



Popular Media, Democracy  
and Development in

# AFRICA

Edited by Herman Wasserman

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# Popular Media, Democracy and Development in Africa

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*Popular Media, Democracy and Development in Africa* examines the role that popular media could play to encourage political debate, provide information for development, or critique the very definitions of 'democracy' and 'development'. Drawing on diverse case studies from various regions of the African continent, the chapters employ a range of theoretical and methodological approaches to ask critical questions about the potential of popular media to contribute to democratic culture, provide sites of resistance, or, conversely, act as agents for the spread of Americanized entertainment culture to the detriment of local traditions. A wide variety of media formats and platforms are discussed, ranging from radio and television to the Internet, mobile phones, street posters, film and music.

Grounded in empirical work by experienced scholars who are acknowledged experts in their fields, this contemporary and topical book provides an insight into some of the challenges faced throughout the African continent, such as HIV and AIDS, poverty and inequality, and political participation. Examples are grounded in a critical engagement with theory, moving beyond descriptive studies and therefore contributing to the intellectual project of internationalizing media studies.

*Popular Media, Democracy and Development in Africa* provides students and scholars with a critical perspective on issues relating to popular media, democracy and citizenship outside the global North. As part of the Routledge series *Internationalizing Media Studies*, the book responds to the important challenge of broadening perspectives on media studies by bringing together a range of expert analyses of media in the African continent that will be of interest to students and scholars of media in Africa and further afield.

**Herman Wasserman** is Professor of Journalism and Media/Cultural Studies at Rhodes University, Grahamstown, South Africa and Honorary Senior Lecturer in Journalism Studies at the University of Sheffield. He is a Fulbright alumnus and editor of the journal *Ecquid Novi: African Journalism Studies*. Recent publications include *Tabloid Journalism in South Africa: True Story!* (2010) and *Media Ethics Beyond Borders* (co-edited, 2010).

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## **Internationalizing Media Studies**

Series Editor: Daya Kishan Thussu

*University of Westminster*

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## **Internationalizing Media Studies**

*Edited by Daya Kishan Thussu*

## **Popular Media, Democracy and Development in Africa**

*Edited by Herman Wasserman*

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Herman Wasserman, March 2010

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# Introduction

## Taking it to the streets

Herman Wasserman

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In December 2008, shortly after the historic election of Barack Obama to the presidency of the United States, I encountered a street vendor selling cheap copies of DVDs on the pavement in Yaoundé, Cameroon. Wearing a T-shirt proclaiming 'Barack Obama for President 2008', he was inviting patrons coming from the bakery across the street to browse his selection of titles. These included not only biographical films presenting Obama as a son of Africa, but also some that offered critical perspectives on his predecessor, George W. Bush, by exposing the 'relationship between Bush and Osama Bin Laden', for instance, recounting conspiracy theories about the 9/11 attacks, or including Bush in a documentary about famous dictators. The proximity of this exchange on the pavement (in close proximity to the bakery selling fine pastries and ice cream across the bustling street) struck me as a vivid illustration of the multiple histories, alternative visions of modernity and the layered identity positions occupied in everyday Africa. It also suggested how global popular culture gets sampled, re-made locally and re-circulated in order to attain political significance, even if the counter-hegemonic impact of such popular engagement with the political sphere remains debatable. The pavement discussions ensuing from the selling of DVDs about Barack Obama and George W. Bush, shaped to relate to Cameroonians' daily lived experience, would resemble not so much the elitist public sphere envisaged by Habermas as the vibrant, convivial *radio trottoir* (Ellis 1989; Nyamnjoh 2005) where current affairs are discussed in informal networks. The overlaps and interfaces of popular media, politics and everyday lived experiences in Africa are at the centre of this book.

The example of Obama's representation in African popular media (see also the cover illustration of this book, where residents of Kibera slum in Nairobi follow the inauguration of Obama on television with expectation and jubilation) furthermore reminds us that African media cannot be studied in isolation from global political events nor could local engagement with global media events be understood as passive consumption. An essentialist view of African media as locked in a binary opposition to those in the Global North could be just as reductive as one which views African media audiences as the passive dupes of American cultural imperialism or an approach to African media which neglects the