Chapter 79

Challenging or Reinforcing the Gender Divide?
The Appropriation of Media and ICT in Uasin Gishu, Kenya

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ABSTRACT

This chapter aims to deepen the understanding of how the appropriations of new communication technologies in dramatic changing communication ecologies interrelate with social and cultural changes in contemporary rural and urban Kenya, focusing on gender and space. The study, which is set in Uasin Gishu County, Kenya, is based on a 799 household's survey concerning gendered access and usage of media and ICT and 80 life-world interviews with men and women on their appropriations of new media. The chapter concludes that the interrelation between new media and gender is complex. To a large extent the media usage reflects the patriarchal structure in Kenya and reinforces gendered spaces but new media also offer new spaces that challenge prevailing norms. Suggesting that new technologies can simultaneously function as vehicles of transformation and reproduce power relations and cultural patterns.

INTRODUCTION

Within the last two decades, the media and ICT ecologies in rural and urban Kenya have undergone dramatic changes. The much hyped and unprecedented spread of mobile telephony has taken place simultaneously with the introduction of or increased access to radio and television including satellite television. This chapter aims to deepen the understanding of how these changes interrelate with social and cultural changes in contemporary Kenya with a focus on gender and space. It examines to what extent the increased access to new technologies functions as vehicles of transformation or reproduces

power relations and cultural patterns by addressing how existing gender roles influence the consumption of media and ICT and how the appropriation of new media and ICT alters, challenges and reinforces gendered spaces. The chapter also sheds light on how these changes in gender relations and family structures appear different in rural and urban areas and what these results tell us about the potential of media and ICT appropriation in relation to gender equality.

The study, which is set in Uasin Gishu County, Kenya, uses a combination of baseline study and ethnography and is part of the larger research project Critical Perspective on New Media and Social Change in the Global South that brings together researchers from Kenya and the Nordic countries.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The interrelations between technologies and society are highly contested, multi-facetted and ever changing processes. In this chapter the main aim is to study how the significant and simultaneous appropriation of new information and communication technologies interrelate with socio-cultural processes of change on individual, family and society level in rural and urban Kenya. The unprecedented spread of mobile telephony has been the subject of several comprehensive studies and surveys, but it has to a lesser degree been considered that the spread of mobile telephony has taken place simultaneously with other significant changes in the local communication ecologies. In the rural areas the introduction of mobile phones coincides with the introduction of or increased access to radio and television including satellite television, while in urban areas the changes have been just as dramatic going from limited access to phones, state controlled electronic media and the printed press to having access to a plethora of new information and communication technologies including an abundance of electronic media, mobile telephony and social media.

Against this background, this chapter will apply the concept of communication ecologies as the theoretically approach to understand the appropriation of new media.

Essentially, then, the 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. Partly because of the advent and use of a multitude of information technologies, it is increasingly common today for numerous human activities to involve or be mediated by the logics of these technologies" (pp. 9-10 Altheide 1995).

Altheide emphasizes several advantages of taking an ecology of communication approach. The ecology metaphor implies a spatial dimension where the basic elements - the communication technologies, the producers and the users - interrelate and coexist. The different elements in the ecologies are interdependent and changes in one part will influence other parts.

On a general societal level, changes in available communication technologies interrelate with socio-cultural changes. The invention of handwriting and later print interrelated with and changed traditional oral societies, and electronic and digital technologies interrelate with current societal changes. However, as Finnemann has pointed out, new information technologies rarely make older forms obsolete unless all aspects of an old technology are absorbed by the new technology; written communication and print did not exterminate oral communication, electronic and digital media have neither wiped out oral nor print

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