

Integrating technology into histories of information in post-independence East Africa

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This paper locates East African technologies within the global history of information. I am currently teaching a course for MA Global Studies (Universität Leipzig, in partnership with Addis Ababa University) titled ‘Communicating a new world order: Decolonising information and media in the 20th century’, covering initiatives in Africa, Asia and Latin America to use communication technologies (print, audio-visual, satellite) to radically change the global order in the period 1945-90. In the context of an interdisciplinary programme with students from various academic backgrounds, I am trying to guard against narratives that imply technological determinism or give developmentalist accounts of ‘new’ technologies being ‘adopted’ in countries that were and are challenging (neo-)colonialism.

I will begin by considering how concepts of resilience and vulnerability (HoST Special Issue 16:1) are instructive in this effort. I would then like to discuss possible insights from my current research project on the East African information professionals in the theorisation of the global ‘information society’ (1960s-80s). The case study I will focus on here relates to engineers and technicians working for Uganda Broadcasting Corporation (UBC) during the 1970s. After Ugandan independence in 1962, UBC’s had two main priorities: first, to make their broadcasts audible for listeners in the north and west of the country, by building new and more powerful transmitters (in the context of inter-African competition over space on the electromagnetic spectrum); second, to ‘Africanise’ the workforce through extensive (internal and foreign) training programmes. Beyond merely a history of Idi Amin’s regime (which invested heavily in the information sector), UBC’s archives suggest how technicians improvised with inadequate resources in the face of structural inequalities in the global electronics market, and what tensions this caused in the workplace.