

Chapter 4

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.

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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, multifaceted 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.

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