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The Digital Natives Are Coming!

How Social Media Are Changing Political Discourse in Kenya

Jan Cernicky / Antonie Hutter

In many regions of the world, the ideal of the internet as an instrument of political freedom has not been fulfilled. Instead, the internet is increasingly used as a means of maintaining power for the elites. In many African states, and especially in Kenya, this conflict has not yet been resolved. Here, the youth, who make up the majority of the population, have a good chance of creating a freer, fairer society via the internet. But without well thought-out support, they are unlikely to succeed.

Introduction

According to the World Bank's definition, Kenya is no longer a developing country.¹ It has become a middle-income country and possesses the fourth-fastest-growing internet market in the world. The M-Pesa mobile payment service that has been developed here, is regarded as a model for modern payment systems worldwide. A large number of start-ups have been founded around this service, and are now expanding rapidly. In the social and political spheres, too, the internet – and especially social media – has become an influential instrument of political decision-making. This trend will become even more pronounced because the extremely high birth rate will result in the usually internet-savvy young generation in Kenya, playing an increasingly significant role in the coming years. This generation of digital natives is currently faced with a social and political elite for whom the internet is new territory at best. Especially in rural areas, where the authorities are often not even able to write, this rift is even deeper. In countries such as Kenya, the young generation therefore has the rare opportunity to use their position of relative strength to depose the old elites, and define for themselves how the internet will influence social decision-making processes in the future.

Internet and Social Media in Kenya

Kenya is considered to be one of the most advanced countries on the continent in terms of

digitalisation. Today, 85 per cent of the population in Kenya are registered with mobile phone providers. There are almost 30 million internet users, and 70 per cent of the population have access to mobile internet. Social media are widespread. According to a June 2016 report by the Blogger Association of Kenya (BAKE)² social media platforms such as blogs, Twitter, and Facebook have become an effective tool for Kenyans to exchange information on political topics of interest to them and to demand their freedom of speech. In this respect, social media provide a platform for political dialogue and influence opinion-forming. Twitter is especially important here. In 2016, Kenya had over 700,000 confirmed, active monthly users on the platform, the majority of whom access Twitter on a daily basis. This is more than in Germany, which has a much larger population.

A central element of the Kenyan internet wonder is M-Pesa, a mobile payment service provider. Even though the idea is not from Kenya, and other mobile operators now offer mobile payment services as well, M-Pesa operated by Safaricom, a mobile operator in the Vodafone Group, remains synonymous with mobile payments far beyond Kenya. The original idea of sending the most frequently used prepaid phone credit in Kenya to another mobile phone subscriber, quickly became a fully-fledged payment system.

M-Pesa developed so rapidly because there were previously hardly any low-cost options for



School 1.0: In terms of digitalisation Kenya is one of the most advanced countries on the African continent, but it is still a long way to the digital classroom. [Source: © Thomas Mukoya, Reuters.](#)

transferring money from the larger cities to rural areas. However, doing so is of great importance in Kenya because of the high number of internal economic migrants who commute between rural and urban areas. In many cases a family member, usually the husband, works in a city while the families remain in the countryside. Today, more than 80 per cent of Kenya's adult population use mobile payment services – this even applies to illiterate nomads.

The rapid acceptance of M-Pesa among the population and the integration of digital payment services into the economy, placed Kenya on the global digital map. M-Pesa's dynamism

has spawned numerous digital innovations that have established themselves in Africa and led to multinational companies such as Craft Silicon and Cellulant.

This also resulted in ever more international capital finding its way to Kenya. One example is the company Accelerators 88mph. In August 2013, the company invested 500,000 US dollars in its third group of start-ups in Kenya and increased its total financial commitment to two million US dollars with 32 start-ups, in which it holds stakes of between ten and 25 per cent. These start-ups include, for example, the social travel network, Tourist Links, the Yum



food delivery website, the Iprocure mobile agricultural payment start-up, and the Booknow mobile ticket platform. The sums invested may seem small from a global perspective, but the fact that there is international investment in start-ups here is a revolution for Kenya.

Another important element of the information and communication technology landscape (ICT) in Kenya is iHub, which was founded in 2010 by Eric Hersman, one of the co-founders of *Ushahidi*; a website that collected eyewitness reports of violence via text messages and Google Maps. iHub is a technology incubator that promotes innovation and collaboration between its tech start-up members. It is also a regional precedent, whose concept has been reproduced in other countries. There are now more than 70 similar tech centres on the African continent, for instance.

The developments mentioned above, may be some of the reasons why Kenya was named in a study by Tufts University in 2017 as the fourth-most-important growing digital economy among 60 industrialised and emerging countries. The Digital Planet 2017³ report finds that Kenya's digital economy is highly dynamic and has great potential for growth in the coming years.

Political decisions also contributed to this positive development. One of Kenya's first major steps in ICT was the connection of underwater fibre optic cables from the Indian Ocean to Nairobi in the autumn of 2007, with the aim of providing millions of people with fast internet access. 2008 witnessed the publication of the first national ICT Master Plan, covering a period of five years (2008 to 2012). It is now part of the Vision 2030 development agenda launched by Kenya's former President Mwai Kibaki that same year.

At the time, Kenya was one of the first African countries to join the Open Government Data Initiative, launched in 2011. To date, 75 countries have committed themselves to the initiative, and other countries are preparing to join.

Supporters of the initiative agree to develop action plans for greater transparency, civic participation, and administrative modernisation in their countries and to carry out regular review processes. In this context, the government has been actively recruiting data scientists since 2014 with the aim of developing an e-governance that can be accessed by everyone.

Kenya is considered the fourth-most-important growing digital economy.

However, success seems to be moderate; the authors' experiences with Kenyan e-government tend to be negative, for example. In fact, even though the application routes have been digitalised and most official procedures are initiated on the appropriate internet portal,⁴ it is still necessary to visit the authorities in person, and it is often unclear why the digital route was necessary to begin with. These may be teething troubles, but difficulties may also be due to the on-going insufficiency of digital infrastructure in Kenya and, above all, the poor quality of staff training.

The government's lack of understanding of digital dynamics is also evidenced by the Kenyan ICT plan mentioned above. Since it does not deal with the basic components needed to develop an ICT industry, such as high-quality higher education in conjunction with developing a network of IT companies, which contributed to the success of Silicon Valley. Instead, a housing development costing ten billion US dollars, Konza Tech City, is being planned and is primarily described as a real estate project. Real estate is the classic source of income for those in power, and once again it is evidently impossible to break this paradigm.

So it is not surprising that, despite the growth described above, Kenya remains at a very low level of digital framework condition development compared to more developed countries.

In 2016, Kenya was ranked 52nd out of 60 countries surveyed in the field of digital economy development and was second among the six African countries in the survey. When compiling the indices, researchers evaluated the selected countries in four main areas – the robustness of infrastructure, the ability and willingness of consumers to use digital technology, the legal and policy framework, and the level of innovation and change. Training in the IT sector also remains weak compared to the international standard. It therefore comes as no surprise that many of the founders of start-ups and visible blogs studied at prestigious universities abroad.

The growth of the Kenyan digital industry is not due to, but in spite of, state regulations.

Hence, the highly acclaimed growth of the Kenyan digital industry is not due to, but in spite of, the state infrastructure and regulations. However, this is certainly not a disadvantage for internet-savvy young people, since it allows them to create free spaces whose principles the ruling elite can scarcely understand.

Development of the Internet as a Political Forum

At almost the same time as Kenya's connection to the international fibre optic network, another event was shaping Kenya's politically active internet community: the civil war-like clashes following the disputed presidential elections at the end of 2007. These clashes were the first historical event in Kenya to be influenced by the use of social media. Only via the internet was it possible for Kenyans of the diaspora in particular to obtain information about actual events in the affected regions. The traditional media held back to the point of self-censorship, fearing that reporting might escalate the situation. In order to document the atrocities committed in a manner that was independent of the political interest

groups, the *Ushahidi* (“witness” or “testimony”) platform was founded after an appeal by Ory Okolloh, a well-known blogger. The platform was used to document reports of violence via SMS, which were also associated with a physical location. This internationally visible reporting on the violence committed and the pressure of the Kenyan diaspora which was thus informed, provided an important impetus for achieving ultimately successful, high-level international mediation in the conflict. This is regarded as the birth of Kenyan internet activism, which was initially supported primarily by political blogs written by such people as Okolloh, Daudi Were, and Charles Ng'ang'a Wairia (in Swahili).

The “Arab Spring” in 2011 gave new momentum to internet activism. During this time, for example, the hashtag #Kenya28Feb developed into a movement which mainly focuses on cohesion among Kenyans and is still active today. Yet, the confrontation with the “Arab Spring” also led the government to devote more attention to monitoring unwelcome opinions on the internet.

This trend was intensified by the terrorist attack on the Westgate shopping centre in September 2013, whose traumatic effect is still felt in Kenyan society to this day. The attackers used social media to publish (effectively live) graphic images from the shopping centre, in order to use them as propaganda. This placed the focus on the use of the internet by criminals and terrorist groups.

The government and parliament reacted with tough anti-terrorism laws that were passed at the end of 2014, generally referred to as “security laws”. In some areas, these laws weakened the essence of the rule of law. The laws had a particularly large impact on the media and the liability regulations for content distributed on social media; because the terrorist attacks were so recent, however, protests against them only occurred sporadically.

What is particularly important here is the introduction of a criminal charge for offensive or inciting statements, commonly referred to as

hate speech.⁵ However, the Kenyan Supreme Court weakened the relevant provisions, since freedom of speech must not be subject to restrictions across-the-board. According to the court's decision, the burden of proof that something can be interpreted as hate speech lies with the prosecuting authorities. This means that all expressions continue to fall under free expression unless it can be proven that they are hate speech, which is very difficult in practice. There is therefore only one documented case of an internet activist who was convicted of hate speech; who in turn had to serve a three-month prison sentence. There have, however, been at least six cases since 2016 in which citizens have been arrested and detained because they were accused of hate speech.⁶ But all of them were

released quite quickly, since it was not possible to press charges. At the moment, the passage under discussion tends to be used to intimidate disagreeable bloggers.

Nevertheless, global comparison shows Kenya doing quite well with regard to the freedom of the internet: In the internet freedom survey conducted by Freedom House, Kenya scored a remarkable 29 points on a scale of 0 (best) to 100 (worst).⁷

How Are Young People Using Their Freedoms?

The use of the internet as a political instrument has changed considerably since 2007. While the



A picture of the past: Bloggers with their notebooks shaped the early stages of web activism. Today, the scene mainly communicates via Twitter and Instagram. Source: © Thomas Mukoya, Reuters.

scene was dominated by active bloggers at that time, they have been replaced by users of Twitter and, to a lesser extent, Instagram.

The commercialisation of the internet has gained momentum in Kenya, too.

The remaining blogs are very strongly commercialised and deal with areas where targeted advertising is obvious, such as fashion, food, and technology. A few individuals who used to be considered political bloggers, such as Aurthur Mandela (Xtian Dela), now use their profiles primarily as advertising platforms. Scarcely any political messages can be discerned from them. Nevertheless, political blogs continue to make an appearance, such as Kenya Today,⁸ which is close to ODM, the opposition party. However, these are hard to distinguish from internet editions by traditional newspapers and do not fill a substantial gap in the relatively free Kenyan media landscape.⁹ Newspapers that are visible at a national level also report on corruption scandals and – depending on their political orientation and owners – are quite critical of politics. Blogs therefore tend to fill gaps in questions of youth culture or specialised technology, for which there are no adequate media products in Kenya. Albeit, at least since the controversial 2017 elections, the Kenyan government has taken a much more restrictive stance towards the press. Whether this will have consequences for the use of blogs remains to be seen.

Twitter has become a very relevant tool for political and social mobilisation. It is not a tool for discussing complex interrelationships, but rather for placing specific issues on the daily agenda by means of fast-paced, short messages, usually including some photos. Boniface Mwangi,¹⁰ with nearly one million followers on Twitter, is very successful at this. For example, in May 2015, the announcement that President Kenyatta intended to fly to the inauguration of the new Nigerian president with a delegation

of 60 people, caused such an outcry that the trip had to be cancelled and was reduced to a small delegation under the vice-president. Since Mwangi tweeted about the president's official speeches being flown in printed form by plane to the various provinces, there has also been a switch to more modern and cost-effective communication channels for this, too. The introduction of public toilets in courthouses is also a result of Mwangi's tweets. The Kenyans on Twitter group¹¹ recently managed to publicly and critically discuss the president's list of persons to be honoured for special services to the country. This in turn led to completely different individuals being honoured informally on the internet and political statements being associated with them.

So far, however, only this type of small, isolated topic has been set in motion using short campaigns on the internet. The really big challenges – corruption, the ailing education system, and the various obstacles to young people who want access to formal employment and political influence – obviously cannot be adequately addressed on Twitter. Even Mwangi admits that this is the case: "Twitter is good at making a lot of noise. Successful political mobilisation still requires activity in the non-virtual world."¹²

This is not simply theoretical knowledge. Mwangi, Ory Okolloh, and other internet-savvy young people from Nairobi's well-educated middle class, founded the UKWELI party in 2015 and stood for election in 2017. The UKWELI Party is not an internet-based party like the European Pirate Parties, for example. On the contrary, it stood for election with a programme to combat corruption, provide better opportunities for young people and women, and improve the quality of state services with very concrete ideas for enhancing the lives of the young middle class. During the election campaign, it benefited from experience in the use of social media, but ran its election campaign primarily in direct contact with people on the street.¹³ Although it addressed the pressing problems of most Kenyans, conducted a very professional election campaign, and above all addressed

people under 40 years of age (who make up the clear majority of voters), not one candidate won a mandate in the national or any of the regional (county) parliaments.

One reason for this is Kenya's majority voting system, in which ethnic affiliation and bribes play a major role in many cases. In some constituencies, it is therefore considered a great success to reach second or third place during the first attempt. At the same time, it is disappointing because a clear majority of Kenyans are against ethnic politics and vote-buying.¹⁴ Thus, if responses to surveys are honest, it should actually be possible to achieve a majority in elections using such a programme.

A representative of UKWELI Party explains why it is not that simple: "Small, short campaigns are very effective. It is easy to mobilise quite a lot of people for them. But when the campaign has reached its goal, people feel that they have made their contribution to politics, are satisfied, and return to everyday life. It is very difficult to win them over to politics in the long term."¹⁵

Structural problems such as bribery of voters cannot be solved with internet campaigns alone.

Thus it is not to be expected that young people who can be mobilised on the internet for a campaign against the president's trip to Nigeria with an excessively large delegation, will also reject bribes during elections. This connection does not follow. Structural problems such as bribery of voters cannot be solved with internet campaigns¹⁶ alone – the reasons for such problems are far too complex.

The UKWELI Party reacted to this knowledge early on, launching a door-to-door campaign in the real world. It was probably too late for this election. The challenge now is to prepare for the 2022 elections at an early stage, skillfully

connecting the virtual and non-virtual worlds. The chances should be good; after all, about a quarter of the electorate will be eligible to vote for the first time in the upcoming elections – and in Kenya, these new voters will almost all be digital natives as well.

Generational Conflicts

Thus Kenya – like many other African states – is faced with a fascinating generational conflict based on many fault lines: On one side, there are young relatively well-educated people (by African standards), for whom the internet is a normal part of life, and who are systematically distanced from power and resources by the older generation; on the other, there is the 50+ generation which, especially in rural areas, is often scarcely able to read and perceives the internet as more of a threat, but has a large part of the resources at its disposal. The younger generation constitutes a clear and constantly growing majority.

Having said this, the internet most clearly depicts the difference between the two worlds. Although the most important Kenyan politicians maintain Twitter profiles with many followers, they only use them as an additional channel to spread messages that are also delivered via other media.¹⁷ They do not seem to understand Twitter's function as a quick campaign tool for specific issues. This is underscored by relatively amateurish online smear campaigns primarily against the opposition. These campaigns, apparently carried out by an American media company, hardly had any impact because they merely repeated assertions that had already been made in traditional media. Nor does the fact that President Kenyatta and opposition leader Raila Odinga have hired highly visible social media activists as communications advisers, and that President Kenyatta pays groups of bloggers, such as the "36 bloggers", to disseminate their opinions, do much to change this impression. According to internet expert Mark Kaigwa,¹⁸ these internet specialists are very far removed from the powerful men in the internal hierarchies, and have no influence

on the development of communication strategies. They are there to distribute prescribed messages as effectively as possible via their followers. Nor are they included in the political line of the politicians distributing money.

This describes a change which, according to Kaigwa, is currently underway: A few years ago, internet activists mainly formed a kind of “virtual NGO” in which political and social opinions were formed quite spontaneously, but the commercialisation of the internet has gained momentum in Kenya, too. In this context, it is not only the political elite who pacify internet activists by giving them money, but as discussed above, the advertising industry to a greater extent; the latter is diluting the political effectiveness of internet activists through product placement, without having an explicitly political agenda.

Conclusions

As described above, many factors seem to be coming together in Kenya that can pave the way towards a free, dynamic internet as a space for social and democratic freedoms. On the other hand, the newly re-elected government already exhibited authoritarian tendencies in the last legislative period and indicated – immediately after the (subsequently annulled) elections in August with its crackdown on several NGOs¹⁹ and on several television stations in January 2018 – that these tendencies can be expected to intensify further. China, too, which no longer defines its interests in Kenya solely in terms of trade policy, but is also seeking political allies on the African continent, will support these tendencies with its technical expertise. The necessary Chinese IT equipment suppliers, such as Huawei, already have a strong presence in Kenya. In addition, the commercialisation of the internet provides for a gradual dilution of political content.

It therefore remains unclear who will prevail in the medium term. Will the old generation hang on to the resources while the young people occasionally engage in short pinprick campaigns? Or will the internet activists and young politicians

succeed in changing the social and political awareness of the younger generation, achieving better political participation opportunities in the long term and thus a chance to gain fairer access to state resources and high-quality government services?

There is definitely a chance that they will follow the latter course. As described above, with respect to technology, Kenya is far removed from countries such as China that can largely control the internet. In addition, the courts have proven that they are fully committed to protecting freedom of expression, including on the internet, and do not shy away from conflict with the government. Despite the restrictions imposed by the aforementioned security laws and a judiciary that is not always fully functional, Kenya remains a constitutional state. This is precisely where the legal basis for the use of the internet is defined in the conflict between legislators and the highest courts.

The young generation therefore has the opportunity to further develop the internet as a space for open discourse. This is not without risk, however, because opponents who do not really understand what is happening on the internet tend to react harshly and disproportionately. Given this constellation, it would be naïve to believe, based solely on their greater knowledge of the internet and numerical superiority, that the Kenyan digital natives will automatically assert themselves and maintain the internet as a space for free expression. Targeted support, not only from individual internet activists and their groupings, but also from specialised lawyers, critical media, and NGOs, as well as cooperation with courts and governmental regulatory agencies, seems necessary if this goal is to be achieved.

–translated from German–

Dr. Jan Cernicky is Head of the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung's office in Kenya.

Antonie Hutter is Project Manager at the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung's office in Kenya.

- 1 Kenya has been among the lower-middle-income countries since 2015.
- 2 Cf. The Bloggers Association of Kenya (BAKE) 2016: State of the Internet in Kenya 2016 Report, Nov 2016, in: <https://bit.ly/2uqU2ke> [22 Feb 2018].
- 3 Cf. Chakravorti, Bhaskar / Chaturvedi, Ravi Shankar 2017: Digital Planet 2017 – How competitiveness and trust in digital economies vary across the world, The Fletcher School, Tufts University, Jul 2017, p.22, Table 2, in: <https://bit.ly/2tLqJ9M> [22 Feb 2018].
- 4 The portal can be found at: <https://www.ecitizen.go.ke> [22 Feb 2018].
- 5 Paragraph 12 of the Security Laws: “A person who publishes, broadcasts or causes to be published or distributed, through print, digital or electronic means, insulting, threatening, or inciting material or images of dead or injured persons [...] commits an offence and is liable, upon conviction, to a fine not exceeding five million shillings or imprisonment for a term not exceeding three years or both.” Kenya Gazette Supplement 2014: Acts, 2014, Kenya Gazette Supplement 167, 22 Dec 2014, in: <https://bit.ly/1HeTwFa> [22 Feb 2018].
- 6 Cf. Freedom House 2017: Freedom on the Net 2017, in: <https://bit.ly/2IT609k> [22 Feb 2018].
- 7 Cf. *ibid.* For comparison: Germany scores 20 points, China 87.
- 8 Kenya Today, in: <http://kenya-today.com> [22 Feb 2018].
- 9 Reporters sans frontières showed Kenya achieving 95th place among 180 surveyed states; in the Freedom House ranking, Kenya is “partially free”, achieving a score of 58 on a scale of 0-100. For comparison: Germany: 20, Bulgaria: 42, Russia: 83. Cf. Reporters sans frontières 2017: Classement Mondial de la Liberté de la Presse 2017, in: <https://rsf.org/fr/classement> [22 Feb 2018].
- 10 Boniface Mwangi, Twitter, in: @Bonifacemwangi.
- 11 You can follow them at #KOT on Twitter.
- 12 From a conversation between Dr. Jan Cernicky and Boniface Mwangi, Dec 2017.
- 13 During the election campaign, the KAS in Kenya followed a UKWELI party candidate, Samantha Maina, with a camera. The video is available at <https://bit.ly/2GaAWEC> [22 Feb 2018].
- 14 Cf. i. a. Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung / Centre for Multi-Party Democracy – Kenya (CMD) 2016: Voter Bribery as an Election Malpractice in Kenya – A Survey Report, Dec 2016, in: <http://kas.de/kenia/de/publications/48023> [22 Feb 2018].
- 15 From a conversation with Dr. Jan Cernicky.
- 16 An example of this is the quite visible campaign #notwithmyvote, which ran during the elections in 2017.
- 17 Cf. the profiles of President Kenyatta (@UKenyatta, 2.8 million followers) and Vice President William Ruto (@WilliamsRuto, 1.6 million followers).
- 18 Cf. Ndemo, Bitange / Weiss, Tim (ed.) 2017: Digital Kenya – An Entrepreneurial Revolution in the Making, Palgrave MacMillan, Basingstoke.
- 19 This concerned, for example, the International Development Law Organisation (IDLO) and the Kenya Human Rights Commission (KHRC).