Signal and Noise: Media, Infrastructure, and Urban Culture in Nigeria

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Larkin, Brian. *Signal and Noise: Media, Infrastructure, and Urban Culture in Nigeria.* Durham and London: Duke UP, 2008.

Media theory, from Benjamin to McLuhan to Kittler, in one way or another rests on the assumption that media technologies work in the way they are supposed to. Function, so to speak, follows form: radios always transmit signals and reproduce sound; motion picture cameras always capture light and reproduce the illusion of life. In Brian Larkin's provocative *Signal and Noise: Media, Infrastructure, and Urban Culture in Nigeria*, the case is more complicated. On the surface, Larkin's study examines the ways in which the development of technologies like radio and cinema worked to produce the "skeleton of urban life" in modern Nigeria (5). At the same time, the book offers up a theory of media that begins from the perspective of the developing world, where radio and film first emerged out of colonial efforts to strengthen city infrastructures. Here, media technologies do not always work in the way that they are supposed to: they develop in fits and starts; they break down; their uses are ultimately defined by the aims, and the limits, of empire.

According to Larkin, nowhere in Nigeria was this more the case than in Kano, a Hausa city in the predominantly Muslim northern region of the country. It was in Kano that British colonial authorities began experimenting with radio broadcast networks and mobile cinema units during the late 1930s and early 1940s. From the outset, radio and film were part of an official state program of "indirect rule" in place throughout Nigeria's northern states. On one hand, media technologies—like the railroads and highways that were built throughout the country around the same time—promised to serve as a "connective tissue" (8) linking together the Nigerian territory and facilitating centralized colonial governance. On the other hand, technologies like radio and cinema had utility in and of themselves. As "sublime" spectacles of technological achievement (9), broadcasts and films seemed to reinforce the superiority of Western civilization and its wider mastery over the natural world. However, as Larkin emphasizes throughout the book's excellent opening chapters, on-the-ground experiences of Nigeria's media infrastructure often contradicted the colonial agenda.

Radio, for instance, emerged in cities like Kano around the time of the second World War. Although the British initially intended broadcasting technology to help disseminate state propaganda, Nigerian radio's overall "signal" (to adopt one of Larkin's controlling metaphors) was never clear. Prone to power failures and unstable frequency transmissions, the colonial broadcasting network was fragile at best. More importantly, the programming that did end up "working" gave urban Nigerians new opportunities to experience culture beyond the local. In stark contrast to Europe and the United States, where radio sets had been entrenched in the space of the middle-class home for almost two decades, broadcasting in Kano was a public affair. Colonial authorities installed radio loudspeakers throughout

the city's streets—on the walls of libraries, post offices, markets, and other prominent communal spaces—literally wiring the urban environment to global currents of information. The new urban experience of radio ended up dividing the Hausa listening public. Kano's elites were generally in favor of the medium's ability to open up the space of the city to the influence of modern communications. By contrast, more conservative factions regarded radio technology itself with suspicion. Fascinatingly, well into the 1950s and 1960s Kano's religious leaders argued about the extent to which the disembodied sounds heard on-air were "reproductions" or "extensions" of their original sound sources (55). Those who believed the latter insisted that the male radio voice's ability to "reach" the private female ear was a violation of traditional Islamic codes of sexual conduct. Moreover, the visibility of the radio loudspeakers themselves seemed to underscore the extent to which "Christian" noises had begun to pollute the sacred spaces of the city. Here, as elsewhere, Larkin's account suggests that mass media in northern Nigeria were shaped both by the aims of colonial rule and by the established religious and cultural norms of Hausa society. Kano's residents never listened passively to the radio sounds that filled their streets. Instead, they attached their own set of social meanings to the media network that was gradually taking shape around them.

Nigerian film technologies developed along a similar trajectory. One of the British colonial government's most influential infrastructural initiatives was to bring mobile cinema units to the territories surrounding Kano starting in the late 1930s—state authorities even established a cinema taskforce, the Colonial Film Unit (CFU), to help create programming and organize the projection process. Formally, mobile films (or *majigi* in the local parlance) were similar to early films in Europe and the United States around the turn of the twentieth century: first and foremost, they sought to display the novelty of film technology to an impressionable viewing public. In terms of their content, however, the *majigi*'s political interests were much more visible. Mobile programming usually revolved around informational documentaries and newsreels, which were intended to inform viewers about state infrastructure projects and educate residents about personal health and civic welfare. The CFU's emphasis on urban development—its emphasis on molding Hausa viewers into subjects fit for modern civilization—was the main reason why Hausa leaders viewed the *majigi* as a legitimate form of public consumption. According to a number of Larkin's local informants, mobile films were embraced as important communal events in the life of the northern region—this, in direct contrast to the reception of commercial cinema in Nigeria around the same time, an important counterexample in Larkin's larger narrative. Starting in the 1950s, Hausa officials attacked Kano's commercial film theaters (which typically projected entertainment films from the United States, Britain, and India) for creating spaces of unregulated public association between men and women. Like radio, film technology was also critiqued on religious grounds (among other charges, moving images appeared to give life to the dead). Larkin argues that these kinds of controversies can be seen as part of a broad cultural effort to "reterritorialize" urban space in the face of Western influence (124). Questioning the ethics of commercial cinema—and, in turn, elevating the moral status of mobile cinema—was one of the many ways in which local Hausa leaders reclaimed their authority over a media environment that was largely created outside of their control.

In the book's final chapters, Larkin shifts gears to examine the rise of pirate media networks in Nigerian cities during the 1980s and 1990s—an important part of the country's media infrastructure that continues to flourish today, largely outside of state influence. Larkin's basic argument here is that piracy enables the average resident of Kano to plug into the global media culture from which he or she is ordinarily cut off: "Where cinema screens were once filled with outdated films from the United States or India, pirate media allow Nigerian audiences to watch films contemporaneously with audiences in New York or Mumbai. Instead of being marginalized by official distribution networks, Nigerian consumers can now participate in the immediacy of an international consumer culture" (224–5). However, because they are prone to technological glitches and corrupt reproductions, pirated media forms also engender experiences of media that are unique to the developing world. "Detail is destroyed as realist representation fades into pulsating light," Larkin writes, describing the characteristic look of the Nigerian video film, a politically-charged set of regional cinema genres that circulate outside of official distribution channels. "Facial features are smoothed away, colors are broken down into constituent tones, and bodies fade into one another. Reproduction takes its toll, degrading the image by injecting dropouts and bursts of fuzzy noise, breaking down dialogue into muddy, often inaudible sound" (237). This kind of a media environment—one marked by stasis rather than speed, constant repair rather than smooth progress—calls into question the promises of modernization that emerged in Nigeria under colonial rule. More broadly, as Larkin rightly points out, pirate media also expose the limits of Western media theory, which too often presumes that technologies always work smoothly and effectively.

Signal and Noise makes three notable contributions to the study of modern media and urban life. First, the book convincingly demonstrates the extent to which mediascapes work to produce and define cityscapes, and vice versa. Larkin's account of Nigerian radio and cinema suggests that media environments are just as important as built environments to the production of urban space and urban culture in modern Africa. Second, as an effort to rewrite the history of modern media from the perspective of colonial and postcolonial Nigeria—as opposed to Europe and the United States—the book effectively replaces all-too-familiar narratives of technological "revolution" and "development" in media studies discourse with more contingent narratives of "breakdown," "distortion," and "noise." According to Larkin, such an emphasis underscores the ways in which "the meanings attached to technologies, their technical functions, and the social uses to which they are put are not an inevitable consequence but something worked out over time in the context of considerable cultural debate" (3). Finally, the book makes a strong case for the value of comparative approaches to media history. Rather than looking at technologies like radio and cinema in isolation from one another, Larkin suggests, we need to adopt methodologies that examine them contiguously, as part of a larger "networked infrastructure" (5) through which the contested stuff of culture circulates. It is here, perhaps more than anywhere else in the book, that Larkin's account seems to break new ground, giving historical weight to more abstract theories of culture and media that have been dormant in media anthropology, media ecology, and media archaeology for some time. *Signal and Noise* is an engaging work that should generate substantial interest with scholars working in African Culture Studies, Urban History, and Media Studies alike.

—*Brian Hochman*