

Television Labor: Historical Trajectories and Contemporary Concerns in Global Contexts

Helping Your Images of Yourself to Look like Ours: Global Audiovisual Standards, Foreign Assistance, and TV Labor in Africa

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In the last decade, a combination of economic, demographic, and technological changes have helped TV industries in Africa to grow rapidly. On the one hand, new digital tools have helped make the production of audiovisual content easier and cheaper. On the other, rising disposable income has helped to create audiences willing and able to support locally-made TV programs that better reflect their lived realities than imports from other continents. As migration to dense urban centers like Lagos and Kinshasa has increased, it also has become both technologically feasible and economically rewarding for TV providers to offer services that can reach large numbers of customers.

This growth has been accompanied by investment from non-African media companies. In 2012, for instance, France's Canal Plus began offering a satellite TV service in 20 Sub-Saharan Francophone countries, as well as Ghana. The service airs TV shows from Europe alongside European-African co-productions and African programs. The French company has taken care to tailor its service to the expectations of its customers in Africa: for instance, it offers the option to pay via mobile phone – a ubiquitous practice where cell phone penetration is greater than that of bank accounts.

But while foreign investors are interested in African TV, foreign audiences are not. More than TV from any other continent, African shows are not viewed outside their region – or sometimes country – of origin. Broadcasts of Latin American telenovelas are popular in Poland; South Korea's *Boys Over Flowers* aired in everywhere from Israel to India; and my friends and I – and seemingly most residents of England – watch and have heated discussions about Denmark's *Borgen* or *The Bridge*. But outside of emigrant communities, television from African countries isn't often watched outside of Africa.

A lot of factors have prevented African TV from finding audiences abroad. But a foreign aid program currently being run by France's CFI (France's organization for media cooperation abroad) would suggest that African programs' dissimilarity to global audiovisual norms might be an important – and mostly overlooked – reason for foreign audiences' disinterest. Called "L'Afrique en série," the program (which is funded by the European Development Fund, and is thus official foreign development aid) teaches TV production skills (at least, European-style ones) to about a hundred audiovisual technicians in TV industries in countries such as Ghana, Cameroon, Niger, and Burkina Faso. Each of the 12 courses offered by the program focuses on a different topic related to the production of fiction TV series – such as sound mixing, sound recording, editing, framing, directing, and

production coaching. All are taught by professionals in the European TV industry (mostly, of course, France).

Even though African TV is successfully competing with foreign imports for African audiences, for CFI, these depictions of African lives do not measure up to the aesthetics of global TV tastes. *L'Afrique en série*'s website bluntly states that many African TV programs are "technically weak," which "reduces their circulation potential in countries outside of Africa." Through these training courses, they hope to meet the objective of helping "the best African series to achieve the international standards demanded by the field of global broadcasting."

The logic behind such a program is easy to criticize. After all, who is France to tell Africa what African lives should look like? Even so, I'd like to ditch the cultural imperialism thesis for now, and consider the possibility that CFI might have a point of sorts. With TV increasingly watched across national and regional borders, global audience's expectations – aesthetic, generic, structural, etc. – help determine what is profitable in a global marketplace and, in turn, what gets produced. The production of these globally-accepted forms of TV requires technical expertise that may be out of reach for workers in some local TV industries. From this perspective, I wonder, are aid programs like *L'Afrique en série* so different from other types of well-meaning technical trainings in the foreign assistance milieu – such as water safety or improving crop yields?

In audiovisual productions, technical expertise and knowledge are inextricable from cultural expression. In my reading, the CFI project suggests that perhaps in its critique of globalization and media, academia has been too concerned with the latter at the expense of the former. After all, mitigating imbalances in the technical expertise of TV professionals worldwide *might* increase the number of African TV shows seen abroad. But it seems probable that it will have a more tangible effect on people's everyday lives than simply combating supposed cultural imperialism: advancing the career development of workers in Africa's audiovisual industries.