

Reconceptualising Radio Trottoir as a Media-related Practice

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The widespread prevalence of radio trottoir in the African context has been explained both through culturalist notions of orality and the existence of tightly controlled media landscapes (Nyamnjoh 2005). While the importance of informal discussions on politics cannot and should not be ignored, this paper argues that there is a need to situate the practice of radio trottoir in the broader, mediated relationship between the state and citizens. While the field of political communication is dominated by normative, prescriptive perspectives on formal mass media, African Studies has focused on a range of forms of popular culture but often neglected to analyse these in relation to formal, more official publics. Drawing on Jenkins' (2006) work on convergence culture, this paper argues for a wider analytical focus on the increasing convergence and intertextuality between different forms of media which are conventionally analysed separately: formal and informal, official and popular, state and private, old and new media. Engaging with debates on practice in media anthropology, radio trottoir can then be reconceptualised as a media-related practice through which citizens simultaneously respond to official forms of mediation and produce alternative imaginaries. These practices are no longer strictly enabled by oral communication but also increasingly circulated through SMS text messages and the internet, hereby occasionally provoking a response from the state, as is demonstrated through examples from Zimbabwe. A more intimate dialogue between political communication and studies on African popular culture can therefore point to the multiple centres of media production and blur distinctions between consumers and producers, conventionally made in the field of media studies but increasingly challenged by scholars pointing to the importance of new media in enabling grassroots media production.