

A GOOD CONNECTION?

MOBILE PHONES AND DEMOCRATISATION IN SUB-SAHARAN AFRICA

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When you drive out of Accra, Ghana's capital, you are immediately struck by the way some of the houses are painted from top to bottom in lurid yellow, bright red or lime green. Only when you look more closely do you realise that these facades are also painted with the logos of mobile phone companies. House-owners let phone companies turn their homes into giant billboards – and bright colours are the trademark of all these firms. Ghana's colourful "mobile phone houses" provide visible evidence of how the mobile phone nowadays quite literally colours Africa's landscape. And this development increasingly includes political communication and the media within the context of democratisation.

The number of mobile phone users is sky-rocketing throughout the region, and the continent is now the fastest-growing mobile phone market in the world.¹ Gustav Praekelt, an expert on mobile communications and founder of a Johannesburg-based foundation, works on the basis that there are one billion people and 456 million mobile phones in Africa, with the numbers growing apace. The front-runner is Nigeria with 78 million devices, followed by South Africa with 52 million.² By 2015, more people in



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- 1 | Cf. Andrea Jeska, "Afrika twittert sich in die Freiheit", *Die Welt*, March 6, 2011, <http://welt.de/print/wams/vermischtes/article12710215/Afrika-twittert-sich-in-die-Freiheit.html> (accessed October 7, 2011).
- 2 | Cf. Gustav Praekelt, "m-Dem: Mobile Democracy Toolkit", Presentation at the "KAS E-lection Bridge Africa" conference Accra/Ghana, May 1, 2011.

Sub-Saharan Africa will have access to mobile phones than to electricity.³

“WE ARE ALL CELLPHONE”

The inhabitants of South African shanty towns spend 27.5 per cent of their income on the communication sector, often using money which should really be used for buying essential goods.

The vast majority of users use pre-paid cards, rather than having a contract as is more usual in the West. They are very cost-conscious – it is almost a ritual for African mobile phone users to finish their call, then stare at the display to check their current credit level. But this fascination is understandable, as a study has shown that the inhabitants of South African shanty towns spend 27.5 per cent of their income on the communication sector, often using money which should really be used for buying essential goods.⁴

The mobile phone seems to be the ideal device for a region with frequent power cuts and which in many areas does not have the kind of landline network which is common in Europe or North America. Even in the most remote areas you come across people who cannot imagine life without their mobile phones. Professor Joseph Diescho from Namibia uses a play on words to describe the distribution of cell phones (this term is more commonly used in the region than mobile phones): “In the past the population of Africa was generally divided into Anglophone, Francophone and Lusophone. But those times are gone. Now we are all Cellphone.”

The vitality of the communications sector is a sign that Africa is a continent on the move. “Africa? It’s a basket case, nothing ever changes. This is what many Germans think about the continent, but they’ve got it wrong”, says

3 | Cf. Madanmohan Rao, “Regional Hubs of Excellence and Innovation”, *Mobile Africa Report 2011*, http://mobilemonday.net/reports/MobileAfrica_2011.pdf (accessed October 7, 2011).

4 | Cf. Herman Wasserman, “Mobile phones, popular media and everyday African democracy: transmissions and transgressions”, Keynote speech at the workshop “Mobile phones: the new talking drums of everyday Africa?” held at the African Studies Centre in Leiden/Netherlands, December 2010, <http://mobileafricarevisited.files.wordpress.com/2011/02/3a-herman-wasserman-keynote-mobile-phones.pdf> (accessed October 7, 2011).

Dominic Johnson in *Spiegel Online*.⁵ He describes what is happening in Somalia where, in the midst of all the dramatic pictures of starvation which are going around the world, in the summer of 2011 a mobile phone company in the north of the country set up a modern data network. Here the company has already established mobile phone banking and Somalia's first solar-powered mobile communications network. Journalist Andrea Jeska, who travels extensively in Africa, adds: "Whereas in the past Africa has been associated with people dying of Aids and conflicts, it is now on its way to becoming a shining example of rapid technological progress."⁶

Mobile phones are transforming the everyday lives of Africans forever. A well-known example is that of the fishermen who use their phones while at sea to check the local fish market prices in various towns along the coast so that they can decide where they can best sell their catch. In the past, they were just dependent on whatever price they could get for their perishable goods at the local harbour. Sub-Saharan Africa has long been a world leader when it comes to making money transfers via mobile phone. The market leader and best-known brand is M-Pesa (pesa means money in Kiswahili), a mobile system from Safaricom which has attracted seven million customers in less than three years. Some experts estimate that up to ten per cent of Kenya's gross national product is channelled through M-Pesa.⁷ The mobile phone "as a mobile wallet" (*Spiegel Online*) is particularly important for people who live in rural areas where the next bank is miles away. And because socialising has always been important in the region, it is hardly surprising that Africans are flocking to use the new possibilities offered by mobile phones – and the mobile internet above all.

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5 | Cf. Dominic Johnson, "Warum Afrika besser ist als sein Ruf", *Spiegel Online*, July, 26, 2011, <http://spiegel.de/wirtschaft/0,1518,776485,00.html> (accessed October 7, 2011).

6 | Cf. Jeska, n. 1.

7 | Cf. Anne Perkins, "Are mobile phones Africa's silver bullet?" *The Guardian*, January 14, 2011, <http://guardian.co.uk/katine/katine-chronicles-blog/2010/jan/14/mobile-phones-africa> (accessed October 7, 2011).

When accessing the internet, Africans have missed out the desktop computer and have gone straight to the mobile phone. In Sub-Saharan Africa, most people surf the web using WAP-enabled mobiles.

Anyone interested in this key issue will soon come across the term “leapfrogging”. This means that when accessing the internet, Africans have missed out the desktop computer completely and have gone straight to the mobile phone. In Sub-Saharan Africa, most people surf the web using a WAP-enabled mobile. WAP stands for “Wireless Application Protocol” and is a technical standard for accessing internet information over a mobile wireless network. Nowadays, increasing numbers of phones in Sub-Saharan Africa can access the internet.

According to Africa’s leading web analysis service, *Memeburn*, mobile internet users in East Africa exceeded fixed internet users by around 215 million in 2011.⁸ During a speech in Cape Town, Joseph Jaffe made an interesting comparison: in the U.S., 25 per cent of people are mobile internet users, while in South Africa the figure is 57 per cent and in Egypt it is 70 per cent.⁹ A survey by Dan Zarrella showed that 33 per cent of all posts on Facebook, the network which has revolutionised the way we socialise, are made via mobile devices.¹⁰ Another indication of the increasing significance of the mobile network can be seen in the fact that South Africa and Kenya are among the world’s top five in the area of mobile ad banners, as clearly this is where the target customers can be found.¹¹

This rapid evolution has been spurred on still further by the proliferation of smartphones.¹² The popularity of this new generation of mobile phones in the Sub-Saharan region can be seen by the fact that in the last two years, 75 per

8 | Cf. Erik Hersman, “Mobile web content in East Africa”, *Memeburn*, May 23 2011, <http://memeburn.com/2011/05/mobile-web-content-in-east-africa-report> (accessed October 7, 2011).

9 | Cf. Nur Bremmen, “The power of mobile”, *Memeburn* June 3, 2011, <http://memeburn.com/2011/06/the-power-of-mobile> (accessed October 7, 2011).

10 | Cf. Dan Zarrella, “33% of Facebook posting is mobile”, *Memeburn*, May 10, 2011, <http://memeburn.com/2011/05/33-of-facebook-posting-is-mobile> (accessed October 7, 2011).

11 | Cf. K.F. Lai, “The next great mobile wave, Bric by Bric”, *Memeburn*, January 20, 2011, <http://memeburn.com/2011/01/brics-countries-lead-the-way-in-mobile-innovation> (accessed October 7, 2011).

12 | Cf. Uzair Parker, “Future of Smartphones: Motion control?”, *Memeburn*, February 18, 2011, <http://memeburn.com/2011/02/the-future-of-smartphones> (accessed October 7, 2011).

cent of managers in South Africa's largest companies have provided their staff with smartphones.¹³

The process of transformation which is being brought about by the new technology is having a major effect on society. The mobile phone – of whatever type – has taken political communication and the media in Sub-Saharan Africa by storm and has totally transformed them. “Yes, it is a revolution”, says Jake Obetsebi Lamptey, Chairman of the New Patriotic Party (NPP) in Ghana, and he talks of “an explosion in popularity which takes our breath away.” The consequences for the spread of democracy and democratic contests can be felt everywhere, from Accra to Johannesburg, from Nairobi to Maputo.

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Everyone involved in political communication in the region is now faced with new opportunities and challenges as a result of the changes taking place in technology and in the way we access information. All of a sudden it is possible for politicians to get their message out directly to the people without having to filter it through the media. The lack of roads and infrastructure is no longer a hindrance when it comes to contacting people who live in remote rural areas. Traditional top-down communication has now been complemented – perhaps even replaced – by interactive communication. Participation and mobilisation is now possible at a level which was previously unimaginable – everyone can listen and take part. Social media such as Facebook and YouTube can, at least to some extent, compensate for the lack of access to the rigidly controlled state mass media. A new kind of proximity and directness has become integrated into the everyday media landscape. Political and media representatives can now communicate without being bound to the customary extent to particular places and times. And the new methods of communication mean that young people – who have become perhaps the most important target group in the whole of Africa – can now be contacted in ways that are direct and up-to-the-minute. These innovations also throw an exciting new light

13 | Cf. “Smartphones the surprise newcomer in mobile race”, *Memeburn*, February 25, 2011, <http://memeburn.com/2010/02/smartphone-the-surprise-newcomer-in-mobile-race/print> (accessed October 7, 2011).

on everything concerning elections and election coverage. Are we on the brink of a brave new mobile world?

360-DEGREE OPINION-MAKING

"Sometimes the more recent enthusiasm for mobile phones in Africa bears resonances of the early evangelism around the use of the internet for democracy in Africa", says Professor Herman Wasserman of South Africa's Rhodes University. "The excitement generated by mobile phones seems however more justified because it has already been proven that mobiles are much more accessible than other ICT platforms such as personal computers and fixed-line telephones."¹⁴ In a regional report, Verashni Pillay, deputy editor of the respected *Mail & Guardian* in Johannesburg writes: "The dependence on mobile in Africa means that politicians will have to meet their voters where they are—and that will be more often than not be on their cellphone, or in time, their tablets and eReaders."¹⁵

So the mobile phone's contribution to developments in democratisation could be described as "360-degree opinion-making", i.e. allowing a whole new spectrum and range of voices to be heard. Staying with the metaphor, Pillay talks of "technology that multiplied a voice to a shout" when referring to the events which took place in North Africa in 2011. The South African journalist refers to four pillars of the mobile transformation: unfiltered communication, access to media, participation and mobilisation.

POLITICAL MESSAGES AND CITIZEN FEEDBACK

Mozambique's democratic opposition party Movimento Democrático de Moçambique currently sends text messages directly to the mobile phones of up to 10,000 citizens.

Right across Africa, political players are filling these technological vessels with information and busy experimenting. According to Daviz Simango, president of Mozambique's democratic opposition party Movimento Democrático de Moçambique (MDM), the party currently sends text messages directly to the mobile phones of up to 10,000 citizens. Because of local conditions, it keeps the messages

14 | Cf. Wasserman, n. 4.

15 | Cf. Verashni Pillay, "Befriending Voters, Arresting Activists", <http://kas.de/medien-afrika/en/publications/22564> (accessed April 5, 2011).

very short, with the texts generally consisting of just a few words, "sometimes just five or six". In this way the party can provide its supporters with basic information about hot topics such as the failure to pay teachers' salaries. At the end of the day people need to know what the political parties are working towards and what they stand for – something which is difficult to get across when they are denied access to government-controlled mass media channels such as state TV.¹⁶

People need to know what the political parties are working towards and what they stand for – something which is difficult to get across when they are denied access to mass media channels.

The difficulties experienced by Simango are shared by Luke Tamborinyoka, spokesman for Zimbabwe's Prime Minister Morgan Tsvangirai of the Movement for Democratic Change (MDC). He remembers how the MDC was denied any newspaper coverage during the 2008 elections in Zimbabwe and how they "didn't get a second on TV or radio". When you have no access to the traditional media you have to look for new ways of getting your message across. In view of the situation in Zimbabwe, he sees mobile phones, mobile internet and tools such as Facebook as "alternative media platforms" which have to be used in a pragmatic way to help shape opinions. As a result, the state will lose its media monopoly and some of the control that it is used to exercising.

In Namibia, the opposition party Rally for Democracy and Progress (RDP) sends out invitations for its meetings or party events almost exclusively by SMS. According to the RDP's Libolly Haufiku, the party has a database containing the mobile phone numbers of tens of thousands of its supporters.¹⁷ Even stronger messages are coming out of South Africa, such as the exhortation by the Congress of the People (COPE) to "forget branch meetings!"¹⁸ All that can now be managed and communicated via social networks. Other opposition parties in South Africa are privately discussing whether in future they should invite their supporters to vote by mobile phone on where the final

16 | Previously unpublished interview with Daviz Simango, August 2011, <http://kas.de/e-lectiobridge>.

17 | Cf. interview with Libolly L. Haufiku, "Personal Human Contact is Crucial", <http://kas.de/medien-afrika/en/pages/10090> (accessed October 7, 2011).

18 | Cf. Pillay, n. 15.

party rally before the elections should be held, as a sign of appreciation for their participation and support.

In an online interview, NPP Chairman Obetsebi Lamptey reveals that in Ghana, they are thinking about carrying out telephone campaigning for the national elections in 2012, as is common in the USA. The difference is that in America, volunteer helpers normally call voters on their landlines, whereas in Ghana they are thinking about contacting people on their mobiles. The election strategists hope this will result in a significant mobilisation of their supporters.¹⁹ At a regional electoral conference Professor Kalulu Taba reported that politicians in the Democratic Republic of the Congo were happy to have an opportunity to use new communication methods to get in touch with voters and circumvent the problems of the country's notoriously bad road network.²⁰

Kenyan presidential candidate Martha Karua writes her own Facebook and Twitter posts. For the first time, there is a degree of closeness between politicians and the people.

Michelle Fondo is a member of the communications staff working for Kenyan presidential candidate Martha Karua. In a recent interview, Fondo explains how she feels that Kenyan politics has always been characterised by exclusion. For example, no one has ever had the chance to personally pose a question to a presidential candidate. Martha Karua has changed all this, and—according to Ms Fondo—she writes her own Facebook and Twitter posts. It is absolutely essential to be authentic if you are serious about stimulating participation and interactivity. So for the first time, there is a degree of closeness between politicians and the people. Communication is no longer reserved for the elite, and more and more members of the public can “simply join in”.²¹

Twitter is particularly popular in the region and is usually used on mobile devices. South African President Jacob Zuma made use of it to gather suggestions for what topics he should cover in his “State of the Union” address, saying

19 | Cf. interview with Jake Obetsebi Lamptey, “Yes, it is a revolution!”, <http://kas.de/medien-afrika/en/pages/9975> (accessed October 7, 2011).

20 | Cf. speech by Kalulu Taba at the “KAS E-lection Bridge Africa” conference held in Accra/Ghana, May 1, 2011.

21 | Previously unpublished interview with Michelle Fondo, August 2011, <http://kas.de/e-lectiobridge>.

he would incorporate the most popular issues into his speech.²² There was a remarkable response – and Zuma kept his promise.

In Nigeria, current President Goodluck Jonathan enriched the country's political and media landscape by not only announcing his candidacy on Facebook, but also by using it to interact with the country's citizens. In a now famous post, he mentioned a Facebook user called Toyin Dawodu who had submitted an idea for an electricity generation project. Jonathan promised that a member of his staff would contact the young man. He says he can't respond to every single message, but he indeed reads them and "they influence [his] my actions".²³

This interactive exchange between Jonathan and the young man also throws into sharp relief the target group of young people which plays such an important role in Africa's society, politics and demographics. Daviz Simango from Mozambique gets straight to the point when he says "If you have the youth you have everything."²⁴ Mobile phones now offer the opportunity to begin a dialogue with this group and to get to know them better. As Michelle Fondo notes, no other group uses the new communications technologies more than young people.²⁵ Luke Tamborinyoka from Zimbabwe adds that this is why he also keeps an eye on online videos. In his experience, young people have now for some time been turning their backs on television and prefer to go to the internet for information and entertainment. You have to meet the voters where they are.²⁶

No other group uses the new communications technologies more than young people. They have been turning their backs on television and prefer to go to the internet for their information and entertainment.

22 | Cf. Michelle Atagana, "President Zuma gathers Twitter ideas for State of Nation address", *Memeburn*, April 4, 2011, <http://memeburn.com/2011/02/president-zuma-gathers-twitter-suggestions-for-state-of-the-nation-address> (accessed October 7, 2011).

23 | Cf. Michelle Atagana, "Social media governments: Iceland, Nigeria, Rwanda & South Africa", *Memeburn*, June 15, 2011, <http://memeburn.com/2011/06/social-media-govt-iceland-nigeria-rwanda-south-africa> (accessed October 7, 2011).

24 | Cf. n. 16.

25 | Cf. n. 21.

26 | Previously unpublished interview with Luke Tamborinyoka, June 2011, <http://kas.de/e-lectionbridge>.

The American idea of the “tele-town hall” also fits in well here. This is a mixture of a decentralised but still interactive town hall meeting and teleconferencing, where front-runners can answer voters’ questions. Anyone wishing to ask a question needs to have a telephone or mobile phone, and the politicians just need internet access. Ten years ago, it would have seemed like science fiction to even imagine carrying out such a thing in Sub-Saharan Africa, but now politicians are starting to seriously consider the idea.

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Fundraising has also been put on the region’s new agenda of modern political communication. Africa is the world leader in the area of mobile money transfers. The world’s top manufacturers are already working on the production of mobile phones which will replace credit cards.²⁷ All of this presents totally new opportunities for political players in Sub-Saharan Africa.

South African Gustav Praekelt and his team at the Praekelt Foundation are working to bring together all these elements of political communication to form a kind of mobile phone toolkit. He calls the project “m-Dem” (short for mobile democracy) and its aim is to help democratic parties and organisations in Sub-Saharan Africa. The idea is that membership applications and registrations, databases, targeted text messages, event announcements, surveys, news, discussions and much more should all be done via mobile phone. “m-Dem” is provided free-of-charge and ready-to-use for democratic protagonists in the region. Praekelt gives the following example of his vision: Six weeks before election day, supporters could text the party leadership to let them know which two issues they think are most important in the final campaign stages. In this way, the party leadership would be better informed, and the grass-roots supporters would have a say in the decision-making process.²⁸

27 | Cf. Mvelase Peppetta, “Reports: Google to announce smart-phones will replace credit cards”, *Memeburn*, May 25, 2011, <http://memeburn.com/2011/05/reports-google-to-announce-smartphones-will-replace-credit-cards> (accessed October 7, 2011).

28 | Cf. Praekelt, n. 2.

MOBILE PHONES AND ELECTIONS

Within the framework of democratisation, the mobile phone now has a new and powerful role to play in the electoral processes of Sub-Saharan Africa. This may involve innovative forms of electoral registration, using mobile phones to encourage people to vote, or using them to keep track of voting and vote counting. During South Africa's municipal elections in May 2011, voters were able to check their personal registration data by sending an SMS to a central office number.²⁹ The mobile instant messaging service MXit, which originated in Stellenbosch, South Africa, has contributed to democratisation by encouraging people to vote. MXit is compatible with around 3,000 different mobile devices. The company is one of the region's giants, with up to 350 million messages being sent via their service every day. Around 75 per cent of their 22 million users are aged between 19 and 26, so it was significant that MXit worked together with non-governmental organisations to encourage its users to use their democratic right to vote in South Africa's 2011 municipal elections.³⁰

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Along with voter registration and mobilisation, new forms of election monitoring have also emerged. Two projects in Sub-Saharan Africa are of particular interest. In Kenya, the *Uchaguzi* platform developed by *Ushahidi* first drew attention during the unrest following the 2007 presidential elections. Originally its intention was to allow people to report on those turbulent days. Three years later, during the Kenyan referendum in 2010, more than 1,230 text messages were sent via Uchaguzi which helped to gain a comprehensive picture of the country's democratic process. These included messages such as "voting going smoothly – no problems" in Gachoka, "long queues of voters waiting patiently" in Nairobi, "good turnout" in Timbila and "disabled voters given assistance" in Muranga.³¹

29 | Cf. Electoral Commission South Africa, <http://www.elections.org.za/content/VoterReg.aspx?id=569> (accessed October 7, 2011).

30 | Cf. MXit press release, "MXit encourages young South Africans to vote", February 14, 2011.

31 | Cf. website of *Ushahidi*: <http://blog.ushahidi.com/index.php/category/elections> (accessed October 21, 2011).

On the other side of the continent, in West Africa, the USA's National Democratic Institute (NDI) implemented "Operation Swift Count" for the Nigerian elections in early 2011. According to project leader Richard L. Klein, the organisation used over 7,000 stationary and 1,000 mobile observers, who sent encrypted text messages to a specially set-up National Information Center. The aim was to get a comprehensive real-time overview of the elections, identify any manipulation of the vote and thus increase confidence in the democratic electoral process. The main focus of attention was on how and whether the results from local polling stations were passed on to the electoral authorities. In Nigeria there is a saying that "elections are carried out on Saturday but won on Sunday". The Swift Count method has already been successfully used several times in Sub-Saharan Africa.³²

INTERACTIVITY INSTEAD OF INFORMATION MONOPOLY

Nowadays, the battle for democracy is fought less with bayonets and weapons, but instead with mobile phones.

Using mobile phones for reporting is a way of strengthening and encouraging the process of democratisation. Nowadays, the battle for democracy is fought less with bayonets and weapons, but instead with mobile phones. Photos and videos filmed by phone, text messages with "breaking news" and the direct exchange of this information is changing and expanding society's opinions. "It's hard to be a totalitarian regime when people suddenly know so much", says Bono Vox, who is involved with several human rights NGOs in Africa.³³ Salil Shetty, General Secretary of Amnesty International, explains: "These new technologies enable those in power to be confronted with the truth."³⁴

In this respect, the most prominent examples from 2011 came out of Tunisia and Egypt, Libya, Syria and Yemen. Specific examples in Sub-Saharan Africa are less well

32 | Cf. press release from Project 2011 Swift Count, "Pre-Election Statement for 2011, General Elections, Thursday March 31, 2011", <http://ndi.org/files/PSC-Press-Statement-033111.pdf> (accessed October 7, 2011).

33 | Cf. Jeska, n. 1.

34 | Johannes Korge, "Twittern gegen die Staatsgewalt", *Spiegel Online*, May 13, 2011, <http://spiegel.de/politik/ausland/0,1518,761945,00.html> (accessed October 7, 2011).

known. John Mrema of Tanzania's democratic opposition party Chadema tells of an authorised demonstration organised by his party against the manipulation of the mayoral elections held in the city of Arusha in January 2011. Thousands of protesters had gathered when the demonstration was suddenly declared to be unlawful. The security forces moved in and several demonstrators were hurt in the clashes, as was documented by amateur videos. In the past, the country's rulers would have controlled all information and media outlets and would have been able to make sure their version of the events was the only one that was heard. This has now become much more difficult. Many Tanzanians have seen these videos and have experienced their power.³⁵ Every individual citizen now has the previously undreamt-of power of being able to provide information to the masses.³⁶

Television and radio stations, newspapers and online publications are of course also experimenting with mobile technology. The buzzword is participation, tied in with the idea of "360-degree opinion-making".³⁷ British expert Mary Myers has been running successful projects in Africa for many years and acknowledges the role the mobile phone can play on the continent when it comes to forming independent opinion. She says that people who live in rural areas now have a voice, adding that interactivity is not just a catchphrase anymore, but has become a reality, as is shown by making a foray into Sub-Saharan Africa. She describes how people all over West Africa take part in radio shows via their mobile phones. Media boss Terry Volkwyn, whose station *Talk Radio 702* is one of the most popular in South Africa, reports that the station receives up to 6,000 text messages an hour, which "helps us to get a picture of public opinion among the population".³⁸

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35 | Cf. videos on YouTube, incl. "Chadema Arusha" and "Machafuka ya Arusha part I", <http://youtube.com/watch?v=4XPWb7HFo9s> and <http://youtube.com/watch?v=BFoTXb7Kiwc&feature=related> (accessed October 7, 2011).

36 | Cf. Beauregard Tromp, "Democracy redefined by 'internet revolution'", *The Star*, February 2, 2011.

37 | Cf. "King Radio and the Future", <http://kas.de/medien-afrika/en/publications/23561> (accessed August 5, 2011).

38 | Cf. statement by Terry Volkwyn at the "Joburg Radio Days 2011" conference held in Johannesburg/South Africa, July 27, 2011.

Katie Katopodis of the cross-border radio news service *Eye Witness News* sends her reporters into the field equipped with smartphones. The journalists can then use them to record and file their reports. For East Africa, American Melissa Ulbricht provides information about the use of the Mobile Phone Toolkit from her organisation, Mobileactive. This web-based tool helps reporters to transmit interviews or reports via mobile phone to their respective radio stations, to share them with others or enter into a dialogue with listeners. This speeds up action and response times in opinion-making and creates a new kind of interactivity.³⁹

CITIZEN JOURNALISM IN THE "WILD, WILD WEB"

Journalists are building close ties with the population of the small town of Grahamstown in order to collect stories and opinions and to get photos and information relating to ongoing stories.

Nowadays, people are not only listening, they are also participating. The phenomenon of citizen journalism is growing. In Grahamstown, home of South Africa's oldest independent daily newspaper *Grocott's Mail*, its creators are combining traditional ways of doing things with modern media methods. As part of the citizen journalism project "Indaba Ziyafika", journalists are building close ties with the population of the small town of Grahamstown in order to collect stories and opinions and to get photos and information relating to ongoing stories. This is only possible thanks to the mobile phone.⁴⁰

Nevertheless, the challenges and risks cannot be ignored. Mobile phone networks and the allied "wild, wild web" (the title of a debate on this theme) are manifestations of a new public space which, in many parts of Sub-Saharan Africa, is either insufficiently regulated or mainly regulated by the ruling powers. In reality, this means that governments can still silence those voices that they don't want to hear. In 2010, Cameroon blocked Twitter when President Paul Biya found himself facing online resistance.⁴¹ And during the food riots in Mozambique in September 2010, the government was accused of blocking text messages.⁴² Zimbabwe's

39 | Cf. statements made by the two experts Katie Katopodis and Melissa Ulbricht at the "Joburg Radio Days 2011" conference held in Johannesburg/South Africa, July 28, 2011.

40 | Cf. n. 37.

41 | Cf. Pillay, n. 15.

42 | *BBC*, "Mozambique blocked texts' during food riots", September 14, 2010, <http://bbc.co.uk/news/world-africa-11300211> (accessed October 20, 2010).

leading mobile phone company, Econet Wireless, was threatened with closure because it allegedly allowed the democratic MDC to use SMS services free of charge.⁴³ And in February 2011 the news came through – again from Zimbabwe – that 46 Facebook users had been arrested, accused of plotting to remove the government “the Egyptian way”.⁴⁴ These regulative issues are joined by technological concerns. Specialist firms are now able to fish for private information buried deep in data networks and, if required, make this information available to non-democratic regimes with devastating consequences for the proponents and processes of democracy.⁴⁵

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On the other hand, some politicians have chosen another way of getting to grips with the new world of communication and the opportunities presented by mobile technology – they use it themselves. One of the front-runners in this is Rwandan President Paul Kagame, who has helped his country take a remarkable technological leap forward. He is extremely active on Facebook and Twitter, and sometimes he even turns up unexpectedly at events which have been organised online. But some observers criticise Kagame for restricting freedom of speech and making press freedom largely a pipedream. Ambrose Pierre of Reporters Without Borders has some harsh words to say on this apparent contradiction: “Kagame’s policy is similar to that of China’s – embracing technology while controlling and censoring it.”⁴⁶

RUMOURS, SPECULATION AND “ANALOGUE PEOPLE”

A certain amount of risk is incurred by the fact that so many people can now be involved in spreading opinions and information so much faster than ever before. This was illustrated when South Africa’s former President Nelson

43 | John Mokwetsi, “Social Media: New political weapon in Africa”, *Newsday*, February 14, 2011, <http://www.newsday.co.zw/article/2011-02-14-social-media-new-political-weapon-in-africa> (accessed October 20, 2011).

44 | Cf. Pillay, n. 15.

45 | Cf. Tom Foremski, “Did US companies help Egyptian government to crack down on internet?”, *Memeburn*, January 31, 2011, <http://memeburn.com/2011/01/did-us-companies-help-egyptian-govt-to-crack-down-on-internet> (accessed October 20, 2011).

46 | Cf. Pillay, n. 15.

Mandela became seriously ill in January 2011. Rumours of his death raced around the world thanks to mobile communications and the new social networks. Even though these rumours turned out to be false, they left a lasting shock wave in their wake.⁴⁷

The present lack of adequate control over the mobile digital sphere and its potential for anonymity may form the perfect toxic breeding ground for hate speech. Professor Guy Berger gives an example of this mixture of rumour, speculation, historic half-truths and insults when he points to the xenophobic attacks which took place in South Africa in 2008. At that time the new methods of communication were certainly not used to promote democracy; they rather highlighted significant problems which have still not been resolved. Some experts believe that strict regulatory intervention is the solution, while others, like Professor Berger, think the best remedy is debate.⁴⁸

Experts feel that the main challenge is the central issue of how to involve people in rural areas who don't know anything about the use of modern technology in the communications processes of the 21st century.

But in different ways, all the experts feel that perhaps the main challenge is the central issue of how to combine traditional and digital methods of communication. In other words, how can we best involve people in rural areas

who don't know anything (or don't *want* to know anything) about the use of modern technology in the communications processes of the 21st century? Jake Obetsebi Lamptey from Ghana calls them "analogue people" and says this group must not be ignored: "Out there, it is still the good old word of mouth."⁴⁹ Libolly Haufiku from Namibia says: "Personal human contact is crucial."⁵⁰ And Daviz Simango, the mayor of Beira in Mozambique, expands the issue by focusing on the poorer people in society and on their participation in the democratic process of opinion-making. He believes the question of how to involve the lower levels of society in modern communications is critical for the future.⁵¹

47 | "Don't keep us all in the dark", *The Star*, January 29, 2011.

48 | Cf. "Media Freedom in the Digital Age", speech by Guy Berger given at the conference "African Constitutionalism and the Media", Pretoria/South Africa, August 4, 2011.

49 | Cf. n. 19.

50 | Cf. interview mit Libolly Haufiku, "Personal human contact is crucial", <http://kas.de/medien-afrika/en/pages/10090> (accessed August 19, 2011).

51 | Cf. n. 16.

CONCLUSION: IT ALL COMES DOWN TO CONTENT

If we are to believe the experts, the future role of the mobile phone in the democratisation of Sub-Saharan Africa will not be determined by technology alone.

According to the digital prophets, we will be using our little devices as an easy way to pay for things and to create and consume media and information, and the Sub-Saharan

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region will increasingly have fast internet connections at its fingertips. But this is not the most important thing; it rather comes down to the content and approach of this message. In Sub-Saharan Africa many people cannot ignore the region's long history of suppressing dissident opinion, and they are simply afraid.

"If we are to move towards democracy it is critical for people to feel that they can say what they think", writes journalist Chief K. Masimba from Harare.⁵² Of course, mobile phones mean that information can be transmitted very quickly across large distances, they help to fill the gaps for people who have little access to mass media and facilitate greater levels of participation in the democratic process. But at the end of the day, these opportunities have to be filled with content and activities. And of course also with trust – trust in oneself and in others. Jake Obetsebi Lamptey says: "Out there people have known us and our people for years. No computer can replace that kind of trust."⁵³ Not just computers but also mobile phones, no matter how advanced their technology. However, there is no doubt that the mobile phone can fill historical gaps and create new opportunities so that there is really a "good connection" when it comes to opinion-making in Sub-Saharan Africa and its progress towards democracy.

52 | Chief K. Masimba, "Technologie ist nicht die Lösung", *E+Z*, 6/2011, 254-255.

53 | Cf. Pillay, n. 15.