

Chapter 12

ICTs and Cultural Promotion in Africa: Insights From Recent Research and Case Studies

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ABSTRACT

Digital technologies have, in recent times, become key tools for cultural promotion and preservation in various parts of Africa. A number of interesting cultural projects are today created in most Black African countries to promote specific aspects of less represented cultures through digital platforms. The entities behind such projects vary from nongovernmental initiatives to government agencies and are driven by varied motives. In spite of this variety of motives, their actions indisputably aim at the same cultural vision: the promotion and restoration of various aspects of the African cultures. Hinging on empirical understandings, this chapter critically explores these digitally driven cultural projects. The chapter specifically examines the prospects and challenges of using digital technologies to promote culture in Black African countries. It addresses the following research questions: What is the state of cultural promotion in Black African countries? How are ICTs facilitating cultural activism in the continent? and What are some of the challenges faced by cultural activists in the continent?

INTRODUCTION

According to some popular myths, the use and proliferation of digital technologies in most non-western climes have not been culture-free or neutral, but two subtle vectors of westernization and western cultural imperialism. These myths are not unconnected to theories which stipulate that, rather than being perfectly open and accessible to all, digital platforms such as Facebook, Youtube, Google+ and Twitter among others are commercial entities conceived primarily by and for the Western world. These digital platforms most often “reinforce the inequalities of globalization, rarely reflecting the perspectives of those at the bottom of the digital divide” (Ramesh, 2017). Closely associated with this position is the

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fact that CMC technologies appear to embed and subtly promote the cultural values and communicative preferences of their western designers. Ess (2006) illustrates this reality with two examples drawn from Africa and Asia. He notes that the concept of Learning Centres adopted in South Africa to empower indigenous peoples by helping them exploit the multiple potential and capacities of the ICTs technically failed, partly because of glaring incompatibilities between the ICT-driven projects and local cultures. In effect, as Ess (2006) puts it, “the Centres reflect their designer’s Western emphasis on individual and silent learning – in contrast with indigenous preferences for learning in collaborative and often noisy, performative ways”. In the same way, the Western Group Support System (GSS) which enables anonymity as one of its features aimed at facilitating direct and open communication failed in most of the Confucian cultures of South Asian mainly because of its cultural content. The project proved to be a disaster as it “succeeded in encouraging subordinates to make comments that were culturally interpreted – and condemned – as attacks on one’s ‘face’” (p.23).

These two examples and many other similar issues give credence to the myth stipulating that CMC technologies are not value-free or morally neutral as they carry and promote particular cultural values (mainly Western values) and communication habits which are far from being universal. ICTs are socio-cultural products which become “mainstream mental models in the societies in which they emerge” (Tedre et al, 2006) and which may not always reflect or be compatible with the cultural values of societies that are exogenous to the original ICT developer (Endong, 2015, 2017; Keniston, 1997; Lieberman, 2015; Stogyte, 2013). It could thus be contended that, the use and proliferation of digital technologies in such continents as Africa and Asia have arguably been key contributors to the phenomena of cultural erosion and extinction as well as vectors of westernization or Americanization in these continents.

Though this position has a degree of pertinence, it appears indisputable that technology has evolved to the extent that it is today possible to create websites, graphics and software among other instruments that enable all communities irrespective of their origin and philosophical affiliations to transmit various aspects of their cultures to their youths. The evolution and increasing accessibility of new information and communication technologies have equally made it possible for many communities to export - and even globalize – their cultural values. In tandem with this, the digital technologies have, in recent times become key tools for cultural promotion and preservation in various parts of Africa. A number of interesting cultural projects are today conceived in most Black African countries to project or promote various aspects of less represented cultures through digital platforms. The entities behind such projects remarkably vary from nongovernmental initiatives to government agencies and are driven by varied motives. In spite of this variety of motives, their actions indisputably aim at the same cultural vision: the promotion and celebration of various aspects of the African cultures.

Hinging on critical observations and secondary sources, this chapter seeks to explore these digitally driven cultural projects. The chapter specifically examines the prospects and problems of using digital technologies to promote culture in black African countries. It sets out to answer the following research questions: what is the state of cultural promotion in Black African countries? How are ICTs facilitating cultural activism in the continents and what are some of the problems encountered by cultural activists in the continent? In view of answering these questions, the chapter is divided into four main parts. The first part explores the state of cultural promotion in Africa. The second part addresses the role of the ICTs in cultural activism in the continent. The third part reviews a number of Internet assisted projects aimed at cultural promotion in selected parts of Africa and the last part x-rays some of the challenges to ICTs assisted cultural promotion projects in the Black continent.

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