoretical, methodological and epistemological issues that are of paramount importance concerning media and social change scholarship. The different articles provide engaging insights into some of the current theoretical, methodological and epistemological debates in this field.

Theoretically a recurrent tension in this special issue is the fundamental question about the relation between agency and structure. Helle-Valle argues that from an epistemological perspective, when it comes to explaining in a causal manner how and why new media contribute to processes of social change, 'structuralist-inspired perspectives tend to fail to provide good explanations'. According to Helle-Valle, one of the main reasons for this failure is that the explanations that structuralist-inspired perspectives, with their 'reliance on transcendental entities like "culture" "society", etc., provide become invalid as the "terms become fetishized in the sense that they are endowed with agency" and given *explanatory* or *causal* status' (Helle-Valle 2019: 148, original emphases).

Following this critique, Helle-Valle argues for the adoption of a social mechanisms perspective largely because it 'foregrounds practices (not models, structures, cultures or discourses) and it presents ambitious but fairly realistic perspectives on causes and explanations' (Helle-Valle 2019: 159).

This relatively fixed binary between practices and structures as epistemological foundation for research on media and social change is challenged by several scholars who argue that, people experience and use a range of media in their everyday life (practices) and these 'are always grounded in particular contexts, worldviews and knowledge systems of life and wisdom' (Willems and Mano, 2017: 4). These contexts inhabit what can pass for *structural* elements.

When discussing people's everyday uses of new media Gustafsson for instance highlights gender and generational differences in Kenya as constituting elements of 'structural power hierarchies' that shape the ways in which new media are accessed and used. Similarly, Nielsen emphasizes that the findings from his research in Kenya show that new media facilitated processes of sociocultural change are taking place in 'a society with very strong, internalized, traditional gender roles and deeply ingrained community power structures'. Strand in her article on sexual minorities' adoption of new media in Uganda identifies important structural elements in the political economy of Twitter, which shape the extent of visibility accorded to a range of users from celebrities and business elites to ordinary people. Consequently, an eclectic epistemological approach in studying new media and processes of social change tends to provide more nuanced findings, a point emphasized with varying degrees, through the different articles in this special issue.

Methodologically, the article brings to the fore central methodological debates in the field. The contributors have used a range of relevant methods to address their subjects of inquiry and by doing so provided an array of useful analytical insights. While the first four articles are largely ethnographically inspired, the last two articles have used a range of methods focusing on quantitative and qualitative content analyses of social media content. Grounded in his adoption of a practice perspective Helle-Valle argues that to study what people actually do with the media and what effects these acts have 'requires a command of historical and ethnographic depth'. He advocates for 'solid ethnographic data collection' and goes on to argue that 'statistic, discourse analysis and the like might well be part of such endeavours but only to the

extent that they are relevant to the lived life in which media are put to use' (Helle-Valle 2019: 145). Storm-Mathisen's article is also mainly ethnographical in approach but exploits a range of methods including surveys, participant observations, video diaries and digital ethnography. The articles by Gustafsson and Nielsen are also mainly informed by ethnographically inspired data, field observations and interviews, but Nielsen draws on quantitative data as well. The last two articles have used both quantitative and qualitative analytical methods to analyse Twitter content. Their 'non-ethnographic' nature notwithstanding, these chapters still present insightful perspectives on how ordinary Africans are using new media in relation to articulating various forms of identities from sexual identities (Strand 2019) to national and continental identities (Cheruiyot and Uppal 2019).

In summary, what the articles in this special issue show is that rather than adopting a fixed, dogmatic or inherently limited specific prescription on theoretical, epistemological or methodological considerations, a more comprehensive empirical examination of new media and social change ought to be versatile and inherently eclectic in its theoretical, methodological and epistemological orientations. This eclecticism for instance has led to contributors in this special issue engaging critically, with a series of pertinent and contextually relevant theories ranging from affordance theory (Strand), theories on identity (Cheruiyot and Uppal 2019) to radical practice theory (Helle-Valle and Storm-Mathisen) and domestication theory and communication ecology theory (Gustafsson 2019; Nielsen 2019). In other words, a theoretical mix originating from western thinking but used in a pragmatic way, with thorough contextualization and including rich qualitative empirical data.

Overall, this special issue has posed and sought to seek answers to some of the big questions concerning the rapid developments in the media landscape in contemporary sub-Saharan Africa and the social changes currently unfolding in the region. In tackling this daunting task, this special issue is anything but comprehensive in scope. Only three countries (Kenya, Botswana and Uganda) and a study on Pan-Africanism are the focus of the empirical analyses presented in this special issue. Furthermore, only few themes such as contending representations of identities (Strand 2019; Cheruiyot and Uppal 2019), socio-economic development (Helle-Valle and Storm-Mathisen) gender, power and generational perspectives (Helle-Valle 2019; Nielsen 2019; Gustafsson 2019; Storm-Mathisen 2019) have been addressed in a focused way. This means that geographically and thematically, the contributions in this special issue should be seen as limited in scope. We however hope that the perspectives raised in this issue's articles will open up further lines of inquiries that can serve as the basis of further studies to unpack what will, undoubtedly be a defining theme in many years to come in Africa: how are Africans using the different media available to them and what are the consequences of these?

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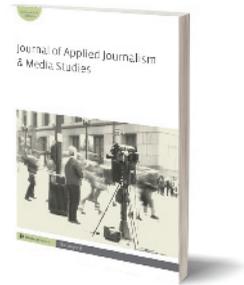
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The journal has a particular focus on and interest in contemporary issues and practices of media firms as they are experienced by their actors journalists, executives, publishers and proprietors, among others. Besides scholarly submissions, the editors are interested in articles written by media actors focusing on topics including their activities, problems, strategies, guidelines, management and editorial issues, organization, ethical codes, coverage, distribution, marketing, handling of user-generated material, etc. The journal is the first scholarly publication giving due consideration in publishing to material by media actors. Practitioners, for the first time, will have their articles printed alongside academic papers within the pages of the same journal.

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