

Expanding Horizons of Empirical Enquiry into Feminist Media Studies in Africa

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Abstract

This essay argues for a broader outlook to feminist media studies in Africa. Despite decades of groundbreaking feminist research in gender and media in Africa, there is a paucity of research on the impact of contemporary shifts in media systems and media management in gender relations in journalism. Feminist media scholars need to take cognizance of the extent of impact of excessive media privatizations and the replications on work-time arrangements and schedules in the newsrooms and how these arrangements impact on gender roles and relations in African newsrooms. The call for new and broader empirical enquiry also requires corresponding development and application of appropriate conceptual constructs and theoretical approaches to explicate gender relations in the newsrooms.

Keywords: Africa media scholars; female journalists; gender relations; work-time arrangements; work-time schedules

Introduction

This essay stems from observations gathered as part of a doctoral study project that aims to document experiences and challenges female journalists encounter in the journalism profession in Ghana, a country within the West Africa sub-region of Africa. It is obvious that in the past two decades female journalists in most African countries have made strides in the journalism profession and newsrooms. Various studies, surveys and projects already affirm the growing feminization of the journalism profession worldwide.

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However, this study posits that there is a paucity of studies concerning gendered working conditions in African newsrooms. It must be stated here that African feminist media scholars have utilised an array of theoretical and conceptual approaches to critically analyze and probe media discourses and narratives that relate to African women's work in the journalism profession. Available literature, and a substantial number of studies relate to gender representations in the media and negative portrayals and depictions of women in the media. Other popular areas of enquiry include the career mobility and leadership roles of women in the mass media industry. Again, findings of most of these studies reveal forms of gender discriminatory tendencies, hidden biases, harassments related to sexist ideologies, and a lack of diversity in media ownership that affect women in journalism. Some female media scholars have expressed fears that journalism practice in general may gradually become a 'pink ghetto' as male journalists abandon the profession as a result of the growing feminization.

Thus, this essay attempts to provoke African feminist media scholars to expand the scope and depth of empirical enquiries in genderization of the newsroom. It calls on African media scholars to pay some attention to the prevailing journalism working conditions; journalism work-time arrangements and schedules including how work volumes and other aspects of work-time impact particularly on female journalists in Africa. This essay further calls for a re-consideration and development of theoretical approaches to explain this suggested trajectory.

Rationale for Dynamism

This renewed call resonates with Opoku-Mensah's (2001) appeal for transformative shifts in focus on contemporary issues concerning gender in media. Bosch (2011) reiterated Gadzekpo's (2009) call for 'creative, dynamic and responsive' approach in studying gender and media narrativity. These calls for re-focus had taken cognizance of the changing political and technological dynamics that were impacting media systems in Africa. Pioneer African feminist media scholars such as Bosch (2011); Gadzekpo (2011, 2009); Geertsema (2010, 2008); Buiten (2009); Morna, Rama and Muriunga (2006); Opoku-Mensah (2001); Made, Morna and Kawaramba

(2003), among others, have conducted extensive studies into various areas of gender and media relations.

Africa's political upheavals from authoritarianism through various phases of 'democratic consolidation process' (Frère, 2015) at the end of the 1990s, reintroduced diversity and pluralistic media systems (Anyidoho, 2016; Shepperson & Tomaselli, 2009; Gadzekpo, 2009). These changes instigated resurgence in efforts at emphasizing discrepancies in gender roles in the media. Feminist media scholars and activists had recognized these dynamics and the transformative impact on gender-media relations. Media activists spurred on by the Beijing Declarations and Platform of Action (1995:149) successfully engaged the media as a capable site for gender activism, gender awareness creation, and gender equality and equity in journalism institutions. Gender advocacy groups, centers and unions have been central to addressing inherent socio-cultural patriarchy in media output and in journalism work. The plethora of women journalists' associations work fervently at correcting persisting gender inequalities, and negative representations and portrayals of women in the media. In addition, such associations provide information and support to government and other agencies on gender policies.

The rationale for calls for expansion in directions in feminist media enquiry in African is again premised on the current wave of neo-liberal, pluralist and market-driven media economy systems in most African countries. Media systems across the continent are de-regulated and mostly privatized, leading in some cases to media concentration and consolidation among a few businesses and political affiliates. Incidentally, public funding for traditional state media is dwindling. Currently, most African media systems operate independently of government control and are more audience-centred and highly dependent on advertising revenue. In addition, shrinking newspaper circulation, prompted by the rise of new and social media, is re-directing journalism work into more electronic-based productions in most African countries. Basically, the traditional employment safety nets provided by state-owned, public-financed media houses which guaranteed job stability for journalists are dwindling. These dynamics, in addition to unfavourable work conditions, unfriendly work arrangements and schedules, unpredictability in work times and excessive work volumes on one hand

can accentuate and create some imbalances in the work-life of female journalists.

New Areas for Research

Deepening the focus in empirical enquiries into feminist media studies in Africa must begin with examining the critical areas in journalism work culture. Certainly, unconventional work cultures, especially unpredictability in work times and irregular work scheduling, impinge negatively on health, welfare, family life and general well-being of female journalists. But more important is the need to understand the extent to which these impact or deepen the gender gaps in journalism work in African newsrooms.

Journalism work culture, as it is, is time-bound: demands for meeting news deadlines, being punctual for assignments, and working for hours. Like medical practitioners, most journalists operate irregular time schedules. Most journalists are available and on call at any time and odd hours of the day. Thus, Fagan et al. (2011) argue that such unpredictability and inflexibility in work-time schedule arrangements often act as demotivating factors for women to stay in journalism as practitioners. And this contributes to sustaining entrenched gender biases in journalism practice. Thus, it is in these areas of journalism gender studies in African that the paucity of research studies is clearly evident. For instance, anecdotal evidence from many married African female journalists reveals that they still have to carry out domestic-social duties as traditionally expected of them as spouses, mothers, caregivers, counsellors in addition to being breadwinners. In addition, a good number of female journalists who are mothers grapple with issues of family child-care support. As Gadzekpo (2009) argues, such issues are 'fertile areas' for further scientific enquires for feminist scholars within the journalism field.

The impact of the taken-for-grant challenges women face in the newsrooms in the perceived male-dominated profession like journalism is an important area for empirical investigation. African feminist media research could begin to investigate how the newsroom's work-time arrangements and schedules place strains and stresses on most female journalists. Scholars can investigate how aspects of these work-time arrangements contribute to the preservation of male dominance and the widening of various aspects of

gender gaps and how these strengthen gender discrimination proclivities in African newsrooms.

While there is some evidence showing the extent to which female journalists in Africa lack social life, particularly in maintaining fruitful marital life (Thige, 2016), such issues have not been really problematized for empirical enquiry by journalism researchers. Interestingly, a majority of these studies come from elsewhere. Thige (2016), for instance, investigated factors influencing retention of journalists at Kenya Broadcasting Corporation for his unpublished MBA thesis.

Importantly, any further empirical examination of these aspects of working conditions in African newsrooms can provide insightful sources to knowledge in gender relations in newsrooms. For example, in other jurisdictions outside Africa, Everbach and Flournoy (2007), among others, have studied work conditions in newsrooms in the US; Reinardy (2011) has also done work on burn-out rate among journalists in the US. Some of their findings reveal that unfriendly work schedules are critical push factors to the attrition rates of women from journalism.

Finally, African feminist media scholars need to develop new analytical approaches to studying these uncharted areas. New conceptual models may be needed to further explain the gendered nature of journalism work concerning time/schedule arrangements, work-life balance, even including issues of family support networks, that impact on women's work and retention in journalism. Obviously, feminist approaches may have to adopt interdisciplinary approaches to studying labour and organizational-related studies to reinforce studies in journalism and gender.

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