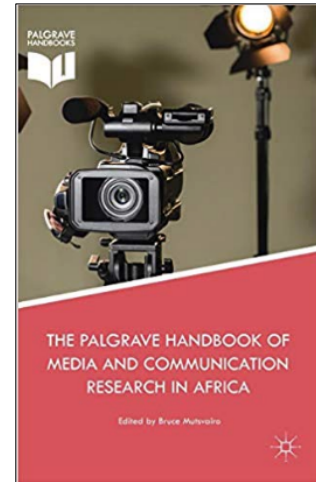


Bruce Mutsvairo (Ed.), **The Palgrave Handbook of Media and Communication Research in Africa**, Gewerbestrasse, Switzerland: Springer International Publishing, Palgrave Macmillan, 2018, 483 pp., \$181.00 (hardcover).

Reviewed by
Gregory Gondwe
University of Colorado – Boulder, USA

To many scholars around the world, African media and communication research is either a terra incognita or an amalgamation of Western thought. The theories that underpin media and communication research in Africa are deeply rooted in the frameworks of Western thought. And it is through these lenses that African scholars execute and operationalize Communication Research in Africa. This book, therefore, provides new approaches for undertaking media and communication scholarship in the postcolonial era. It highlights a number of approaches adopted to navigate and interrogate issues that Western theoretical frameworks are incapable of answering. It further suggests new frontiers for rethinking media and communication research in Africa while providing empirical evidence as to why some of the methods conceptualized in the West will not work in African scenarios. The result is a thorough appraisal of crucial issues of controversy about the fluidity of the media and its identity in Africa.



The Palgrave Handbook of Media and Communication Research in Africa is a contribution of various authors and conduits whose work has been divided into 26 chapters and four parts, namely: Media and Communication Studies in Colonial, Postcolonial and Protest Contexts; Conceptualizing and Contextualizing: Lessons and Limitations; Cross-disciplinary Approaches in the Digital Age; and New and Old Media: Perspectives, Methodologies, Developments and Ethics. Essential to all these chapters is the quest to seek measures that could possibly act as a panacea for “de-Westernizing and decolonizing” African media and communication scholarship. The foreword section by Keyan G. Tomaselli interrogates the status quo, not only of African scholarship but of Africa as a whole. Drawing from Valentine Mudimbe’s (1988) *The Invention of Africa*, the author asserts that “the idea of Africa is itself a Western construct” (p. 198), therefore questioning whether “Africanizing” the discourse is not another irony for Westernization (p. vi). In responding to this thought, Tomaselli brings to light the hybrid of theory and methodology that has always existed since the beginning of interactions among Homo sapiens. He, therefore, cautions scholars that seek to “decolonize” African media and communication scholarship not to embark on “monological or zero-sum” separations of theory but seek to create “blocks that should ideally mature into dialectical practices, which animate participation, dialogue, and critical engagement of scholarship from both the West and Africa” (p. vi).

Bruce Mutsvairo’s chapter (chapter 1), “If I were a Carpenter: Reframing Debates in Media and Communication Research in Africa,” serves as a prelude for the entire handbook. The author introduces us to the most pertinent question that characterizes the debates. Essentially, the author sets the scene by

asking how African media research is perceived by fellow scholars in or outside the continent, and what should constitute African media and communication research. The idea is to disentangle the dominant beliefs about what characterizes the edifice of media and communication research in Africa.

Chapters 2 through 7 grapple with the challenges of doing media and communication research in Africa. While highlighting the philosophical and theoretical underpinnings of studies done in Africa, the authors question whether Western theories done by a "subaltern" can attract a universal acceptance. For Toussaint, research conducted in Africa, whether by an insider or outsider, becomes a mere form of what Couldry and Mejias (2018) in their article, "Data Colonialism: Rethinking Big Data's Relation to the Contemporary Subject," would call "data colonialism," which has intentions of exploiting and extracting knowledge to feed Western epistemologies.

Chapter 7, though, in part 1, lays a foundation for part 2 (chapters 8 through 13). Named "Conceptualizing and Contextualizing: Lessons and Limitations," this section starts by looking at the possible practical remedies for decolonization. In chapter 7, Karam suggests that we "rethink film theory" that has a huge impact in shaping our perspectives. Teer-Tomaselli (chapter 8), propagates for the use of political economy as a means for analyzing the media in Africa. Teer-Tomaselli argues that because of its interdisciplinary nature, political economy as a method of analysis has the power to reveal the dynamics of capitalism in African media and communication scholarship (p. 132). On the other hand, chapters 9 through 13 present the historical antecedents that inform media and communication scholarship in Africa. The whole idea, as expressed by Rodney-Gumede (pp. 177–194) is to interrogate the real meaning of the discipline in line with the debates about the "ferment of the field" (White, 1983) in the *Journal of Communication*.

In quite a different direction, part 3 (chapters 14–17) introduces some "Cross-disciplinary Approaches in the Digital Age." Overall, the authors seek to find the true meaning of technology in Africa. In other words, the authors grapple with the ways in which new technologies are inculturated in Africa. Katrien Pype, for example, studies vulgar language in social media and creates meaning from it. Drawing from Congolese artists' messages, the author asserts that the digital insults (*electronic mbwakela*) constitute a new electronic genre from which Congolese artists tap their creativity and reconfigure "affect, images, and meaning" (p. 246). This, for Gagliardone, calls for a new way of understanding politics in Africa through digital technologies. The author questions how the nongeographical binding technology could answer the questions that are geographically bound into politics. "To what extent are national and international actors shaped or constrained by technology?" the author asks. To answer this question, the author suggests that we move beyond normative frameworks and study the way culture adapts and appropriates technologies in their contexts (p. 246). In a similar way, Ndlovu examines how people in diaspora, with less power to set the agenda, navigate through the quest for contextualizing their cultures. While this might seem like a challenging endeavor, Ndlovu observes how nature inevitably creates innovative methods through which "the voices of all citizens are given due prominence, regardless of their access and understanding of the technologies of communication as a result of their social and economic status" (p. 279).

In the final section (part 4) the authors in chapters 18–26 revisit the debates by comparing the differences in the new and old media. At most, the authors assert that the winds of media transformation were blowing over Africa, and therefore, propose landmarks that would characterize African media

discourses. Orgeret, for example, proposes a revisit to how we study gender and communication in Africa; Tavernaro-Haidarian, on the other hand, calls for the reconsideration of the philosophy of Ubuntu, which “offers a deeply relational locution of power that significantly contrasts conflictual notions, while shaping thoughts and actions of discourses” (p. 386). Musa and Yusha’u, on the other hand, provide methodological suggestions, with Yusha’u contending that the discourse analysis, as a method, was not capable of answering the most important questions of media and communication research in Africa. He emphatically suggests the use of critical discourse analysis that goes beyond traditional academic analyses to include critical social inquiries that delve deep into a language as a social practice. For Yusha’u, it is only when we approach it in this manner that we will be able to address issues of inequality, power relations, ideologies, and dominance that are expressed through language.

Vivid strengths of this lengthy volume include the general feelings that the authors hold about the media and communication research in Africa. This is basically what every postcolonial theorist in Africa seeks to address: to have African scholarship acknowledged around the globe, and be able to equally contribute to the generation of global epistemologies. In other words, the authors seek to advocate for an approach that does not perceive research from Africa as only anecdotal or an archive for the West, but that it also contributes to the global spectrum of epistemic knowledge. Therefore, while some scholars have sought for a complete separation of African scholarship from the West, others hang on the idea that the two merge with mutual respect and consideration of epistemic knowledge. One thing that might be lacking in this volume is how to navigate media and communication research amid burgeoning Chinese investments in African media systems. Clear influences of China on African scholarship have manifested in recent years. Given the fact that the book was published in 2018, it would be worthwhile to dedicate a chapter to that. Overall, the book is a must-read for anyone who seeks to conduct research on African media systems.

References

- Couldry, N., & Mejias, U. A. (2018). Data colonialism: rethinking big data’s relation to the contemporary subject. *Television & New Media*. Advanced online publication. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1527476418796632>
- Mudimbe, V. Y. (1988). *The invention of Africa: Gnosis, philosophy, and the order of knowledge*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press.
- White, R. A. (1983). Mass communication and culture: Transition to a new paradigm. *Journal of Communication*, 33(3), 279–301.