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CIRCULATION AND CENSORSHIP IN NAIROBI: ON TV AND ONLINE

Ng'endo Mukii is a talented animator principally known for her short documentary animation film *Yellow Fever* (2012). The film has traveled the world through film festivals, was shown on the European cultural TV channel Arte, and has been viewed by hundreds of thousands of people on the VOD platform Vimeo as well as other online distribution channels such as YouTube, Buni.TV, and IndieFlix. This is a successful case of distribution for an independent short film. Examining the work it took her to get the film into distribution—and the platforms she has used—is highly revealing.

The film explores a global hierarchy of female beauty standards that positions whiteness at its pinnacle and the psychological impact this has on African women. In a particularly evocative sequence, Mukii interviews her young niece, depicted in animated form. During the interview, her niece remarks: "I really want to be American instead of a Kenyan. If I was American I would be white, white, white, white and I love being white." The young girl sits on a carpet next to a television that plays advertisements for whitening cream and shows white pop stars, suggesting a link between the consumption of global media (pop music videos) and advertising in shaping young minds. When confronted with the idea that she cannot simply become white, the young girl, without missing a beat, responds that of course she could, through the use of magic—an idea she gained through watching the American television show *Wizards of Waverly Place*.[1]

Animated interviews such as this appear throughout the film and are interspersed with live action female modern dancers who contort their bodies to depict the existential discomfort of trying to conform to unrealistic beauty standards. Mukii made the film while she was a student at the Royal College of Art in London, but the inspiration for her incisive critique of race and representation was her return to Nairobi after studying at the Rhode Island School of Design and living in the United States. The circular motion of travel and return opened her to a new perspective on issues she had never originally questioned while living in Nairobi, and she began "looking at this issue of race and representation in media and trying to figure out where this added value of whiteness had come from in African countries."[2] The film is bold, provocative, and stylistically internationalized—both in its theme and in its production process—and this undoubtedly helped the film travel as far as it has.

Yet while the film had been widely seen, Mukii had an ambivalent view about the distribution platforms she had used and the trade-off that was so often made between visibility and remuneration, and the influence this would then have on her (and other filmmakers') ability to produce more films. She was glad her film was on platforms like Buni.tv and IndieFlix, but was cautious, saying, "I don't know how these platforms necessarily work, for short films—especially made by independent African filmmakers." Among her concerns are the limited discoverability of a film like hers, which has to compete with so much other content. Similarly, despite the success of her film at festivals, Mukii was rarely paid for these screenings. In fact, she frequently had to cover costs such as mailing DVDs of her film.

While *Yellow Fever* has received some compensated screenings on the channel Arte, generating income through TV distribution has been a challenge for Mukii. She continually had to navigate requests for her film where she was offered exposure rather than payment:

> You always get emails: "Your film was in this festival, our people really enjoyed it, we'd like to put it on our television locally, you're going to get 5 million viewers, you're not going to get any money, could you say yes?" And it's like, well, if you have 5 million viewers you just need one advert to pay, you know, for mine and the other films that will be shown.[3]

She railed against the exploitation in a model like this, where a powerful entity that could pay would *choose* not to. She saw the same problem as pervasive in Kenyan television:

> If the TV station was willing to pay or had 1.5 million [KES] to pay [for] half an hour of TV, then we would be generating so much more content. Instead, they pay for that Mexican series from ten years ago that's a thousand bucks per episode, and they pay for Nollywood—and that's probably two cents an episode [laughs]. They don't care.[4]

Either in the distribution of already made content or in the production of bespoke content for distribution, television stations had a powerful influence on filmmakers in Nairobi and how they hustled to make and sell movies and other content, because it remains true that filmmakers need both financial rewards for selling their films *and* exposure to help them develop future projects.

Television and online space are particularly important for the distribution of Nairobi-based female filmmakers' work. Home viewing is by far the most popular way of watching films in Kenya and thus offers a useful starting point for examining issues in the circulation of films and television shows by Nairobi-based female filmmakers within Kenya.[5] This is also a space with key tensions. For instance, platforms like Vimeo and YouTube offer filmmakers a way to distribute their films and potentially reach larger audiences without going through traditional gatekeepers like television networks, but this comes with important trade-offs: Gaining exposure can mean foregoing direct economic returns, and there is no guarantee that films uploaded to these platforms will ever be watched. Filmmakers also must contend with issues of state and market censorship that limit the kinds of local content audiences can encounter on television in Nairobi. Finding profitable and sustainable ways of distributing their films is the biggest challenge Nairobi-based female filmmakers must overcome in their careers, but as we shall see, it is one they face with innovative strategies.

HUSTLING TO MAKE TELEVISION

In this section I will look at a particular type of media—television—and how production and distribution dynamics work together to influence the sort of material that gets made and shown, and how Nairobi-based female filmmakers hustle within this space. Before delving into how Nairobi-based female filmmakers work within the space of local television, it is necessary to know who the major broadcasting players are. The Kenyan television landscape can be broadly divided into two categories: pay TV and free-to-air local broadcasters. In the local broadcast sphere, the major players are KTN, Citizen TV, NTV, and KBC (the national broadcaster). The two most important pay-TV operators are the East African Zuku and the South African M-Net.[6]

Many filmmakers are looking at television for potential opportunities, and a key challenge to overcome is that of being a small player in a market of major corporations and, correspondingly, how to maximize success in a market characterized by power asymmetries and the resulting potential for exploitation. Each major broadcaster—KTN, NTV, and Citizen—is part of a much larger media corporation, which contrasts with Nairobi-based female filmmakers who work either independently or as part of small production companies.[7] They also have to contend with foreign content, including American movies, telenovelas, and Nollywood films, and compete with these often much cheaper products. Both supply of and demand for content must be accounted for in assessing the local screen media viewing landscape and the role of foreign content within it.[8]

Rates paid by free-to-air channels are a contentious issue within the Nairobian screen media landscape. Filmmaker Toni Kamau argued that free-to-air stations do not give producers the tools—in terms of production time and budget—to make high-quality television. The stations "don't pay enough" and they should because

> they get a lot of money. Like Citizen, for example: One of their TV anchors earns 800,000 shillings a month. And if they commission a show, they are going to pay you 150,000 shillings an episode. So, I wouldn't say that they don't have the money. I think that they don't think they need to pay for content.[9]

These statements are indicative of a common mode of thinking about free-to-air broadcasters: that they almost deliberately exploit filmmakers by allocating them very small budgets and that they have the means to pay more. Filmmakers want their films to be shown on television, or want to produce series for television, but it can be difficult to make an adequate income from these choices.

Intellectual property rights issues are widely acknowledged as a problem facing filmmakers in Nairobi—particularly in terms of negotiations with broadcasters. For instance, Isabel Munyua noted that "the problem with the individual filmmaker is that he is so desperate . . . to do whatever it costs to make that film, or that whatever it is, that he's willing to sell it for a song to a TV station." TV stations will pay producers to make content, but this is in exchange for owning the rights to that content, "which means they are going to reap all the benefits of it," including the possibility of Internet distribution and reruns. In order to address this unequal power dynamic between stations and filmmakers, Munyua was fervent that filmmakers must be made aware of the fact that "we are not just filmmakers—we are businessmen."[10] Other filmmakers, such as Wanuri Kahiu, learned this lesson the hard way. She produced a Downton Abbey–esque drama about the politicians and employees of Kenya's State House with the TV station Zuku, and, despite the idea for the show being hers, the show itself actually belongs to Zuku. It is up to them to distribute it—or not—and to her knowledge, Zuku has released it only once. While Kahiu benefited from the experience of making the show, which, as she says, "is amazing," she cannot further monetize that experience, and if she could do it again, she would not have given up the rights to her idea.[11]

One example of a filmmaker with strong business savvy in this area is Dorothy Ghettuba. Her importance as a producer was continually mentioned to me, particularly in association with her landmark show *Lies That Bind*, which aired on KTN (2011–2014).[12] Her company Spielworks Media can be classified as an "upmarket television house."[13] Ghettuba left a career in venture capital in Canada to start a production company in Nairobi because she "had to decide; do I want to stay in Canada and do what has already been done and [be] this small fish in a big sea or do I want to come to Africa?"[14] Through leaving a career in Canada to develop an untested business in Nairobi, Ghettuba demonstrated the entrepreneurial drive that is a shared characteristic of so many Nairobi-based female filmmakers. Ghettuba described herself as focusing right from the outset on having her productions "make financial sense," and thus adopted a thoroughly entrepreneurial and business-minded approach to screen media production at Spielworks. She elaborated: "We realized that producing mass scale is what made financial sense. And that's why we have a huge catalogue of content" and why she has made TV movies rather than "big screen movies." A cornerstone of her business model is making sure she maintains the intellectual property rights to her content, and she emphasized that when Spielworks began, this was "a concept that not many people were using."[15]

Planning the full distribution run for any of her outputs is essential to her business so that she can both capitalize on every possible distribution platform available and build an audience and fan base in Kenya. She described her strategy as follows:

> In creating content, we own the rights. So, when we produce the show for the first run—for, say, M-Net—we try to break even. Of late we've been doing a little, a slight markup. And they have the rights exclusively for twelve months, then they revert back to us and we're able to sell them. So, we've syndicated quite a number of our shows . . . that's how we have made it make financial sense.[16]

Part of her strategy for maximizing revenue is planning for first and second runs of her television shows from the outset. She first sells her shows to pay-TV stations because pay-TV stations will not buy second runs, but free-to-air channels will. If a show has aired on free-to-air, "by the time you are trying to sell it to a pay TV they don't want it. . . . They are saying, if you've exposed it to so many eyeballs in Kenya, why should we bother taking it?"[17] Yet wide popularity in Kenya depends on free-to-air showings because only a minority of consumers can afford to watch pay TV. The way to both capture this audience and maximize revenue is to show second runs on free-to-air channels.

Ghettuba is particularly entrepreneurial and continually thought about how to get the most from her content and how to push the boundaries of current business models. For example, she said:

> Now I want to own the platforms. I no longer want to just give broadcasters my content. I want to own. Because you give them . . . a show, they pay you $4,000 then they make $12,000 in advertising. On my show, and they're not giving me advertising? Okay. I'm just going to own the platform. And now it's affordable because of the digital migration.[18]

Kenya moved from analog to digital terrestrial broadcasting in June 2015, and a key opportunity posed by this digital migration is the potential for a significantly greater number of television channels.[19] She is also exploring recutting her drama series into short segments so they are better suited for mobile phone viewing.[20]

The battle over what audiences want to watch and what broadcasters should correspondingly program is raging in Nairobi, and some filmmakers had a clear disdain for existing local content on free-to-air television. In my interviews, Nairobi-based film professionals constantly mentioned that there is a lack of innovation in local television programming and that local television is "dumbed down" or "terrible." Entertainment and intellectual property lawyer Liz Lenjo said, "When you look at a majority of the TV productions, they've been dumbed down terribly," and filmmakers Barbara Karuana and Jennifer Gatero each expressed similar opinions.[21] Yet, as we saw in chapter 2, taste functions as a marker of class, and these film industry professionals articulated their own position as middle-class through critiques of local television. By expressing their preference for foreign rather than local television, some of my interviewees performed middle-classness.

Dorothy Ghettuba saw the situation differently. She said: "I don't think that networks want dumbed-down stories. I think networks want simple stories," and this is because these free-to-air networks (and Citizen especially) know their audience:

> They're very clear about what they want. They want light-hearted comedy, they want simple stuff, they want slapstick humor, they want to entertain the Kenyans. Because they know who their target audience is. They know what these people do all day. They know that they're tired. They know that they are exhausted. The economy is crazy. Make them laugh.[22]

When Citizen began showing local shows in 2007, they were met with a dramatic increase in viewership.[23] They make slapstick comedies that are very popular (the pioneering example is *Papa Shirandula* [2007]) and seem to have found a successful model of producing popular local television. In fact, other broadcasters are interested in copying Citizen's programming and creating their own versions of Citizen's shows.[24] Broadcasters seem to be intent on targeting one segment of the population—those who obviously enjoy Citizen's programming—whereas many middle-class filmmakers were keen to explore other segments, and particularly those that were more like themselves in taste.

Pay-TV platforms M-Net and Zuku are a different matter, and this is likely to do with the fact that pay-TV is a luxury good, and by virtue of its cost it targets a middle-class audience. Indeed, as Zuku advertises on its website, it was "established with the aim of making quality home entertainment and communication services accessible to a rapidly growing, choice conscious African middle class."[25] In 2016, the sub-Saharan African market for pay TV was 24 million people.[26] M-Net and Zuku were generally regarded by filmmakers as producing higher-quality and more upmarket content than free-to-air channels. Not surprisingly, M-Net was also commonly identified in my interviews as paying filmmakers the most for content, followed by Zuku, and then by the free-to-air channels at much lower rates.[27]

However, the digital migration may engender a transformation in this media landscape because of the costs associated with the technological switchover from analog to digital television. After the analog switch-off, "audiences will be required to either purchase a (very expensive) digital television set, or a digital decoder or set-top box."[28] When we met, Natasha

Likimani was shopping around a pilot she had developed for a show called *Vows and Veils*, which targets a middle-class demographic. She had made presentations to networks, but "a lot of them are saying, 'oh it's too high class.'" She was adamant this perspective was wrong because the cost of the digital migration would necessarily mean that lower-income Kenyans would be priced out of watching television and broadcasters would then have to target those in the middle classes. As she says,

> When it comes to digital migration, we are supposed to buy these [digital decoder set-top] boxes, and these boxes on average cost 3,000 KES. Who's watching TV? It's people who can afford to buy a TV and buy a digital box. . . . My market is the people who can afford a TV.[29]

It seems likely the technological transformation caused by the digital migration will have a wide-reaching impact on the local media landscape, though it remains to be seen whether it will affect the ability of Nairobi-based female filmmakers to successfully sell their television shows to broadcasters. The increasing market segmentation in Nollywood offers an instructive example here. A growing middle class and returning diaspora have influenced the Nollywood production landscape in Nigeria, and now there is an increasingly segmented spectrum of filmmaking practices. "Asaba" films and "New Nollywood"—each end of the spectrum of low- to high-budget productions—cater to the needs of different groups of people with desires for different kinds of stories.[30]

Local content quotas are one policy strategy for protecting and growing local industries, and this is an approach Kenya is trying. In 2013, Kenyan President Uhuru Kenyatta announced that "the required quota for local content on television will be increased from 40 to 60 per cent," which would result in broadcasters having to commission more local productions or make more in-house productions, that is, if the law is enforced.[31] This promise has been met with skepticism by the local industry. Filmmaker Jennifer Gatero, for instance, dismissed the 40 percent local content quota, saying: "But that's not being reached. So why do I care? . . . It means nothing to me."[32] In the absence of enforcement, the quota was meaningless rhetoric to her. According to the East African ICT trade magazine *CIO*, the local content quota is scheduled to increase to 60 percent in 2018.[33] Yet, as of June 2016, only KBC (the national broadcaster) had reached the 40 percent quota threshold. Of the major broadcasters, Citizen had reached 33 percent local content, KTN had reached 38 percent local content, and NTV had reached 31 percent local content.[34]

Much like Gatero, Judy Kibinge also did not believe the government's line about how quotas would benefit the industry. In her opinion, if the government wanted to support the industry, the best way would not be local content quotas but rather through "a very strong national broadcaster that is imaginatively programmed with great commissioners" to act as a leader in the market. She saw this as possible based on the marked success of Citizen in programming local shows: "I think half of our problem in Kenya is a lack of imagination at a certain level. It's not the money. . . . Citizen television came along and terrified all the other broadcasters by simply putting on some basic local programming," such as *Mother in Law* (2008) and *Papa Shirandula* (2007), which, despite being "kind of basic, a bit slapsticky," was "well done compared to anything else that had been on TV previously and everybody is reacting to that. That's just a commissioner who had a head and just used his imagination." But broadcasters are obliged to serve their shareholders rather than local filmmakers, and this sort of imagination is lacking in her view.[35] Kibinge suggested that curation and imagination, rather than quotas, are the key to building audiences for a diverse range of local content, and that the state's role to play in this area was acting as a market leader in public broadcasting, thereby pushing other broadcasters to expand their offerings to remain competitive.

STATE AND MARKET CENSORSHIP

As we have seen, broadcasters act as important gatekeepers, determining what content will be aired on television. In choosing what to screen and what to avoid, they enact a form of market censorship. When talking about market censorship I rely on film scholar Dina Iordanova's work on East Central European cinema under Communism. Her discussion of Communist-era censorship is particularly useful: "The elaborate censorship mechanisms of Communism are notorious; but then, thinking of the number of daring and serious works of art that were completed [in Poland, Hungary, and Czechoslovakia], we also need to explain how was it possible to make and release films of superb artistry and aesthetic quality under such a repressive system. *In the West many of these films would not be censored—they simply would not have been made*."[36] Filmmakers in the West and the Eastern

Bloc were both constrained; the difference was whether that constraint was due to commercial or political imperatives. She suggests that Western films that are not picked up by a distributor can be seen as shelved and that there are more films that have been inadequately distributed in this geographic area because of low expected profits than were censored during Communism in Poland, Hungary, and the former Czechoslovakia.[37] Shelving films because of commercial imperatives can be read as market censorship.

We can see an example of market censorship in the Nairobian context in the mid-2000s, when Judy Kibinge developed a television series for the network KTN called *Pumzika*. The show "was about a pub called Pumzika and the multiple characters who go to this pub. And just the life and activity around it."[38] She and her team shot thirteen episodes, and yet, on the day of the launch, the network canceled the show, at the request of the sponsor, and it never aired. The marketing manager of the sponsor had changed, suggesting a difference in brand visions between those who approved the show's development and those who were ultimately in charge at the time of the launch. The reason given to Kibinge for the cancellation was that the show

> was encouraging people to drink because it didn't have any obvious anti-drink messages in it. So they wanted characters to say, "Oh, that's a great thing that you're having one beer," "You know, you're not meant to drive." . . . They wanted a lot of that in, and of course we didn't put any. And the morals in the stories were told through the characters and their lives. And nothing was pushed. So, for instance, the kind of underage drinking thing was told through one guy, Ted, who was twenty who comes in to drink. He tries to. He's kicked out on different episodes. But nothing is ever said. And then finally when he turns twenty-one he has this enormous party. . . . So it had some subtle messaging.[39]

In a similar instance, another network, NTV, gave Kibinge a budget of $100,000 to make *Headlines in History*, a film that charted the corporate history of the Nation Media Group, yet they also never aired the completed film.[40] Kibinge did not explain to me why the film was never aired, perhaps because that information is confidential. However, there is little in the form or content of the film that suggests a reason. The film itself is skillfully produced and weaves the corporate history of the media house together with the history of Kenya into a compelling narrative and a flattering portrayal of the company. In both the examples of *Pumzika* and *Headlines in History*, corporate interests meant that finished works were never shown to audiences in Kenya or elsewhere and were effectively shelved. We can thus see the power of broadcasters and powerful brands to act as cultural gatekeepers, determining which content does, and does not, make it onto local screens.

In addition to the problems they face with the market, Nairobi-based female filmmakers occasionally have to contend with outright state censorship. The Kenya Film Classification Board (KFCB) is mandated to "regulate the creation, broadcasting, possession, distribution and exhibition of films" in Kenya.[41] The KFCB actively exercises its right to ban films, notoriously banning Hollywood films such as Martin Scorsese's 2013 film *The Wolf of Wall Street*, stating in a post on their official Facebook page that "there is a limit to everything and we believe the Kenyan public deserves better" (January 14, 2014). However, while the ban may have impacted formal distribution of the film (such as theatrical distribution), it did little to regulate the informal transmission of the film, and it remained available on the streets of Nairobi through the pirate vendors who sell DVDs from makeshift stands all over the city—to say nothing of the ability of audiences with access to suitable bandwidth to find it online. However, it would be too simple to assume, based on the ineffectiveness of censorship in the case of the foreign film *The Wolf of Wall Street*, that the KFCB lacks the power to influence the local media environment through its banning powers.

As was discussed in chapter 3, Wanuri Kahiu's latest feature film *Rafiki* was banned in Kenya because it depicted a love story between two women. But *Rafiki* is not the only film that has been recently banned in Kenya because of its theme. On October 2, 2014, the KFCB issued a letter to the production company The Nest banning their latest film *Stories of Our Lives* from distribution in Kenya. The letter stated that "the decision to decline approval to the said film was because the film has obscenity, explicit scenes of sexual activities and it promotes homosexuality which is contrary to our national norms and values."[42] Yet the one sex scene in the film is no more explicit than any to be found on broadcast television, so rather than being rejected on the grounds of explicit sex, the film was obviously banned because, in the eyes of the censors, it contravened public morality. Alongside the banning of the film, executive producer George Gachara was arrested for filming without a license.[43] These charges against Gachara would eventually be dropped, but the film remained unavailable in formal or informal distribution circuits within Kenya. Unlike *The Wolf of Wall Street*, the KFCB banning of *Stories of Our Lives* meant that audiences in Kenya would be unable to see the film because its *Kenyan producers* were unwilling to risk the potential legal consequences of making their film available in any way in contravention of the ban.[44]

The producer of *Stories of Our Lives*, Nairobi-based female filmmaker Wangechi Ngugi, expressed a keen disappointment about the banning:

> When I got an opportunity to produce *Stories of Our Lives*, it was like a dream come true. Because I've always wanted to tell stories that open up dialogue [about taboo subjects] . . . so I thought finally we're going to show a film that is going to get people to start talking. But it's not happening.[45]

Banning the film in Kenya also meant closing off the opportunity for the conversations that would inevitably surround it. It also stopped the film from being able to influence Kenyans. Media scholar Minou Fuglesang's 1994 ethnographic study of young women viewing mostly Bollywood videos in Lamu, Kenya, found that the films, watched at home, gave young women "a 'language' for dealing with issues such as romance, sexuality and marriage."[46] Likewise, Maurice Amutabi shows how discussing the popular American soap opera *The Bold and the Beautiful* created a new discursive sphere where it was acceptable to talk about taboo subjects such as divorce and sexuality.[47] These findings suggest that onscreen representations of sexuality and gender can have real world impact. In the cases explored by both Fuglesang and Amutabi, the filmic narrative, and the social practices surrounding film viewing, contributed to local practices of love. *Stories of Our Lives* was kept from having this kind of influence in Kenya.

Importantly, audiences outside Kenya were able to see *Stories of Our Lives* so long as they could travel to any of the many film festivals that programmed it. Indeed, I was able to watch the film in London through my position as a submission advisor of the Film Africa festival, and again to watch it at a public screening during Film Africa. Ngugi was similarly disappointed with this trajectory, because, as she says: "I feel like we should be able to show our stories here first. So that we can have those conversations here, where it matters."[48] Through this example, we can see a state apparatus at work, attempting to control both what is physically shown on screens and the corresponding conversations and debates that could potentially result from those screenings.

The *potential* for censorship also has an influence on local production culture. At the time of my interview, one filmmaker (who asked to remain anonymous) was seriously questioning whether or not she would be able to make her next film because the moralizing censorship environment made it imprudent, if not impossible, to shoot the film in Kenya. She spoke eloquently about the affective toll of making media under these sorts of constraints:

> I think my heartbreak is because I felt like I was good. I played the game. I'm the right person. I feel like I'm the good citizen. . . . I'm an ideal citizen up until the point that I make the film I want to make. Then I stop being an ideal citizen. Who does that make me? I feel like I'm having to reevaluate my whole relationship with my country.

But filmmakers, while recognizing these conditions, continually work to find ways around them. Philippa Ndisi-Herrmann mentioned how the current Kenyan government makes her think about self-censoring to avoid getting into trouble with her films, but she mitigates this worry through the support of non-Kenyan funders like the IDFA Bertha Fund (a film fund for world cinema that is part of the International Documentary Film Festival Amsterdam). This funding is "great" because "it means you are answerable to people who live elsewhere, *which means that their ideas are more open*."[49] This situation—where transnational funding facilitates the creation of content that would not be deemed acceptable within the filmmaker's national context—is by no means exclusive to Nairobi.[50] Receiving external funding, and the frequently corresponding access to external distribution circuits, can allow filmmakers to address topics that may not be seen as acceptable within their local contexts.

Changes in distribution models also challenge the Kenyan regulatory environment, and correspondingly the state's ability to censor and otherwise control who can access content and on what terms in Kenya. The KFCB's powers to regulate film viewing, and associated public morality in Kenya, are increasingly being challenged as modes of film exhibition change and new platforms—such as the streaming service Netflix—deliver content to audiences in ways that are more and more difficult to regulate. The KFCB rose to prominence in early 2016 when it controversially tried to regulate Netflix based on the supposed immorality of some of its content.[51] The board was unsuccessful, as the Communications Authority of Kenya "ruled that the streaming service does not require a broadcasting license, as it is an Internet TV network, not a traditional broadcaster."[52] As this example demonstrates, media companies (such as Netflix) and government agencies (such as the KFCB and the Communications Authority of Kenya) each struggle for control over the online frontier. Ultimately, the Kenyan regulatory environment is highly volatile and filmmakers and media companies must work hard to turn the situation to their advantage.

DIGITAL INNOVATIONS AND DIVIDES

New distribution platforms have the potential to challenge existing practices of gatekeeping and screen media access—and the changes wrought by the new digital media environment are global in scope.[53] Material factors enabling and constraining access to digital content must not be disregarded, and the impact of new digital platforms on spectators must be studied in context. Infrastructural conditions such as Internet networks and consistent electricity provision vary highly by location and correspondingly influence both the access that consumers in various geographies have to digital distribution platforms and the development of local production industries.[54] The infrastructure required to stream content (including SVOD content) includes electricity and an Internet connection, but it also includes "soft" infrastructure such as systems to collect payment from subscribers.[55] In African markets, credit card–only payment options are not sufficient, and success in this market means offering consumers options better suited to their circumstances—in this case, especially, paying with mobile phone airtime.[56]

The Kenyan media landscape was immediately transformed when fiber optic cables reached Kenya in 2009, and changes included dramatically increased mobile phone Internet usage and correspondingly the introduction of new phones aimed to specifically target the new users generated by the greater accessibility of the Internet.[57] According to the Communications Authority of Kenya, in the first quarter of the 2015–2016 financial year, 88.1 percent of Kenyans now have mobile phone subscriptions, and the magazine *Business Daily* reports that 60 percent of Kenyans now have smartphones.[58] Thus, Kenya is undergoing a technological shift in mobile phone and Internet access—as is much of the rest of the African continent, where the Internet is dominantly accessed through smartphones—and the number of people with access to mobile Internet is predicted to increase dramatically in the coming years.[59]

Historically, watching the films of Nairobi-based female filmmakers has been no easy task. Their films tend to screen in film festivals scattered across the globe and are held in university library collections, but they are not widely commercially available. Here the potential of Internet distribution becomes apparent. Dina Iordanova argues the changes wrought by the new digital environment are "immense" and fundamentally transform how scholars and other viewers can access films: "Online availability makes travel less important—archives need no longer be visited and attending festivals is not essential. Availability is one thing, but coupled with instantaneity, ubiquity, and accelerated access, the change is immense: we can now see what we want to see wherever we are without delay."[60] But does Iordanova's vision hold true for viewers of Nairobi-based female filmmakers' films?

Rather than relying on conventional gatekeepers such as broadcasters, filmmakers can now share their content freely online. We can see this in the case of Judy Kibinge's noir thriller *Killer Necklace*. Kibinge made the film through her production company Seven in partnership with M-Net New Directions—a program for emerging filmmakers where M-Net mentors the filmmakers and refines the projects to create thirty-minute dramas it then broadcasts.[61] According to Kibinge, M-Net's involvement in the film was almost purely financial: "they just left it to me . . . they just gave us the money, we shot the film, submitted it to them." Kibinge described this as "fantastic" because their lack of involvement in creative decisions gave her a heightened sense of ownership over the film, and she approached the film with extreme dedication so that it could be her "big break." Yet, according to her, "it never went anywhere."[62] M-Net promoted the film in a limited way and to a much smaller extent than Kibinge would have liked. This is likely because the goals of M-Net New Directions and of Kibinge were quite different—New Directions as a project aimed to *make* films within the framework of developing new African film talents, so once a film was finished and aired on M-Net, their goal had been achieved. Kibinge, as a director, on the other hand, wanted the film to have the broadest possible exposure so as to grow her fan base and increase her chances of gaining financing for a future film. In response to the lack of distribution, she took matters into her own hands and uploaded the film to Vimeo in 2015. As she says:

> I just got tired of no one ever seeing it and M-Net doesn't care about it. They don't want to market it. They're never going to show it again. So, I just felt like, too bad, I'm just going to upload it and if they complain I'll take it down.[63]

As of March 2019, the film was still on Vimeo, which seems to indicate that Kibinge was correct in her original assessment that M-Net did not care about the film (or at least not enough to protect its copyright and have the film removed). However, over the course of four years that film attracted only 538 views, which suggests that despite being available to view, potential audiences have not found or potentially been able to find the film.

As the example of *Killer Necklace* shows, making content freely available to potential audiences does not mean that the film will actually be *watched*. Other interventions are often necessary to guide viewers to content. We can see this in the case of Ng'endo Mukii's short film *Yellow Fever*. She shared *Yellow Fever* on Vimeo, and when it was selected as a "Vimeo Staff Pick"—which led to additional celebrity and press coverage—viewership jumped by a dramatic 80,000 people in a two-week time span.[64] Over time, the film received more than 150,000 views. Half of the views the film has received to date are a direct result of a curatorial intervention guiding viewers to the film. As African screen media scholar Lindiwe Dovey cogently notes, "the sheer amount of film material online calls for new forms of curatorship to guide viewers to and through content," while at the same time "just as the digitization and streaming of films is proliferating, so too are cultural festivals of all kinds."[65] These two points together suggest that there is something important about activities and events that guide potential audiences to particular kinds of content presented in particular ways—whether through the "liveness" of a film festival setting (as we will explore in chapter 5) or strategies of Internet curatorship (such as Vimeo Staff Picks) that pull particular films out of the avalanche of available content.

Entrepreneurs and established media companies are increasingly exploring the potential opportunities of SVOD services in Africa. The African screen media VOD platform Buni.tv—founded in Nairobi in 2012 by Marie Lora-Mungai and online until it was sold in 2016—was particularly valuable as a platform for curating East African screen media. Buni.tv aimed to distribute high-quality African content and had a large selection of East African films, but despite its innovations in online distribution, it did not generate enough subscribers and was sold to the French network Trace TV.[66] Similarly, the pay-per-view African Film Library (a subsidiary of M-Net) operated only from 2009 to 2013.[67] While initially exciting for offering more than 600 previously difficult-to-find African films so easily to audiences globally, the future of these films is now uncertain and the library is offline.[68]

As the examples of Buni.tv and the African Film Library show, the online market is highly volatile and individual videos as well as entire platforms disappear, reshape, and are introduced. Furthermore, revenues generated through online distribution services (such as Netflix and iTunes) are minor in comparison to more conventional outlets such as cinemas and broadcasters, suggesting that online distribution is still truly a frontier and one likely to change as various entrepreneurs seek their fortunes in digital spaces.[69]

In addition to new opportunities for film distribution, the Internet offers potential new models of film financing in terms of crowdfunding. Some Nairobi-based female filmmakers have successfully used this method to raise funds for their films. Filmmakers Amira and Wafa Tajdin raised $19,147 in 2012 to fund the production of their feature film *Walls of Leila* (in production) through the crowdfunding platform Kickstarter, and Wanuri Kahiu also successfully raised $12,113 through a campaign on Kickstarter in 2011 to fund her documentary *Ger: To Be Separate* (in production).[70] However, the labor involved in capitalizing on this new revenue stream is not to be underestimated. Philippa Ndisi-Herrmann raised €8,500 ($8,977) to put toward her feature documentary *New Moon* using the Dutch film-specific platform CineCrowd. With the money raised, she was able to buy a camera and therefore own the equipment she would use to shoot the film. But the process of raising funds through CineCrowd was rigorous because, as she says, CineCrowd is very serious about what they do:

> They were consulting us most of the time, at least initially. So when we actually wanted to start crowd funding week, they were like you need to have this, and this, and this, you need to have, like, already have your videos that are going to be unleashing during the month, you need to have your emails ready, you need to have this ready, what are your awards? . . . So when we submitted all the stuff they were like "sorry, these awards are not good enough, this information doesn't suffice." . . . So it took us about two months to be able to actually be completely ready.[71]

She thus had to undertake a substantial amount of work to run a successful crowdfunding campaign. Behind-the-scenes labor is a pervasive feature of digital media industries, and "making it" in these industries involves a significant amount of invisible and unpaid labor for those aspiring to succeed in these spaces.[72] Like the fashion bloggers in Brooke Erin Duffy's study who undertake unpaid work in exchange for the promise of exposure and potential future success, Ndisi-Herrmann invested time and energy in her campaign in the hopes of being successful: CineCrowd releases funds only if campaigns meet their stated fundraising target.[73] Finally, while Ndisi-Herrmann was successful on the CineCrowd platform, she was ultimately only able to make the film with the combined financial support of the East African film fund Docubox, the Göteborg Film Festival, and the IDFA Bertha Fund.

Fundraising and distributing films online is only one option in an arsenal of strategies that Nairobi-based female filmmakers use to make their films and sustain their careers. Hustling to make films in Nairobi involves exploring every possible option: making use of the Internet to crowdfund, applying to transnational film festival funds, running diversified businesses to generate a constant stream of work and potential income to invest in new films, and building many other networks—both local and transnational—to seize opportunities.

CONCLUSION

Throughout this chapter, I have discussed various ways in which the screen media productions of Nairobi-based female filmmakers do and do not reach audiences in Nairobi. We have to be aware of the gatekeepers that decide which products become visible to potential audiences and which remain marginalized. State and market censors create limits on the kinds of screen media products Nairobi-based spectators can encounter, but hustling filmmakers are continually working to find new ways of distributing their films and other media. Nairobi-based female filmmakers are not passive actors in these encounters. Rather, they continually innovate to create new opportunities for themselves and to reach new audiences for their work.

A considerable challenge during the course of researching this book was finding copies of Nairobi-based female filmmakers' film to view. A few, such as *Soul Boy* and *Something Necessary*, were easy to locate in various forms, including on streaming platforms and in DVDs available in select stores in Nairobi and on Amazon. Most films, including classics such as *Saikati*, were much more difficult to locate. I continually scoured the Internet in search of links to films. Films continually appear, disappear, and reappear online. Because I knew about these films in advance, I was able to hunt them down online, but without this prior knowledge, many of these films would be almost impossible to find. Another core method was relying on personal contacts with filmmakers to source their films, where, again, access to the films depended on my prior and insider knowledge. Gaining an audience online cannot be taken for granted. Furthermore, many films available online are illicit. The illegal release of rare films on platforms like YouTube can be read in multiple ways: From an audience-centered perspective, this development is very positive, as many more people have access to the film; however, this sharing is in violation of intellectual property rights.[74]

We need to look at the context in which audiences see films and other media content—be that in the sea of content that makes up YouTube or the restricted mediascape of Nairobian television. As Carmela Garritano demonstrates in her study of Ghanaian video movies, at the time video filmmaking emerged in Ghana (the late 1980s), audiences were accustomed to watching old and degraded celluloid prints in cinemas.[75] Critics of video films have disparaged video film aesthetics, but for early Ghanaian audiences the low-quality aesthetics of these early video movies were not such a radical departure from film aesthetics. Acknowledging this context is thus necessary to understand audience taste. How far films and television shows travel has as much to do with context as it does with content, as I have shown in this chapter. Finding audiences involves hard and careful distribution and curatorial work. It is to this curatorial and distribution work in "live" settings that we turn in the next chapter.

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