

Piracy & Media Studies

“Media Piracy in African Contexts”

Daniel Grinberg, *University of California, Santa Barbara*

When we think about piracy, it is necessary to emphasize its enactments in particular geographies, economies, and cultures. By tracing the contours of a specific location and how piracy transforms the flows of media production, distribution, and consumption, we can begin to detect the co-constitutive adaptations of people at various scales and through their piracy practices. Toward that objective, I further suggest a greater turn to considering the repercussions in African contexts for a number of reasons. For one, countries on the world’s second largest continent are major sites of technological development and expansion, but they remain underrepresented and under-theorized in scholarly analyses. These countries also offer compelling comparative possibilities, thinking of parallels across regional, national, and ethnic boundaries, but also instantiate striking differences in public policy, digital access, and media usage. For instance, we can note the disparities of globalization in the distinctions between rural and urban areas, between democracies and autocracies, or among various levels of economic development. In addition, the formative imprints of colonialism on legal, political, and economic systems demand that we more closely examine the paternalistic cyber-colonialism of non-African multinational companies operating in Africa today. Lastly, related to these colonial aftermaths, piracy and Africa are jointly prone to stigmatizing and marginalizing discourses and tinged with racist implications in the Western imaginary. With terms like ‘shadow economy,’ ‘black market,’ the Dark Net, and ‘the dark continent,’ both concepts are often freighted with the associations of a dangerous, even malevolent blackness.

One case study to briefly consider is Angola, a Western coast country with a population of approximately 13 million people. Portugal occupied Angola for almost four centuries until the latter became independent in 1975. Currently, the median annual salary for residents there is \$720, which makes mobile phone access—the primary mode of digital access there—an exceedingly expensive proposition at \$2.50 for 50 megabytes of data. To respond to this disparity, Wikimedia and Facebook (through its reduced version, Free Basics) have partnered with local telecom provider Unitel to offer ‘zero rating’ access, which makes the data associated with these sites free of charge. However, as journalist Jason Koebler has reported, some Angolans, to tactically capitalize on this limited availability, have begun to hide links to pirated media in Portuguese Wiki articles and shared these clandestine links in closed Facebook groups. This specific enactment is revealing at multiple levels and nuances reductive understandings of piracy as worthless, parasitic, and subordinate.

Most evidently, it evinces the ingenuity and resourcefulness of economically disadvantaged populations to repurpose the limited tools available to them in unanticipated ways. It is creative and transformative, albeit not necessarily in the ways that the narrow imperatives of profit and privatization incentivize. This piracy also gestures to the vagaries of copyright and the public domain, which privilege the placement of select forms of knowledge and creative output within reach and most others at arm’s length behind geoblocking, legal barriers, and exploitative costs. Along these same lines, the mixed use of Wikimedia Zero and Facebook also shows how piracy blurs public and corporate interests, and how both public, nonprofit goals of education and

humanitarianism and the private goal of territorializing emerging markets can become tethered to neocolonial impulses. By devising workarounds that fit their own material needs and desires, Angolans are building on the colonial tradition of asserting their agency through measured but meaningful acts of reappropriation.

Thus far, both the Wikimedia Foundation and the Angolan government have been uncertain how to best respond to these developments, but in other contexts like Zambia, legislators have used piracy as a pretext to heighten digital surveillance, mandate SIM card registration, and enact more stringent laws. With more journalistic accounts and scholarly analyses of particular localized manifestations of piracy, it becomes more possible to recognize its complexities and potentialities emplaced within particular social, historical, legal, and material contexts. Such close considerations can then help contribute toward a broader understanding that exceeds the pejorative characterizations of piracy designed to predominantly benefit powerful institutions and enhance their already rigorous control of media and information.