

DIGITAL DEVELOPMENT DEBATES

Social Media and Democratization in Africa – starting the conversation

Geraldine de Bastion (newthinking communications)

Oh please, not another article on the Facebook revolution...

Much has been written about the role of the internet and social media networks in the recent political uprisings in Northern Africa. But while the world has been attentively watching the people in Egypt, Tunisia and Libya rise up to claim their rights, little attention is being paid to the effects on the rest of the continent. Sub-Saharan Africa is often but a footnote in the global news stream and perceived as the “Dark Continent” in terms of technology by many. It is time to turn the spotlight on sub-Saharan Africa and investigate what role social media play for political communication and why or why not are they being used for organising protests.

No connection, no revolution?

Compared to North African countries like Egypt, internet connectivity is still strikingly low in sub-Saharan Africa. Although the number of internet users has grown significantly in some places due to changes in regulation and improvements in international backbone infrastructures, most African countries still have a lot of catching up to do, according to current ITU statistics. With about 10% of Africa’s population online, the continent is still way below the world average (30%) and the developing country average (21%).¹

Despite persisting infrastructural challenges, internet-based communication has been gaining importance. The much reported rapid spread of mobile connectivity and services, as well as different forms of public and shared internet access, allow a growing number of people who may not have access to a computer or a fixed connection to take part in “the global conversation”. At the end of 2010, mobile cellular penetration in Africa reached 41.4%. International studies indicate the explosion of the African mobile internet market and predict a continuation of the recent dramatic increase of mobile internet subscribers particularly in East Africa².

Social networks such as Facebook, Twitter and YouTube are amongst the most visited websites in Africa³. Recent rankings show Africa is the continent with the most dynamic Facebook growth rates, its user numbers having doubled in the past six months. Egypt, but also Nigeria and South Africa⁴ are amongst the countries with the most rapid uptake. The Twitter micro-blogging service is also gaining importance as a communication tool despite its short and dramatic history in Africa. Having dropped its SMS services in 2008, the company has recently reintroduced them in some countries and is looking to expand⁵.

1 billion stories to be told

Of course, not everyone on Facebook or Twitter is intent on starting a revolution. Social networks are primarily used for personal communication and self expression. Sarah, author of the Ethiopian blog *Sukersays*, started blogging because she “loves being able to write about her opinion” on love, female perspectives and life in Ethiopia and because she enjoys getting to know her readers' point of view. Blogs like Sarah’s give a voice to perspectives often not featured in the mass or, in Ethiopia’s case, government media. This is certainly the case in Uganda, where the blog *Sebaspace*, written by a brave, homosexual blogger at a time of extreme oppression

¹ In 2010 about 10.0% of the Kenyan population was online. Other countries such as Ethiopia have not benefitted from such developments and are lagging behind. In Ethiopia 450,400 Internet users were online in 2010, 0,5% of the population. For reference, see <http://www.internetworldstats.com/africa.htm>, accessed May 2011 as well as <http://www.itu.int/ITU-D/ict/material/FactsFigures2010.pdf>, accessed May 2011.

² According to a study published by Balancing Act in January 2011, mobile internet subscribers grew from 1,562,065 in Q4 08/2009 to 3,059,906 in Q4 09/2010 in Kenya alone: <http://www.balancingact-africa.com/reports/telecoms-and-interne/mobile-internet-in-a-0>, accessed May 2011.

³ See André-Michel Essoungou: A social media boom begins in Africa: Using mobile phones, Africans join the global conversation. *Africa Renewal*, December 2010, page 3, <http://www.un.org/ecosocdev/geninfo/afrec/vol24no4/social-media-boom.html>, accessed May 2011.

⁴ For reference see <http://www.socialbakers.com/blog/116-the-rise-of-asia-and-africa-on-facebook-statistics-by-continent>, accessed May 2011.

⁵ For reference see Erik Hershman's White African blog: <http://whiteafrican.com/2008/08/14/what-twitters-global-failure-means-for-africa/> and <http://whiteafrican.com/2011/03/09/twitter-is-slowly-coming-back-to-africa/>, accessed May 2011 as well as <http://www.oafrica.com/web/twitter/>, accessed May 2011.

in Uganda, ranked third in a top 10 of Uganda's blogs recently published by the African blog aggregator [Afrigator](#). The personal becomes political when people use new media to address critical, oppositional or taboo issues publicly. In countries lacking independent and pluralistic media structures or possibilities for exchange and engagement, the internet can become an important outlet for political communication.

Mobile, social, innovative: African tools to support democratic processes

The social media networks Twitter and Facebook have attracted much attention and yes, they have played a role in the political mobilization of North Africa, but there are other ways new media are being used to contribute to political and opinion-shaping processes, to promote transparency and accountability. It would be a misconception to think that the use of digital media for political communication is a new phenomenon, sparked by the recent events in neighboring countries. A growing number of activists and IT-evangelists in sub-Saharan Africa have recognized its potential over the past years.

The development of Ushahidi in reaction to the outbreak of violence after the Kenyan national elections in 2007/2008 and the use of FrontlineSMS as a tool for election monitoring are just two of the more prominent examples of innovative solutions being created in Africa to improve transparency in political processes. These technologies are being further developed and deployed. During this year's Ugandan elections, citizens could share observations by sending text messages and access information from a variety of sources via [Uganda-watch2011.org](#). Reports included election progress reports, both successes and abuses as well as questions. The messages were reviewed and validated by a team of trained reviewers employed by the Democracy Monitoring Group (DEMGROUP). During the Nigerian elections in 2011, a similar project using FrontlineSMS and Ushahidi called [Reclaim Naija](#) is just one of several tools employed to prevent and report election fraud and engage citizens. The application [Revoda](#) was also developed to allow voters to act as independent observers from their respective polling stations and send reports after having registered their mobile number, name and polling unit number.⁶

Augmenting the new and the old

In most African countries, offline media and radio in particular are still the most effective means of reaching the majority of the population. This is even more so in rural areas. Whilst this remains true, and internet media producers have in the past sometimes cooperated with offline media to spread their message, a growing number of traditional media have incorporated internet use to extend their services. [West African Democracy Radio](#) (WADR) was launched in 2005 with the support of the Open Society Initiative for West Africa. Its aim is to promote the ideals of democratic and open societies in the region. It broadcasts 24 hours a day on FM in Dakar, Senegal and via satellite to the rest of West Africa, including over 30 partner stations. Recently WADR launched a new platform which integrates open source software with social and cloud networks such as [Soundcloud](#), [Facebook](#) and [Twitter](#). For the WADR, augmenting new and traditional media is an effective way to increase their reach as well as open up new possibilities of creating a dialog with their audience⁷.

Where does the Middle East end and Africa begin?

Given these positive developments in infrastructure and examples of use, the question arises as to why social media have not had similar mobilizing effects in protest movements in sub-Saharan Africa as they have had in North Africa. Especially as many countries are faced with similar socio-economic problems, such as high unemployment, unfair distribution of resources and the long-term rule of a political elite. Whilst some may argue that it is just a matter of time or connectivity, others suggest the lack of experience and unifying causes are preventing the shaping of a vox populi. This may have been the case during the recent protests following the elections in Côte d'Ivoire. In her recap in [The Use of Social Media During Côte d'Ivoire Post-Electoral Crisis](#) Anna Guèye suggests that: "the use of social networks in Côte d'Ivoire follows a political conflict which divides society into two camps of comparable size." Emmanuel Kisiangani, from the African Conflict Prevention Programme (ACPP) at the Institute of Security Studies (ISS) in South Africa, agrees that the lack of homogeneity is one of the major reasons for the difference in the levels of success of protests in North and sub-Saharan Africa, "In sub-Saharan Africa, where governments have been able to divide people along ethnic-political lines, it becomes easier to hijack an uprising because of ethnic differences, unlike in North Africa."⁸ The budding protests in sub-

⁶ For an overview of the use of social media in the Nigerian election process see: <http://www.blacklooks.org/2011/04/8079/> accessed May 2011.

⁷ Read more about WADR and their use of new technologies in cooperation with Soundfabric: <http://sourcefabric.org/en/community/news/611/West-Africa-Democracy-Radio-launches-open-source-news-platform.htm>, accessed May 2011

⁸ Quoted by Al Jazeera in the article, "In Search of an African Revolution",

Saharan African countries may be smaller, more diverse and less visible to the rest of the world at present, but they have not gone unnoticed.

Government reactions: just in time?

Although few governments are harnessing the internet to engage in dialog with their citizens, a growing number seem increasingly eager to prohibit critical voices from being heard. As the use of new media for bottom-up political communication is increasing, so are government efforts to exercise control. Over the past weeks, a wave of what has been termed "just-in-time" blocking of sites and banning of services has hit sub-Saharan Africa. It thus appears as though the lesson learned from protests in Northern Africa by other governments has been to prevent political mobilization via internet.

- In March 2011, the main Cameroonian network MTN shut down Twitter's SMS service for a few days. Although no official statement was issued, MTN and government officials suggested security concerns were the reason for the suspension of services. According to the Cameroonian blogger Dibussi Tande⁹, "The ban [was] just presumed to be a precautionary measure taken by the government to ensure that protests in the line of Egypt and Tunisia do not happen in Cameroon following strong build-up of vehemence against the current regime using micro-blogging as a tool."¹⁰
- In April 2011, Uganda's Communications Commission (UCC) ordered internet service providers to block Facebook and Twitter for 24 hours during the "Walk to Work" protests against spiraling food and fuel prices, according to *Al Jazeera* and other news sources. Uganda's recent repression of political criticism is not limited to the control of digital media: the president recently denounced all the press reporting on anti-government protests as "enemies"¹¹.
- Other countries have shown even harsher reactions to any hints of protest. In February 2011, 45 people were arrested and charged with treason in Zimbabwe for watching recorded news coverage of the uprising in Egypt¹². In March 2011, *SW Radio Africa* reported Vikas Mavhudzi had been arrested and charged with "subverting a constitutional government" after posting a Facebook message on the page allegedly belonging to Prime Minister Morgan Tsvangirai. Similar reports came from Ethiopia recently, where journalist Eskinder Nega was apparently detained for "attempts to incite" Egypt-style protests.

The conversation that has just begun is already under threat of being muffled. The international development and internet community should not look away, but speak up against this trend to censor and filter the internet. Media development initiatives need to support the establishment of stable infrastructures and legal frameworks that guarantee freedom of speech, freedom of press, enable the growth of pluralistic media structures and create room for independent media. Those willing to speak out should be supported and encouraged; those in power should be motivated to listen. 2011 is an important year for Africa with elections scheduled in more than 20 countries across the continent¹³. The course of these elections, the way media landscapes develop on and offline and how governments deal with public criticism will be the next tests for democracy.

<http://english.aljazeera.net/indepth/features/2011/02/201122164254698620.html>, accessed May 2011

⁹ Tande has published detailed articles on the temporary Twitter ban in his blog:

<http://www.dibussi.com/2011/03/cameroon-bans-twitter-via-sms.html>, accessed May 2011.

¹⁰ For reference see: <http://news.cameroon-today.com/the-ban-on-twitter-via-sms-services-in-cameroon-has-sparked-off-a-lot-of-heated-debates-about-the-roles-played-by-social-networking-and-micro-blogging-in-setting-fire-to-political-uprisings-and-civil/4917/#ixzz1MFQ5Xvbg>, accessed May 2011.

¹¹ For reference see: <http://www.globalpost.com/dispatch/news/regions/africa/110518/uganda-press-freedom>, accessed May 2011.

¹² For reference see:

http://www.readwriteweb.com/archives/zimbabwe_charges_45_citizens_with_treason_for_watc.php, accessed May 2011.

¹³ For further information on elections in Africa visit: <http://africanelections.tripod.com/> and <http://www.africanelections.org/>, accessed May 2011.