

# **South-North Perspectives: Contesting Cultural and Media Studies**

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## **ABSTRACT**

This intervention examines conceptual trajectories arising out of a 22 year North-South research collaboration. It traces the genesis of that trajectory of (Southern) African cultural and media studies that emerged from a context of struggle and liberation via an interdisciplinary network involving departments in universities in Zimbabwe, South Africa (and Kenya) linked to University of Oslo, 1980-2012. The study concludes by elaborating a new imaginary within cultural and media studies (CMS) that incorporates: i) social justice; ii) social action and popular participation; and iii) a reassessment of some assumptions of the European Enlightenment in multicultural African societies.

**Keywords:** cultural and media studies, Africa, south-north relations,

The twin and interrelated histories of CMS that connected the Centre for Communication, Media and Society (CCMS) at the University of KwaZulu-Natal (UKZN), on the one hand, with the University of Zimbabwe's (UZ) Media Studies Programme on the other, is our emphasis. This axis, initially working through a wider Oslo University-led network, provided the infrastructural hub for intercontinental developments. The axis was the result of a diffusion of conceptual impulses from different, but related sources: Oslo's reading of CCMS and British media studies and a new-found independence in the case of Zimbabwe. CCMS's earlier adoption of CMS was more eclectic, but arising out of a single moment of a revolutionary beginning.

## **The British Connection: 1980-2009**

In the 1970s, an emergent CMS entered English South African scholarship via the History Workshop at the University of Witwatersrand (Wits), which pursued an E.P. Thompson culturalism. The Wits Development Studies programme, in contrast, studied Marx, Althusser, Gramsci, Poulantzas and other historical materialists (see Tomaselli 2000). These scholars

were also cycled via sociology and the Rhodes University Department of Journalism, initially led by Les Switzer. A key scholar who participated in both the Wits and Rhodes projects is Ruth Teer-Tomaselli who was the primary interpreter of both culturalism and Marxist political economy into South African media studies. She was the guiding light in the publication of two early anthologies on South Africa (Tomaselli *et al* 1987; Tomaselli, R.E *et al*, 1989). Apart from Belinda Bozzoli's (1992) introduction of Gramsci to South Africa, the CCMS series, 'Studies on the South African Media', cemented early analysis. Stuart Hall and Richard Johnson, who had been informally consulted on the original CCMS proposal in the late 1970s, entered South Africa also via British-based delegates at the History Workshop, from where they were adapted into emergent South African CMS.

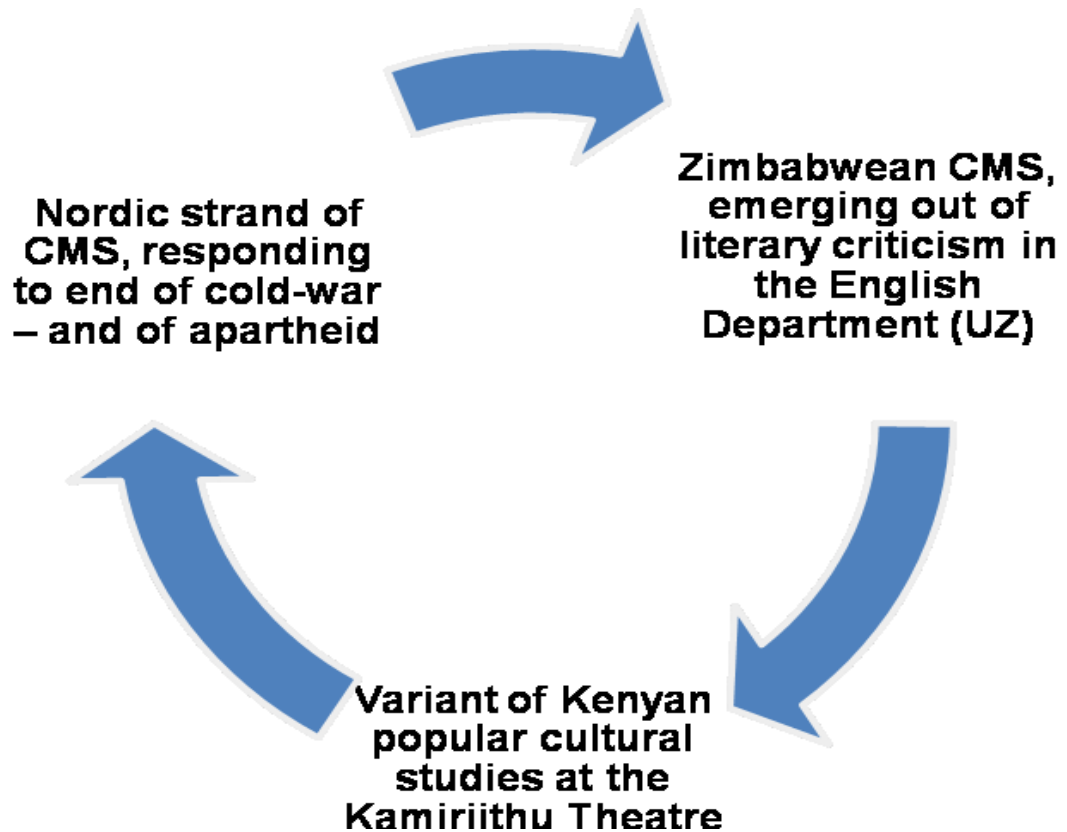
Established in 1985, CCMS arose out of the 1976 Soweto uprising. A group of UKZN lecturers and students had wanted to establish something like the Birmingham Centre that had pioneered studies of the relationship between domination and resistance. CCMS's mandate, as piloted by the Tomasellis, Eric Louw and their colleagues, was to develop graduate research that would: i) theorise the mobilisation of 'culture' and 'media' in the service of the anti-apartheid struggle; ii) enable interdisciplinarity; and iii) work with civil society and oppositional movements (see Tomaselli 1989; Louw 1992). Where most Afrikaans-language universities offered administrative research and Communication Science, it was the anti-apartheid English-language universities that inaugurated critical media studies following the belated introduction of broadcast TV in 1976. CMS globally had struggled to reclaim these sites during the Thatcherist and Reagan era and to restore the integrity of the public sphere (see, e.g., Rønning 1997). All cultural and media sites, we argued, should be contested, not simply abandoned to hegemonic forces as had been the case previously with the four English-speaking universities.

CCMS, thus, was born directly from the anti-apartheid struggle, hence its emphasis on social justice, and from the start worked with, alongside and through anti-apartheid organisations. In this derivation and, indeed, its continued practice after apartheid ended in 1994, CCMS continues to work with civic, community, and development organisations, and helped to shape state cultural and media policies (see, e.g., Louw 1993). This praxis is largely at odds with the textualist CMS that has taken hold in English literature where CMS has become a kind of post-Leavisite practical criticism, or a genuflection to Western post-disciplinary scholarship.

## **The Zimbabwe-Oslo Connection**

In the early 1990s, a research project entitled *Media and Democracy – Cultural Change in Southern Africa*, received funding from the Norwegian Research Council under the programme *State and Society, Democracy and Political Change in the Third World*. The project's partners were the UZ Department of English and the Department of Media and Communication at Oslo. The impetus for the partnership was the end of the Cold War, the impending demise of the apartheid regime, and the 'wind' of democracy then supposedly sweeping across Africa.

The UZ-Oslo axis was a crossroads for three salient strands: i) a Nordic trajectory, represented by Helge Rønning, Michael Bruun Andersen, Knut Lundby, Ragnar Waldahl, Gunnar Liestøl, Anita Werner amongst others; ii) early counter-hegemonic sites of African cultural studies, represented at UZ by Kimani Gecau, a Kenyan in exile in Zimbabwe due to his association with the dissident Kamiriithu Theatre in Kenya; and iii) the pioneering of Zimbabwean media studies. This third strand was represented by UZ literary critics Rino Zhuwarara, Tawana Kupe, Musa Zimunya and graduate students –with contributions from linguistics and sociology. This conceptual geography, which integrated early Norwegian, British, South African and African CMS, can be represented thus:



**Fig.1 The UZ-Oslo programme was meeting place of political and cultural influences**

***The Harare-Nairobi-Oslo Connection***

UZ's preferred mode of teaching literature as a form of decolonisation from the Anglo-Saxon leanings of the former University College of Rhodesia, became the cultural and ideological foundation of the partnership. The UZ-Oslo collaboration, however, was the culmination of a long history of Southern African cultural and media praxis. According to Moyana (1988) Vambe (2005) and Zhuwarara (1999) – the latter a key member of the English Department and a central figure in the UZ-Oslo media studies partnership – the birth and growth of African literature in English manifests not only a sensibility rooted in African oral traditions but is intrinsically linked to the colonial encounter. Oral communication and memory are the historical basis of modes of cultural and media praxis that existed before colonialism, that were displaced by colonialism and which outlived colonialism in various, mostly written forms.

The first creative works to come out of Zimbabwe occurred during the prior Central African Federation of Rhodesia and Nyasaland (1953-1963) – now Malawi, Zambia and Zimbabwe. Most were penned by the South African educated Solomon Mutsvairo (*Feso* 1956) and Hebert Chitepo (*Soko Risina Musoro* 1958). Mutsvairo and Chitepo were graduates of Fort Hare University where they were exposed to the black press. The ‘black’ press such as the *Bantu Mirror*, *African Daily News*, *Moto*, and the *African Parade*, and the Southern Rhodesia Literature Bureau, all contributed to a writing culture amongst black Africans, though remaining largely depoliticised. In fact, such writing tended to be more British culturally than African. The struggle for independence (1966-1979), however, saw the birth of what Zhuwarara calls a ‘long-term and optimistic historical vision’, tempered somewhat by the post-1980 realism in the face of the ‘pitfalls of national consciousness’. UZ thus attempted to bring this history to bear on the reading (mostly textual) of contemporary Zimbabwean literature in English by Dambudzo Marechera, Charles Mungoshi, Stanley Nyamfukudza, Chenjerai Hove, Tsitsi Dangarembga and Yvonne Vera, centring African literature in general against comparative world literatures.

A Nairobi debate of sorts ensued at UZ, with the specific intention of de-Rhodesianising literary studies. The situation in the 1990s UZ English Department was not unlike the one at the English Department at the University of Nairobi in 1968 when three junior lecturers, Ngugi waThiong’o, Owuor Anyumba and Taban Lo Liyong initiated the so-called Nairobi Literature Debate (waThiong’o 1981).<sup>1</sup> Though on the surface the Nairobi debate was about literature, waThiong’o’s later performance work suggests that the discourse extended beyond literary studies. As waThiong’o reveals, ‘My work at Kamiriithu in 1977 made me lose all interest in the novel (1981: 81).<sup>2</sup> An outline of the courses offered at UZ in the late 1990s and beyond tends to reflect a heavy literary and textual bias. This textual base, however, seems inflected by a thinly veiled nationalistic and cultural discourse, a latent culturalism that made the English Department a fairly convenient fit to the Oslo project. At a time when, generally,

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<sup>1</sup>The three questioned why ‘structures of the literary studies evolved in the colonial schools and universities had continued well into the independence era completely unaffected by any winds of cultural change’ (waThiong’o 1981: 93) Not only were they ‘shocked’ that syllabuses designed to meet the needs of colonialism could be seen continuing well into the independence era, but African literature – that is, literature relevant to the daily lives of the majority of Africans – continued on the margins.

<sup>2</sup>‘If the Literature Department at Nairobi was influential in my thinking on language and literature’, says waThiong’o, ‘it was Kamiriithu that was decisive in my actual break with my past praxis, in the area of fiction and theatre’ (1981: xii).

the ‘cultural’ has shown a tendency to establish itself as a master-trope in the humanities, displacing the notion of the ‘textual’ as it is used in literary criticism (Czaplicka, Huyssen and Rabinach 1995), literary studies in Harare provided a viable temporary home.

It was in the UZ Department, therefore, that Oslo Media Studies (and British CMS) cross-fertilised and hybridised with Kamiriithu democratic-participatory theatre and Zimbabwean literary studies. Gecau, one of the five academics (including Ngugi waThiong’o, Ngugi wa Mirii, S. Somji, and Kabiru Kinyanjui) from Nairobi who participated in the formation of the cultural studies hub, Kamiriithu Community Education and Cultural Centre, became the bridge. The following description of Kamiriithu by waThiong’o (1981) shows, for instance, that a concept such as Jürgen Habermas’ (1989) public sphere – though carried on the wings of the Oslo project – was not exactly new to Kenya and Africa:

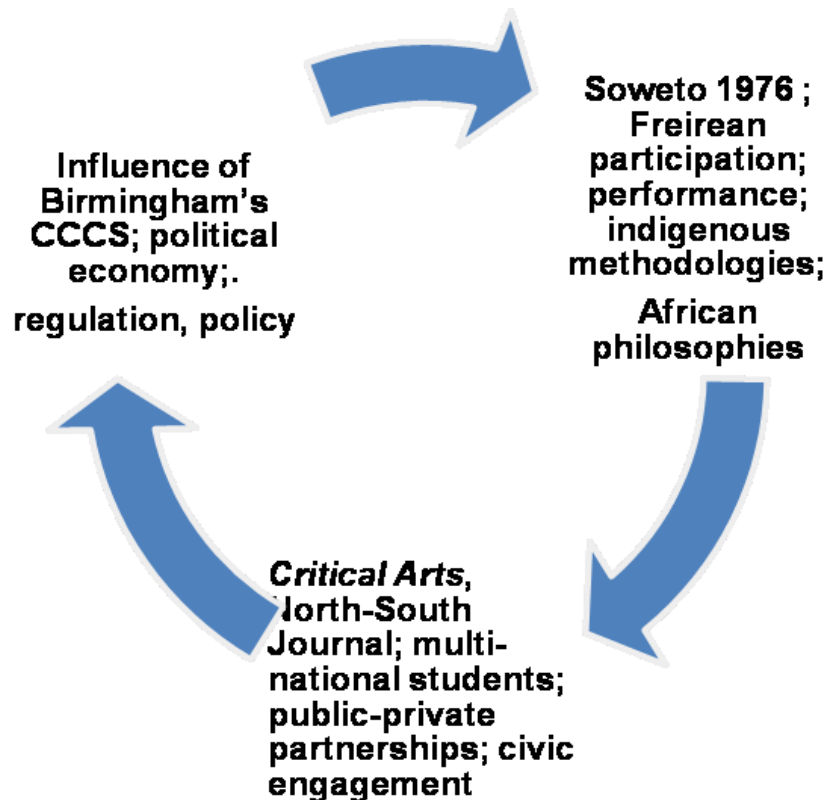
The four acres reserved for the Youth Centre had at that time, in 1977, only a falling-apart mud-walled barrack of four rooms which we used for adult literacy. The rest was grass ... the peasants and workers from the village ... built the stage: just a raised semicircular platform backed by a semi-circular bamboo wall behind which was a small three-roomed house which served as the store and changing room ... It was an open air theatre with large empty spaces surrounding the stage and the auditorium. The flow of actors and people between the auditorium and the stage, and-around the stage-and the entire auditorium was uninhibited: Behind the auditorium were some tall eucalyptus trees. Birds could watch performances from these or from the top of the outer bamboo fence. And during one performance some actors, unrehearsed, had the idea of climbing up the trees and joining the singing from up there. They were performing not only to those seated before them, but to whoever could row see them and hear them – the entire village of 10,000 people was their audience (42).

Kamiriithu, as one of several villages in Limuru originally set up in the 1950s by the British as a way of cutting links between the people and the Mau Mau, becomes located within a larger nexus of implications that suggests that the roots of postcolonial CMS in Africa actually begin with the Berlin conference of 1884. In waThiong’o’s words, ‘Berlin of 1884 was effected through the sword and the bullet. But the night of the sword and the bullet was followed by the morning of the chalk and the blackboard. The physical violence of the battlefield was followed by the psychological violence of the classroom’ (waThiong’o, 1981: 9). Kamiriithu was thus a ‘delayed’ response to the chain reaction set at Berlin. The ‘wind’ of democracy then sweeping through Southern Africa in the 1990s appears to fall within the same pattern of colonial/postcolonial and apartheid/democratic exchange which later spawned critical variants of African cultural and media studies such as Harare’s UZ and Durban’s CCMS.

The Department of Media and Communication at Oslo was formally established in September 1987 jointly between the faculties of social sciences and humanities. A central element was to establish an international profile based on a broad media studies where theories and methods from the humanities and the social sciences interrelated in educational and research programmes that included media policies in Scandinavia and internationally, both social and textual analyses. Theoretical insights from the Frankfurt School, particularly that work based on Habermas, played an important role with regard to public sphere analysis, civil society theory, the configuration of media and democratisation, as well as the discussion of transitions to modernity (see Keane, 1988; Melber, 1993). Another intellectual inspiration from British Cultural Studies, particularly the work of Raymond Williams, whom Helge Rønning had known personally, extended to an attempt to establish a transnational understanding of what constitutes different media cultures.

At CCMS, the centre piece is *Critical Arts: South-North Cultural and Media Studies* (1980ff). which from its inception in 1980 instituted an anti-apartheid and counter-Arnoldian discussion of arts, film, media, education and drama. The Centre's book series, 'Critical Studies on the Southern African Media and Culture', early on partly sponsored by the World Association for Christian Communication, systematically meshed political economy and culturalism in analysing relations of domination and resistance (see, e.g., Tomaselli, R.E et al, 1989). Its later titles directly addressed issues of policy, development and indigenisation of theory into local contexts (see, e.g., Tomaselli and Dunn, 2001).

Following the demise of apartheid after 1990, CCMS moved into a number of general trajectories: policy and regulation, media history, documentary, indigeneity and identity, reception, and development and public health communication. Action research and African philosophies read through critical indigenous methodological applications offered praxis-orientated solutions for a newly democratising society. CCMS's holistic imagination examines the *relationship* between Texts and Contexts (political economy, social institutions, policy and regulation) as well as how meanings are made, represented, interpreted and (re)circulated. These emphases confer upon CMS a conceptual difference to other disciplines with which it nevertheless interacts, represented as follows:



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**Fig 2. CCMS was and still is a syncretic mix of influences**

Central to the processes described in the above charts were a series of international biannual seminars held in Harare, Oslo and Durban between 1993 and 2004 (see Hall 1997), and simultaneously, the registration of UZ graduates for MAs and PhDs at Oslo, UKZN and Westminster. Rønning played a definitive role in facilitating these international connections and in articulating Habermas's theory of the public sphere on the African mediascape (see Tomaselli and Tomaselli, 2003). Student and staff exchanges established a common ground for understanding of the role of media in cultural and political processes in a comparative perspective between different societies – Northern European and African.

The crises in Zimbabwe – from 2000 and onwards – created obstacles in relation to the continued cooperation between UZ and Oslo. Partly, media studies was a sensitive area, and partly UZ suffered under economic and political constraints. Global marginalisation of Zimbabwe after 2005 was, of course, a key factor. This resulted in a brief hiatus.



To some extent, however, the 2012 Wits / University of Michigan (UM) Conference, ‘Beyond Normative Approaches: Everyday Media Culture in Africa’, resuscitated these links and launched a contemporary phase of new, wider, Southern African cooperation, also boosted by the International Association for media and Communication Research conference hosted in Durban six months later.

### **Gaining Traction: Beyond 2010**

The Wits-UM 2012 conference, organised by Wendy Willems at Wits, partly owes its genesis to the above processes that began with the Oslo-Zimbabwe-CCMS collaboration in the early 1990s. Many of the same actors like Paddy Scannell and Kupe were involved. This time, however, conference delegates were drawn from across Africa and the world. The conference was indicative of the value of networking, over extensive periods of time, over an ever-widening array of institutions. The younger Southern African delegates who were not part of the initial project need to know where they are located in this conceptual trajectory, how they have benefitted from it, and why it is necessary for them to historicize their case studies. Another concrete outcome of these early collaborations was the inauguration of the *Journal of African Media Studies (JAMS)*, edited by Westminster’s Winston Mano, which firmly located African scholarship on the international media map. *JAMS* is complemented by *Journal of African Cinemas*, founded co-terminously by Tomaselli, both published by Intellect. The UK base of the two publishers of the two journals and *Critical Arts* (since 2005), provided a much needed bridgehead in rearticulating African CMS from the restrictive ‘area studies’ category, to being components of international CMS.

### **At the Cusp of New Imaginary**

A map of cultural studies devised by Larry Grossberg (1993) explains how historicised cultural analyses are produced. The map constructs two axes – cultural method and social theory – on a grid comparing five methods (literary humanism, dialectical sociology, culturalism, structuralist conjectures, postmodern conjectures) against eight theories (epistemology, determination, agency, social formation, cultural formation, power, specificity of struggle, and the site of the modern). A third axis deriving from the UZ-CCMS link would be a new imaginary. This new imaginary is an aspect of the link between Zimbabwe and

South Africa that was forged in the liminal space of ideas created out of, and extending far beyond, the Cold War and apartheid. A popular concern that emerges from this CMS practice is the struggle for democracy and popular participation, which both the Cold War and apartheid tried to restrict. This third axis remains to be admitted by the predominant, textual, Enlightenment-derived, South African institutional forms that are largely oblivious of the regional context.

The post-Cold War conjuncture reconstituted CMS into a commodity as it is now often taught as a playful form of writing, recreation and consumption. Such CMS, is more often than not bereft of critique and, as the legitimization of banality, loses sight of human rights and social justice. This undisciplined CMS rearticulates resistance as consumption, consumption as democracy and democracy as autocracy. It is then implicated in new hegemonies rather than in a constant state of liberating subjects from this recurring condition. In its ungrounded guise CMS has lost its social relevance, its ethical potential and its objective of praxis-based popular empowerment and institutional accountability.

CMS as an unruly pedagogy' remains crucial (Bethlehem and Harris, 2012). A new paradigm would be relevant, pro-active and acquisitive in a region beset with massive political health, crime and economic problems:

- This new imaginary is all-inclusive while simultaneously democratising, useful, generating employable (critical) graduates. It vests authority in the citizenry rather than solely in Textuality, Authority and Bureaucracy.
- It respects human subjects vested with Freirean agency, and is preoccupied with social change and social justice. In other words, research is a means to a (social) end.
- It would admit critical and indigenous methodologies and invest analysis with new, diverse, pluralistic, ways of making sense.
- The new imaginary would examine power relations and outcomes of contestations, as a means of equipping graduates with expertise to successfully manoeuvre within institutions for career purposes on the one hand. On the other, it would to help them to shape democratic and ethical behaviour in society, while taking into account the plurality of cosmologies, ontologies and identities that now

jostle for legitimation and power in a post-modern world, and in Southern Africa in particular

- The new imaginary would be praxis-based, able to cut across disciplines and to eschew ‘academic-business-as-usual’ (Tomaselli, 2012).
- This imaginary is built on questions. It asks cultural and media studies to venture, if it can, beyond E.P. Thompson, Stuart Hall and Raymond Williams, to building its own sets of contextually relevant, repurposed tools of social analysis.

What is to be protected is not ‘high culture’ or abstract notions of civilisation and hegemony of the canonical Text (often argued in Arnoldian vein to be the repository of civilisation). Rather, the new imaginary requires that instead of defending paradigm fundamentalism and Western civilisation (and its Philosophy made possible by the Enlightenment), that we rather critically engage this corpus and build a more inclusive applied CMS that responds to the myriad contexts in which the diversity of multicultural generations find themselves.

In short, CMS also offers interventionist mechanisms via action research that can shape outcomes sought by individuals and groups within the conditions imposed by history. This is one of the reasons that CCMS shifted from Arts and Languages into the University’s new School of Applied Human Sciences in 2012. The latter School emphasizes empirical application that opens up a disciplinary polygamy that will ensure academic relevance in an increasingly hostile instrumentalist and/or textualist-led world.

### **The Future: The Third Axis**

Following the dispersal of the UZ cohort from the end of the 1990s, the Norwegians continued working with CCMS and Rhodes, and then regrouped in Norway following completion of a number of regional projects (see e.g., *Critical Arts* issue on Intellectual property rights and the political economy of culture, 20(1) 2006). Graduates of the early Oslo-UZ programme are now working in South Africa (Sarah Chiumbu, Kupe, Selina Mudavanhu, Alice Kwaramba (now Kanegoni)), Wallace Chuma, Dumisani Moyo, Last Moyo) or in the UK and Norway (Winston Mano, Andrew Morrison, Nkosinathi Ndlela, Brilliant Mhlanga) while the veterans remain in Zimbabwe (Gecau, Zhuwarara, and the new generation represented by Susan Manhando-Makore, Nhamo Mhiripiri, Peter Mandava,

Zvenyika Mugari, Manyardze Hwengwere, Selina Mudavanhu, Jerome Dube, Tazzen Mandizvidza, and those who studied at CCMS and who are now working in education, civil society or in government.<sup>3</sup> When the contemporary history of Zimbabwean media scholarship comes to be written, this dispersed cohort will be seen to be punching way beyond its weight level. The tragedy is that neither the Birmingham nor the Zimbabwean initiatives survived their home institutions<sup>i</sup> – in both cases however the impulses set in motion have had global purchase.

The implications of the cooperation between Oslo, the Media Programme at UZ and CCMS can also be seen in Orgeret and Rønning (2009). Its contributions come from many of the media researchers who started their careers as part of the links described above. One of the book's contributors, Terje Skjerdal, a lecturer at Gimlekollen School of Journalism and Communication, Kristiansand in Norway, took his Masters at CCMS. He coordinated the Norwegian funded MA programme in Journalism and Communication at Addis Ababa University, where many other participants in the links between Oslo, CCMS, UZ also played key roles.

CCMS continues as a formally constituted Centre at UKZN, though increasingly in opposition to regressive tendencies now filtering through the new state. The Centre expanded significantly after 2006 as it firmly lodged many of its well-funded programmes within community, provincial, civic and rights-based projects (public health and development communication, indigeneity issues, media freedom and regulation, history, heritage and cultural industries research, etc.) This contribution has been recognised by UKZN and supported unconditionally. Students work with a variety of development NGOs throughout the country in doing their research, shaping outcomes along the way, empowering the marginalised and cautioning power. In this set of tasks, CCMS breaks with classroom hegemony, it questions uncritical appropriations of Western canons (including CMS), and adapts Enlightenment thought in reconstituted ways to understanding and shaping the new social, cultural and ontological conditions that inform electoral majorities. CCMS applies critique in ways that directly benefit host, subject and other partner communities. It has done this while retaining a critical distance from new hegemonies, and recognising the value that indigenous ontologies, essentialist as they may be, can bring to the academic table.

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<sup>3</sup> Mhiripiri, Mandava, and Mugari are all lecturers at Midlands State University. Mandizvidza is the general manager for news at ZBC and Manhando-Makore is at local film producer Mighty Movies.

The history of CMS is an ongoing, incomplete narrative. We conceive of ourselves as incomplete praxis-oriented subjects addressing ongoing contradictions.

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<sup>i</sup> The Birmingham Centre was reduced to a programme, and was then closed in 2004.

### **Acknowledgements**

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