

# Confronting the global: The ‘mediatization’ of local culture and Namibian youth receptions of media power

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## Abstract

*This paper investigates the idea of the ‘mediatization’ of Namibian cultures, media power, and degrees of reflexive actor ‘negotiations’ of media institutionalism. It seeks to understand awareness of and reaction to local and global power narratives in relation to actors’ symbolic relationships with media. Research reveals that Namibian youth are often positive regarding the novelty and opportunities that global media offer for identity and lifestyle negotiations. However, it also revealed ontological anxieties about erosion of ‘traditional’ culture on the one hand, and concerns on the other about the absence of representation or recognition of the ‘local’ in global media productions. The Windhoek research on which this paper is based conceptually establishes three reflexive youth orientations and identities toward local/global media power: cultural appropriationist, cultural traditionalist and cultural representationalist. Theories of power and media are contrasted and analysed in relation to these reflexive categories, giving special reference to Lukes (2005). The paper concludes that while media culture today appears to be instrumental in Namibian identity formation and cultural change, social tensions and conflict over matters of culture and power are evident.*

## Media culture and mediated power: An introduction

This paper addresses matters of institutionally mediated power while abstractly theorising, through Namibian empirical evidence, the processes through which media users receive, interpret and negotiate local-global communications. Negotiation is a form of confrontation or engagement with, in this case, aspects of local but chiefly global cultural forces. It investigates interactions between Windhoek youth, institutionalised media, and relations and power encountered in contemporary media production and consumption. The following analysis is based on research undertaken in the City of Windhoek between 2011 and 2014 which generally looked at how youth engaged with media in the shaping of lifestyle and identity. An important finding of the research was the distinct ways in which actors negotiated media power. From this, the paper establishes three theoretical categories or ‘positions’ reflexively expressed and occupied by youth: cultural appropriationist, cultural traditionalist and cultural representationalist. These abstractly and analytically describe their specific negotiative and identity locations in relation to media communications and its power or influence.

Communication refers to any form of symbolic interaction between people or institutions involving exchanges of signs or ideas which are consciously planned, or are even potentially unreflective or habitual (Reichertz, 2011). The core argument presented here is

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that media communications possess an intrinsic technological character which today permeates much of our social interactions. This assumption is justified through the observation that media actions are increasingly moving to the centre of citizens' everyday cultural practices and the core of lived culture itself, principally through digital media. This creates a distinctive social and physical positioning of actor identity and lifestyle within technological mediation. The significance of this shift and our appreciation or awareness of it, at least in Namibian settings, is underrated even though it becomes comprehensively apparent in how much mass media leave their mark on our interactions with others, our identities and the cultures we share with them.

Media today undeniably instigate cultural transformation through the manner in which actors' engage and incorporate media technology, form and content into everyday practices. This includes how we reflexively negotiate media content rather than merely 'receive' it. Academic blind spots that automatically marginalise mass media as socially (and sociologically) unimportant are nowadays intellectually unsustainable, and denying investigation of media influence, media power and how culture itself might be changing in the face of such technological development is at best injudicious, at worst questionable and blinkered. This is not to argue for a deterministic, all-embracing, unitary media logic in society at the expense of other structures; only for recognition of media and media power in social analyses previously marked by its absence. Livingstone (2009) says that we must take account of the fact that today we live in worlds that are saturated with media communication, and youth tend to be at the cutting edge of this. As Mufune (2005, p. 180) has argued: "Social transformation ... becomes discernible through the situation of young people, and the youth in turn give actual expression to changes."

In a second important sense, the phenomenon of media power requires rethinking. The traditional Frankfurt School view of 'what power does to us'<sup>2</sup>, typified by the work of Adorno (1991), needs to be transcended, to arrive at the question 'what do we do with media power'? How do we negotiate seemingly neutral pre-coded symbols and meaning in the form of information and entertainment from media institutions? How do we reflexively 'receive' media power in specific power dialectics between media institutions and actors? This paper evaluates and theorises specific actor receptivity of mediated power narratives in the context of youth in Namibian society.

### **Culture and 'mediatization'<sup>3</sup>**

Media are embroiled with matters of culture. How to define culture? Culture can be regarded as "a whole way of life, a structure of feeling lived and experienced by a large majority of people in a society" (Williams, 1985, p. 10). Culture is the practice and production of everyday meaning, always entailing power, which is accepted or contested by actors.

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<sup>1</sup> We refer in the text to people who engage with media in any form as 'actors' or at other times as 'agents'. These are well-established sociological terms which originally arose out of classical action theory of Max Weber, or in contemporary social theory from interactionist perspectives of writers such as Blumer or Goffman. Actors are regarded as active agents who reflexively construct and negotiate meaning, whether in their general social practices or, in our topic, in terms of their encounters with institutional media. In Giddens' sense, the actor is not 'free' but constrained by structural conditions, which also represent potential opportunity.

<sup>2</sup> Generally seen by them as negative in instilling 'false consciousness' and control in an age of unreflexive mass culture.

<sup>3</sup> A note on spelling: 'mediatization' has been used throughout as this is how the word is now universally presented in academic texts. However, for 'globalisation', or similarise is preferred except in quotations when the spelling of the original is kept, if different. This spelling convention has been adopted for all -ise/-ize words (which can be spelt either way in British English) and their derivatives. It is the house style of Cambridge University Press, most UK mass media, and the European Union.

Media cultures have been defined as “cultures whose primary meaning resource is mediated through technical communications media, and which are moulded by these processes in specifically different ways” (Hepp, 2014, p. 70). Culture becomes spatially loosened from conventional conceptions thereof based exclusively in single (local/national) contexts, experiencing a disembedding from the latter by global forces (Giddens, 1991). Today culture (like power) is extensive and dispersed globally speaking, overwhelmingly mediated or even ‘mediatized’ in the multiple convergent settings of cultural globalisation (Jenkins, 2006).

Thompson (1995) in his work *The Media and Modernity* noted an emergent ‘mediatization’ of society and culture as a historic reality, from the invention of printing through to pervasive contemporary forms in television and the novel virtuality<sup>4</sup> of internet. He regarded this process as a long term trend which establishes what he calls ‘media culture’ in modern societies. The advent of digital media Thompson calls ‘extended mediatization’ whereby social relations and public interactions have not only moved beyond the traditional limitations of physical face-to-face engagement, but have intensified and virtualised a significant portion of social interaction (especially via digital media). This makes much of what we speak and write immediately ‘out there’, made extensively visible or heard, and responded to, in ways not formerly possible (Thompson 2005). Recently, mediatization has been described as an extended process in which we “engage continuously and infinitely with media meaning” (Silverstone, 1999, p. 17), while Hepp (2014, p. 68) states that “mediatization is more a conceptual construct like individualization, commercialization or globalization; and to be understood as a panorama of a sustained metaprocess of change ... Media cultures are the cultures of mediatization.” This tends to be situated in social interactions of work, leisure, family life, relations with familiars, buying and selling, and consumption choices. People text each other or transact business on a regular basis with cell or smart phones, tablets or laptops without necessarily physically engaging another human being in a co-present physical sense. Both old and new media represent mediatization, and it would be unwise at this stage to marginalise the importance of older communication forms.

Thompson (1995), drawing on Bourdieu (1990), characterises globalised mass media as having ‘symbolic power’. Symbolic power utilises images, symbols and texts in the mass-transmission of news production and entertainment. This also implied high degrees of control in terms of ideas, news, knowledge and beliefs that shape how actors see their social worlds. Today symbolic power is uniquely predicated on the existence of media institutions, even though it is found in other sectors such as education or the church. However, the media are more technologically immediate and pervasive in their influence, occupying a strategically more important place in societies than other institutions of representation. Symbolic power is defined by Thompson (1995, p. 17) as “the capacity to intervene in the course of events, to influence the actions of others and indeed to create events, by means of the production and transmission of symbolic forms.”

Three power advantages are suggested by this concept: *first*, ‘intervention’, whereby an event is both reported and interpreted in terms of standard media production practices, revealing the media’s capacity to define news event and its own ontological views of the world. *Second*, ‘media influence’ over the thinking and practices of individuals and groups through symbolic representations. *Third*, ‘control over both production and transmission’ which tends to position media power in a one-sided way against global publics. Since

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<sup>4</sup> Virtuality relates to the ‘virtual’, a situation or condition whereby people gain access to interactions, relationships and information from other people and institutions not physically co-present, who may be in another part of the country or the globe. This is a compression of social space where the world shrinks as we have immediate virtual access to most parts of it. Media technologies are at the heart of virtuality.

Thompson (1995) first argued this, the rise of the internet and social networking from the late 1990s may be said to have altered this imbalance, providing a *fourth level*: platforms for publics to 'answer back' and engage with alternative media, possibly for the initiation of social change through social movements (Castells, 2009). A partial deinstitutionalisation of media and transfer of communicative rights to citizens has become possible, even conditions for a democratic space in the new global public sphere, as Volkmer (2014) has argued. Power itself can be interrogated and negotiated rather than imposed on actors more than ever before.

Actors have choices, and are not 'choice-less': they can subjectively face media power individually, or do so in alliance with others in the new media duality. Individual negotiation can be followed by collective intercessions, potentially leading to interactive alliances – or in extreme circumstances beyond matters of media (but through media), to social movements such as the Arab Spring or the recent 'affirmative positioning' movement to occupy urban land in Windhoek<sup>5</sup>. However, here the focus will remain on *initial individual* rather than collective responses to media power.

### **Institutional media power and actor responses**

The term 'institutional media' should not be conceived simply as organisations with the technological ability to transmit information, meaning and power narratives; but rather as something socially broader and more complex and far-reaching. It represents the institutionalisation and reification of the technology of media use, how we see and talk about media, and the power we ascribe to media. Actors see media as 'institutional' in the sense that they perceive it as an objective force (Hepp, 2014). But, as argued later, we are capable in our mediated relationships of a *negotiative response* – even though we do not always articulate or instinctively know how to react. Reflexive rationality can de-objectify reified aspects of social life. This aspect will be discussed again shortly.

Institutional media power emanates from national and transnational media corporations who distribute monopolistic cultural and symbolic products worldwide, ostensibly for profit but also potentially for ideological dissemination of cultural, social and political agendas. Institutionally, media is always embedded in a local national setting whereby local and global media receptively exist side-by-side. Commercial and state media may collude with or resist global media in line with national ideological goals. However, it is impossible today (unless we live in places such as North Korea), to filter out the influence and impact of global institutional media.

According to McPhail (2010) Western media are a key aspect of international communications which have been defined in the context of contemporary globalisation as the flow of norms, values, culture, information and effects between nations and people. McPhail (2010) states that Western global media are commercially very powerful, but it is their cultural dimensions that require primary investigation. It is argued that there should be three levels to such an enquiry. *First*: how foreign media content is absorbed and contained within local culture. *Second*: how it is transmitted in terms of favoured types (the internet, television, and so on). *Third*: how domestic culture and language change in the face of increasingly rapid and intensifying media inflows into nation-states. Others posit a *fourth level*: What are the *reactions* or lines of resistance to global media in the reception countries? (McMillin, 2009; Abélès, 2006; Appadurai 1996) McMillin (2007) has argued that "examining globalization processes from the ground, from the level of lived experiences, is a

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<sup>5</sup> As occurred during 2015, led by activist academic Job Amupanda who initially used social media and newspapers to organise municipal urban land takeovers, often by poorer citizens lacking land and housing. This is an example of what is meant by a 'social movement'.

very different endeavour from examining it from the perspective of institutional power” (McMillin, 2007, p. 180). This quote informs our objectives in this paper: to focus on receptions and negotiations of institutional media power – the actor end of the process. This is often ignored in southern African media studies. Challenges to power and defences of local cultures come into play here, albeit in complex ways, as we shall see in the Namibian context.

Power, in the sense that we use it here, can be defined as the degree of manoeuvre people have in relation to conditions of structural constraint, as opposed to the unquestioned capacity of other individuals or institutions to impose ideological narratives. Castells (2009, p. 10) refers to it as “the relational capacity that enables a social actor to influence asymmetrically the decisions of other social actors in ways that favour the empowered actor’s will, interests and values”. In politics and the social sciences power is frequently reduced to domination, coercion and violence. Alternative deconstructionist conceptions suggest other ways of looking at it. Foucault (1977) famously sees modern power as constitutive of identity, of forming subjects. It is not something that is ‘done’ to someone, but exists as established knowledge and practice. This is referred to as ‘discourse’ which is a disciplinary system without fixed centres of power, with connections operating through institutions, knowledge systems and individuals. Today “power is everywhere; not because it embraces everything, but because it comes from everywhere” in institutionalised ways (Foucault, 1980, p. 92). Discourses shape and limit subjects and their identities, defining their existence and encapsulating who we are as man or woman, Namibian or South African, black or white. On a second level, Foucault states that the field of discourse is a site of struggle and contestation where power relations confront each other. Here there is emphasis on reception of discourse (general or mediated) whereby actors support or challenge discourse itself and the ways it ‘plays’ on them. Resistant identities (in Castells’ sense) are a possibility, but not a given for Foucault due to the disciplinary character of modernity (Foucault, 1977). There is value in the ideas of both Foucault and Castells in the sense that media represent institutionalised power that can nominally be said to be ‘everywhere’. But power that is also capable of being responded to and challenged, even appropriated in ways that turn the logic back on media power itself in the face of actor challenges.

Today cultural globalisation is pervasively related to culture, media and power. Power arises from symbolic manipulation of narrative or image from a technical base which is effectively latent and invisible to media publics. Popular media culture is disguised as neutral entertainment, allowing the media and those who control it to capture ‘their’ version of reality and present it as real (Castells, 2000). On a phenomenological level, Robertson (2002) links globalisation to an intensification of consciousness that people have of a world no longer little-known and distant, but compressed and directly experienced: to a spatially expanded awareness of places other than their immediate locale. He calls this ‘global consciousness’, a single ‘place’ in which individual interactivity and actions have been spatially and socially enhanced. Tomlinson (1999, p. 1) states that “globalisation lies at the heart of modern culture and that cultural practices lie at the heart of globalisation”, insisting that the global cannot be properly explained without reference to this ‘vocabularly of culture’. The individual is offered their own narrative possibility to ‘react back’ at the cultural flows of the global as a challenge.

Modern consciousness now exhibits both local and global cognitions, in that people are constantly aware of their physical ‘home’ of everyday living, and equally of a global existence ‘out there’ which extensively connects with it. Mass media strategically organise this local-global connectivity. But institutionalised within this historically unique form of consciousness lies a tension of potential opposites wherein actors and media culture face each other off. From this tension responsively arises embodied actor ‘positions’ that confront and negotiate media power reflexively. This is discussed next.

## **The Windhoek research methodology**

The foregoing theoretical discussion on media institutions, culture and power will now be substantiated through the application of Namibian empirical evidence. This is drawn from qualitative sociological media research undertaken with a broad range of youth participants aged 18-35 years in the City of Windhoek between 2011 and 2014. Windhoek is the part of the country where social change tends to be manifest and most visible, and therefore an ideal location for assessing reflexive responses to global and local transformations. The working conjecture was that youth are central to processes of change. Youth participants were asked about their media actions and, separately, about matters of culture, material life and perceptions of power. This research worked with the methodological principle that acquiring social knowledge, and subsequent theory construction, is most successful when derived from the direct study of concrete social settings which take into account actor meaning and symbolic interactions. Therefore, grounded theory methods (Charmaz, 2012) and sensory ethnography (Pink, 2012) ideally shaped the research.

Charmaz's (2012) constructivist grounded theory was applied to undertake in-depth flexible conversational semi-structured interviews with Windhoek youth where themes, social processes and patterns were sought, and then turned into theoretical codes that cogently expressed and preserved the essence and character of actor responses. Grounded theory uniquely provides a systematic methodology that allows the cumulative building and construction of analysis directly out of the lives, experiences and social interactions of participants. While primarily used to generate a general theory about specific social phenomena, its main value is the priority it gives to participants for rationalising about the social processes and practices they directly engage with. It recognises that social actors are well-placed to provide their own initial interpretation and meaning, which is then analysed and refined by the researcher. Grounded theory methods were applied in Windhoek to capture, through the development of theoretical codes, people's explanations and cognitions about their media relationships and negotiations. Emergent codes, especially linked to receptions of media power, remained close to the data and sought to preserve actions, allowing for crystallisation of key sociological information. Theoretical codes encapsulated what Charmaz (2012, p. 59) calls the "identifying moments" of the research.

Charmaz cautions against uncritically accepting what people tell researchers. Researchers must not become so immersed in the lifeworlds of interviewees that the actor's words and personal interpretations are regarded as the end of analysis. Research must move to the next level, which is to identify significant processes implicit in what actors are saying, but which are possibly unknown to them. This is where coding procedure and comparative interviews take place. Grounded theory originally called this the "constant comparative method" (Glazer & Strauss, 1967, p. 47). Comparative interview methods allowed for the Windhoek empirical research to rise above over-individualistic limitations, and to control the 'bigger picture' or canvas whereby the whole research process regarding media, culture and power was revealed.

The application concurrently of sensory ethnography with grounded theory introduced a strategy to include 'emotional' data within the overall methods frame. Sensory approaches try to pay proper attention to the human senses. The Windhoek research looked for ways in which actors expressively interpreted cultural space, or emotionally engaged with cultural settings in talk. As with grounded theory, it sought an understanding of how their lives were phenomenologically situated and shaped, seeking emotional connections and expressions in relation to media and material life. Pink (2012) says that positivistic-oriented researchers have for too long ignored the reality that people are emotional beings who express in their lives love, hate, desire, joy, attraction, worry, anxiety, nostalgia, and so on. Researchers tend too much to narrowly seek specifically rational, less emotional informa-

tion from participants. Sensory ethnography links emotional aspects with cultural practices such as consumption, connections with tradition, accumulation of material things, their responses to power narratives, and so on. Sensory grounded theory researchers seek emotional data on two levels (Pink, 2012). First, personal information entailing uniquely subjective preferences, opinions and ontological meaning; Second, social or shared meaning related to commonalities of culture and materialism linked to familiar others in society. At both levels, the researcher specifically notes how actors speak with enthusiasm, apprehension, concern, disquiet, nostalgia or loss regarding the core research themes that matter to them.

The research therefore employed a methodological approach which sought individual and collective meaning, and sensory expressions related to matters of mediated entertainment and information and, centrally, the negotiation of media power they encountered in their media practices.

### **Three reflexive positions on global media power**

There was uneven awareness among Windhoek research participants of media's capacity through its power narratives to shape opinion or influence lifestyle and identity in the face of new global cultural possibilities. Some youth sensed or explicitly noted institutionalised media power agendas, but only when these conflicted with their own entrenched local values and cultural sensibilities. On such occasions lines of resistance emerged, and some participants directly attacked what they saw as the corrosive effects of Western media agendas on their society. Participants had ambiguous relationships with mediated power. Those who glimpsed or overtly recognised power narratives in what they saw or listened to responded in diverse ways to them. Postcolonial theory, writing about cultural imperialism in former colonies like Namibia, tends to suggest uncomplicated reactions to power as either passive acceptance (a Marxian-type false consciousness) or favoured resistance, focusing exclusively on challenges to globalisation in the defence of the 'local' (Ashcroft, 2001; Mongia, 1996; Bhabha, 1994). The problem with uniform theories of power is that they tend to downgrade local power discourses and the way these complicate general flows of power. They analytically limit actors' responses to them. Local culture comes to be relegated to 'hybrid' status in an underplaying and neglect of any sufficient analysis of actual empirical mediated conditions.

Young Namibians reacted in different ways to local and global media influences, in ways that reflexively established negotiative relationships with cultural narrative of mediated power. Youth participants varied from regarding international media as providing lifestyle opportunity or as liberating them from oppressive, stiflingly local culture; or alternatively as seeing media as threatening traditions, or denying representation of valued indigenous culture and unique local social life. A challenging picture therefore emerged from the varied participant accounts, establishing three empirically derived theoretical actor positions: *cultural appropriationists*, *cultural traditionalists* and *cultural representationalists*. These are discussed below.

#### **(i) 'Cultural appropriationists': Cosmopolitan media**

*Cultural appropriationists* tended to 'take' or appropriate from media what they liked, to utilise what was practical for them by incorporating media into their biographic actions. Media were frequently for material ends and especially for life-planning. This position viewed Western media in favourable terms for its novelty, richness, pragmatic potential and cosmopolitanism. The quality or imagination and sophistication of many film and television productions, and the array of possibilities of internet sites such as Facebook, were valued. Fashion and music were checked out, informing their style, even discussing

and sharing these with co-groups of friends and familiars online. They looked at things to buy online, and if they could afford them, they purchased. These youth expressed materially orientated behaviours. Appropriationists prized global media's ability to connect them with other cultures and otherworldly experience, and they discussed local and international culture with one another: they 'culture-shared' online with people in other countries. They recognised possibilities for integrating mediated global knowledge into their self-development, and valued a global cosmopolitanism. In this respect, they were cosmopolitans as well as appropriationists. Specifically, Namibians used internet resources to promote or improve business or general skills and practices; students read widely from the internet rather than being dependent on conventional and often limited local libraries. Their attitude was not so much one of 'giving in' to the allures and seduction of media power (as post-colonialists would see it), but rather one of appropriation and incorporation of mediated symbolic goods for minor or major localised lifestyle projects, in Tomlinson's sense (2003). It was a *strategic option* for them, representing opportunity for new outlooks and identity negotiations that transcended more limited and constrained local possibilities. Hepp (2015, p. 182-3) argues for recognition of "wilfulness in media appropriation" which refers to conversion or 'domestication' of media to match the local use and needs of the consuming actor. Media can therefore be regarded as a commodity like any other, engaged with in a critical manner.

Cultural appropriationists were instrumental about media. It was a practical life tool, a means to meet lifestyle goals of self-improvement entailing moderate-to-high degrees of immersion in (often) Western culture. Such participants were the most sceptical among all the youth participants regarding tradition, because they regarded it as restrictive, with female participants being most likely to cite negative experiences of customary patriarchal restraint or oppression. They thought that national culture would benefit if Namibia became a post-traditional state, in Giddens' (1996) sense, where traditional culture moves into a past heritage. Such participants were 'appropriational' of media resources. Media was something to be engaged with and used to inform material lives and fulfil consumer desires. It informed consumption practices including fashion, told them about the latest technology (including media), it provided repertoires of lifestyle taste, or ideas for business. Miller (2008) writes that material culture needs to be taken seriously in studies of everyday social practices, and argues that consumption of objects or 'things', and ways people 'use' these, are at the heart of the constitution of contemporary identity. Material life is too often judged in moralistic or condemnatory terms; 'things' are not only consumed, but also shape linkages and relationships with others who engage in similar valued consumption practices. Miller says (2008, p. 46): "... material culture matters because objects create subjects more than the other way round. The closer our relationships with objects, the closer our relationships with people." Media reflexively<sup>6</sup> offered a positive transformative possibility for youth.

McMillin (2009, p. 26) has condemned this line of thought for what she calls a "romanticization of agency", representing a neo-liberal discourse which ignores the power of media to manipulate 'subjects' into consumer positionings which reinforce neo-colonial capitalist culture. This analysis, however, underplays the desire of women and men, especially in formerly oppressive and materially restrictive postcolonial societies to rise above the structural confines of conservative patriarchal culture, socio-economic conditions of poverty, and social marginalisation.

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<sup>6</sup> Reflexivity is the person's capacity to reflect on and nominally plan or correct their life-projects or planning by taking into account the opportunities, structural constraints and resources available to them. This is a form of 'self-monitoring' of action (Giddens, 1991).

An Afrikaans-speaking female participant favoured Western media as an essential source of entertainment, but stated that it was chiefly central to her informational needs. She found local Namibian media of the type broadcast by NBC and One Africa 'very limited' by comparison with Western. She said:

*I prefer Western media. I'm from a mixed English-speaking and Afrikaans-speaking family with some Nama. So I lean toward the Western media. I enjoy films and TV in English. African stuff, including a lot of TV in English or Afrikaans, is so bad! I dislike the African side of the media. It doesn't inform on anything much. I have no problem with Western.*

On media and tradition, a female Oshiwambo speaker stated that Namibian media failed to give her the information and motivation to attain her life goals. She thought the country needed to 'get modern' and emphasise tradition less. She provisionally valued traditional culture, but believed it was holding back development. She referred to NBC television programmes that showed 'badly made boring stuff' about tradition. She said:

[NBC] keep showing stuff about people in remote villages dancing and playing music in traditional dress. They look so self-conscious. So few people live like that now, we need to move on. We can't pretend nothing has changed from the past. Tradition now is mainly for tourists. I do dress traditionally when I go back to the other family members in the north, but only for festivals or to please the relatives.

Some Windhoek youth were fiercely resistant to the authoritative demands that tradition tried to place upon them. They wanted the freedom to 'move forward'. One young Owambo woman used Facebook to promote a jewellery business. Western media especially television and the internet was instrumental to this end. Yet, she was careful to emphasise that she would not watch just anything. She was a selective viewer or listener. While she loved soap operas and popular American movies, most of her choices were for practical life-guide purposes. Global media were a resource that she felt did not negatively influence or control her, but provided a service she could appropriate. Post-colonial arguments against cosmopolitan media are valuable in defence of difference and expositions of power, but underplay what people can gain from global media, and can be traditionally reactionary in certain respects. To suggest advantages of media for actors is not to adversely underestimate contexts of restraint or power that will be encountered (Zegeye, 2008).

The cultural appropriationists were usually the youngest Namibian participants, often (but not exclusively) middle class from higher income backgrounds. Most white and 'coloured' interviewees were in this group, but it did significantly include a large number of black lower-income individuals actively seeking upward mobility, and expressing views that firmly placed them in this category. Cultural appropriationists were not always automatically pragmatists: a few can be described as avid consumers of novelty, even frivolity, in their chosen mediated practices. They sought diversion or escape from perceived 'dull' lives, wanted entertainment at the end of a hard working day, or instinctively followed leisure patterns of friends. For some, social networking activities, for example, represented 'fun' rather than deep or serious engagement with the local/global outside. This type of participant dominated the cultural appropriationist category over the pragmatist group; they were the least likely to engage in organised or planned lifestyle projects, or to reflexively recognise the presence of power in their mediated engagements, being potentially easier to manipulate ideologically. Their appropriational activities were therefore significantly different from those of the more obviously 'pragmatic' cultural appropriationists. Yet both types were essentially *appropriationist* in their mediated actions, albeit in different ways.

## **(ii) 'Cultural traditionalists': Suitable media and defences of tradition**

In polar opposition to the previous theoretical position, *cultural traditionalists* were resistant, even belligerent, to the expanding media environment in Namibia, frequently disapproving of the cultural appropriationists' enthusiasm for global culture. Primarily, cultural traditionalists raised fears about perceived erosion of existing ethnic or national cultures by foreign media. They were mainly in the upper age range of the sample (30 years plus), being what might be termed middle class, sometimes as a result of socio-economic position gained by their parents as beneficiaries of rapid social mobility through acquiring government jobs or patronage. A few were from poor or relatively poor working class backgrounds.

Cultural traditionalists did not reject modern media, but in common with appropriationists thought it should be used as a neutral practical tool for, first, development and, second, entertainment. They were the *most likely to talk about the need for media regulation* including state surveillance of media to ensure what they called 'appropriate' or respectful content. Banning of media content was cited as a favoured strategy for cultural preservation. The traditionalists were particularly critical of the popular Namibian singer, Lady May, who was widely discussed in interviews during 2011/2012, typifying the struggle over what media discourse, including celebrity, should look like in the country; with traditionalists using her as an opportunity to forcibly state their position. She had been criticised for swearing at the Nama Music Awards on live public television, later being banned from state media indefinitely. The incident is worth citing as it says something succinct about the cultural traditionalist position. On 4 June 2011 at the Namibian Music Awards (NAMA) in Windhoek, Lady May offended members of the audience and the broader general public. The show was broadcast nationally on NBC state television and widely reported (*The Namibian*, 6 June 2011):

*The NAMA awards were held at a Windhoek hotel on Saturday, and broadcast live on NBC television. Lady May, who won the award for 'Best House' for her song 'Zoom Zoom', committed the foul sin during her acceptance speech. Clad in a fur coat, the pint-size artist said: "Love me or hate me but I'll forever be Lady May," before flashing her middle finger. After thanking her God, her management and her fans, she then said "Good night mother f\*#@#ers" [sic] and walked off stage, leaving the audience reeling in shock and surprise.*

The event made the front pages of most national daily Namibian newspapers over two days. In a similar popular music ceremony in the United States or Britain, it may have gone unreported. The reaction to Lady May's 'symbolic' public defiance is of considerable interest not strictly in itself, but for what it says about conservative cultural positioning in modern Namibia. Lady May sparked a debate about what was acceptable cultural or traditional behaviour, as well as what could be aired on national television. It revealed the frictions between perceived tradition and emerging modernity within in the country. A Nama youth retorted:

*I watched it live on TV [NBC]. I saw what the reaction was from people on the screen, and the other artists on the stage. The whole nation was shocked. For me it was not OK. There were also a lot of big government officials in the audience, important people like ministers, important people who were shocked by what she called them. People have to understand that Namibia is not America.*

Some were critical of the musician, but against the sanction of banning her music. Several youths were unhappy with this. One said: "I don't agree with this banning of her music on NBC just for what she did. It is too extreme. She is just trying to express her life, to work on it. She has not done this before."

The Lady May story has the value of consolidating and articulating tensions over tradition and contemporary media in the Windhoek matrix. It exposed cultural fault lines among participants, and brought to the surface disparities in loyalty both to official and general conceptions of traditional behaviour. Some younger participants appeared more shocked by the punishment of Lady May than by the incident itself. Older ones thought she was too heavily associated with Western culture, paralleling Western celebrity in unacceptable fashion, even though in international popular music culture global audiences expected music stars to be colourful and outrageous. Traditionalists sought to sanction or suppress such behaviour. Bourdieu's (1979) concept of the 'aristocracy of culture', whereby 'official' culture both defends itself and suppresses other versions of culture, is expressed well here. Breaching traditional culture and disrespecting elders had been the primary charge against the singer. The cultural traditionalist positions, especially the desire to legislatively control media, potentially prohibits possibilities of opportunity and change for other groups who did not want this. This aspect was apparent in Windhoek participant accounts where an emerging tension over culture was evident.

Traditionalists referred favourably to state curbing of foreign media on NBC, despite the problem of the scarcity of local programming to replace it. This approach had disadvantaged the state broadcaster in 2002, when the Founding President Sam Nujoma's imposed the decision to force the station to immediately cut American and European content from the airwaves due to too much 'criminal crap' (Nujoma's words, *The Namibian*, 4 October 2002). The president cited unwanted foreign influence, including alleged explicit depictions of sex and violence. The official version for the sudden change was that NBC was meant to be 'educational' and the broadcaster was breaching this remit (*The Namibian*, 7 October 2002). In consequence, limited Namibian production such as news, documentaries, NGO and government information, and televised proceedings of parliament suddenly dominated the schedule, including repeats of old programmes. Several years passed before the prohibition was quietly lifted. This can be interpreted as one of the country's first direct postcolonial conservative challenges to cultural globalisation.

Cultural traditionalists should not be regarded as victims or dupes of local or official culture in their political oppositional positioning against the global. Their doubts or hostile actions toward media are not viewed as driven by blind adherence to false, oppressive tradition cut off from reflexive possibilities. Rather, it is *possible to see reactions ontologically*. The existential security of a cherished traditionalist worldview was under threat and they responded disapprovingly, with trepidation. This is entirely understandable from their point of view. Yet, accelerated global media entry into Namibian society has arguably begun to break up state and local institutional authority's coveted control and manipulation of flows of information and opinion, challenging its ability to define and operationalise 'authentic' or 'official' Namibian culture. Media, and those working in it, were heavily criticised by the traditionalists for undermining this state or official 'possession'. It clearly opened up worrying civic possibilities for disruption of the status quo.

### **(iii) 'Cultural representationalists': Confirmative media**

*Cultural representationalists* occupied a more ambiguous reflexive social position. They had the same fascination for diverse global media as the cultural appropriationists, yet harboured nagging concerns about the *presence* or absence of their cultural heritage or local 'lived' culture within mediated film or television productions. Lukes (2005) has argued that power is not exclusively the influence and prestige that some groups have over others. Power can involve denial or suppression of opinion and group representation. While people enjoy glimpsing into and sharing of other cultures on the internet or in popular cinema and television, they also desire 'their time' and their rightful inclusion in these. They demand that their identities and cultures be portrayed to some degree.

Cultural representationalists desired or demanded from media modes of representation of their Namibian lives, lifestyles and culture that they felt were missing from much of what they viewed and listened to. They rarely found this in Western film or television; but local media also failed them. There were too few indigenous local productions, or production quality proved too low or sub-standard to acceptably and convincingly meet their existential or ontological needs.<sup>7</sup> South African or Nigerian 'Nollywood' soap opera productions and films were 'next best' media where they could relate to fictional lives in dramas set in comfortably recognisable locations, or hear familiar languages such as Afrikaans being spoken in film or television set in Johannesburg or Cape Town – substitute places for Namibia.

The science fiction film *District 9* was mentioned too frequently by participants not to ask why.<sup>8</sup> It was a common reference for participants who hoped to see something of their world in the media they consumed. One female coloured Afrikaans-speaker said she liked to hear her own language spoken in film or television drama, saying that: "*I don't deny that I like that and can relate to it a lot more. Well it's my language, of course! I grew up with Afrikaans as my mother tongue, even though I now have English. Imagine if you never got to hear and see films and TV that had your own language and culture? That's a hard thing.*" She then mentioned seeing *District 9* at the cinema which she was "dragged to see" by her husband:

*I was not keen at first. When I sat there watching the start, I was hearing all these people in this Hollywood-type movie speaking Afrikaans in Joburg. I could not believe it, and I had to laugh. The film was very good. It was like the soaps that change languages from time to time. I liked that film a lot, even though it was very hard and a little cruel. But its heart was in the right place and I liked the way it reflected our recent history. It felt like a much better local film, not a Hollywood one really.*

A bank clerk living in Khomasdal said that he preferred American film and television only because there were so few acceptable Namibian productions. He asked why the country had limited or poor film and television. He said:

*I liked District 9 such a lot because you related to it so much. Joburg is in many ways like Windhoek including the people who live there. It felt good to have a movie that was much like a Hollywood film, but where the people in it were like you. The bad guys and even the main good guy were like the Afrikaner boys we have here. I would like there to be more movies like that. Why we can't do that more, I haven't a clue.*

Cultural representationalists desired *representational media* that mirrored and confirmed their valued social contexts. It has been argued that media are cultural tools that are used by individuals to reflect, approve or reorder lives and cultures (Boyd & Ellison, 2007). They are *confirmative media* required for ontological affirmation, although the commercial imperative of media business systems tends to manipulate such local public loyalties. It has been argued that South African (and Namibian) senses of identity are both encouraged and exploited by television advertisers and programme makers for profit (Narunsky-Laden, 2008). Mongia (1996) states that people desire the valuing, preservation and display of national and ethnic symbols that represent and assert cultural and geographical 'difference'. Many Windhoek participants echoed this sentiment. One male youth referred to concerns with being 'hit' with too much 'American stuff'. He said

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<sup>7</sup> Ontology is the study of human and social conditions of existence. It refers to ideas or beliefs that make us feel safe and secure in our lives, including familiar places, people recognisably 'like us', and 'our' stories. When we behave ontologically, we are confirming the 'familiar' and our relationship to it. Media may or may not be ontologically representational for us.

<sup>8</sup> Neil Blomkamp's successful 2009 apartheid-influenced science fiction allegory set in Johannesburg.

*we are trapped with American [media]. But when you see District 9 or similar, or even 10,000 B.C. that was made here by Hollywood [in 2006], you have a totally different link with it, you can relate more. You recognize the types [personalities] or the places. I saw 10,000 B.C. at the cinema in Windhoek. When they showed the scene with the warriors walking past Spitzkoppe [an iconic mountain near the town of Usakos], everyone cheered in the cinema!*

A female arts college student missed both 'authentic' Namibian media and hearing Oshiwambo spoken in film or television. She was not against English language popular films or programmes from abroad, but did miss her mother tongue, Oshiwambo.

*I really am [worried]. There is a lack of our own films and programmes. The Americans are proud to make movies in their vernacular, in English. But we don't have the confidence to do that. Here over half of Namibians speak Oshiwambo, yet we don't make movies in that language. We need to do that, or it will be American things that we will watch into the future. It will undermine my language and our culture. We must try to make Owambo movies.*

Gloomily, she was not hopeful that this would ever happen given the dominance of English in the country's media. She bitterly blamed the state broadcaster NBC for its 'poor' track record in investing in programmes and films in local languages. They had introduced television news in the main indigenous languages in 2002, she said, but no further initiatives had followed. She was suspicious of what happened to all the state funding the NBC received given that so few local productions had been forthcoming.

Bhabha (1994) argues that the citizens of formerly colonised countries struggle to find cultural and social representation in the world of mediatized globalised culture. They instinctively sense the loss or downgrading of the local. He argues that postcolonial citizens must build a 'third space of enunciation' which is described as a space of opposition where we create our own favoured cultural hybridities. Local actors destabilise global culture at their various national points of contact with it, thereby making hybridity a permanent act of subversion. The fact that Windhoek youth recognised representational 'absences' might be considered a 'first expression' of opposition prior to demands for authentic local media productions to counter ubiquitous Hollywood and foreign media. They demanded cultural representation of the local.

### **Conclusion: Patterns of power and agency**

These specific insights into power overtly or covertly recognised in the accounts of the Windhoek youth participants now require a final contrast with theories of power. Foucault's (1980; 1977) work is frequently deployed in media studies. His concept of discourse neatly analyses patterns of domination in particular epochs, explaining ways of thinking and acting within institutional systems of knowledge of which 'subjects' (note, not agents or actors) are barely aware. However, Foucault's theory of power has been described as over-disciplinary, narrow and one-dimensional in ways it purports to shape society and identity (Joas & Knöbl, 2009). It offers a rather restrictive actional framework where actors appear as heavily and irrevocably conditioned by discourse with little possibility for reflexive negotiation.

Three dimensions of power offered by Lukes (2005) suggest other explanatory possibilities for understanding power and media in Windhoek, providing a more flexible paradigm than that of Foucault. Lukes' (2005) theory combines elements of pluralist and elite political theory, and Marxian notions of ideology with aspects of Foucault's own discourse theory. In this approach, power operates on three levels. *First*, it is embodied in groups struggling

over issues or demands, and those who get their interests recognised and implemented, by definition have power. Lukes (2005) says that conventional theories usually stop at this point, although power operates in other crucial ways. *Second*, power is manifest in the ability of influential groups in business or politics (or media) to restrict potentially conflictual issues or controversies from becoming open and public: "it is crucially important to identify potential issues which non decision-making prevents from being actual" (Lukes, 2005, p. 23). *Third*, and quite relevant to institutional media, power is the capacity or ability to shape public opinion to reflect the thinking and interests of the powerful. Lukes (2005, p. 28) explains this by asking:

is it not the supreme and most insidious exercise of power to prevent people, to whatever degree, from having grievances by shaping their perceptions, cognitions and preferences in such a way that they accept their role in the existing order of things, either because they can see or imagine no alternative to it, or because they see it as natural and unchangeable, or because they value it as divinely ordained and beneficial?

Applying these three levels to negotiative cultural positionings of Windhoek participants helps articulate and explain how power might operate in mediated settings. These dimensions of power apply well to local and global institutional media that produce, export, transmit and disseminate symbolic cultural goods.

Lukes's (2005) second dimension of power can directly be applied to the concern of the cultural representationalists. Participants missed seeing their culture and society displayed in dominant (mainly American) global media, although local media was also thought to exclude an 'authentic' ontologically satisfactory portrait of Namibian life. There was an inclusive need to see 'their' significations rather than those of 'others'. They reflexively saw that popular media excluded or hid the life values and culture that mattered to them. The common response to the *film District 9* revealed surprise and pleasure in seeing a world that participants could in part relate to revealed. In contrast, criticism of local state media such as NBC was expressed, and Windhoekers complained about exclusion where only information and themes that matched the government's political and social agenda were aired. NBC was regarded as giving only an 'official' picture rather than an open, full depiction of the diversity of Namibian civil society.

Lukes' (2005) third dimension of power emerged in several ways in the interviews. Cultural traditionalists fiercely defended conventional local viewpoints in the face of foreign global media, frequently being happy to comply with state attitudes regarding how society should be perceived. A fledgling self-employed businessman in his late twenties interviewed for the Windhoek research, expressed the most radical views on media power among all the participants. Media institutions had negatively come to dominate the world for him. People were now subject to them:

*"Just like they say, that history is written by the victors, so is what we encounter on the media. The media is a control tool. I would say it is bringing us down, de-humanising us, and making us like sheep. We do what our [Namibian] elite tells us to do, and those Western ones."*

Lines of resistance, dispute and tension around matters of culture were developing in complex ways around the three participant standpoints, whether it was about demanding cultural representation from state and private media, or traditionalists insisting on media control against the modern-thinking and cosmopolitan appropriationists – themselves demanding open and free media. Culture appears to be evolving as a site of struggle over who should legitimately possess contemporary Namibian symbols and values, with the state occasionally intervening to articulate its preferred version of national 'tradition'.

While this can be portrayed as an alignment of traditionalists against culturally diverse and open cosmopolitans, it needs to be seen as a more complex process, suggesting instead a dialectically driven logic toward a hybrid overlapping outcome of all three reflexive cultural categories.

Whichever form this amalgam of reflexive positionings will evolve into in the future, it seems likely to result in shifts in culture and identity in the next generation, even flowing uneasily into politics itself, as recent urban social movements reveal around matters of land. Future public debate and even possible civic conflicts may be around aspects of culture in general, and media specifically, rather than economy. This cultural 'tension' is arguably already visible among youth who, through their intensive engagement with media, now demand right of access to media and stand at the abrasive edge of actions of cultural and sociological change.

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