

Befriending Voters And Arresting Activists

A CLOSE LOOK AT THE DIGITAL MEDIA REVOLUTION IN SUB-SAHARAN AFRICA

Facebook, Twitter, YouTube & Co.: For trailing the path in modern political communication, Africa has been the place and 2011 the time. With the northern rim of the continent grabbing all the headlines so far, the time has come to cover digital developments in Sub-Saharan Africa. The Konrad Adenauer Stiftung Regional Media Programme (KAS Media Africa) has joined forces with Verashni Pillay, the deputy editor of the Mail & Guardian Online – one of Africa's leading news sites. Together, we take a closer look at some selected territories across the region and explores if and how the new communication tools promote, deepen, and advance democracy in Subsaharan-Africa. This report underlines KAS Media Africa's commitment to digital democratization – please also see our new web project "E-lection Bridge Africa" (www.kas.de/e-lectionbridge).

A man setting himself on fire is enough to turn anyone's stomach. The echo of that man doing it repeatedly on thousands of screens is enough to start a series of revolutions that could change a continent.

Tunisia's Mohamed Bouazizi wasn't the first person desperate enough to set himself on fire thanks to an uncaring and unjust system. But that single act of protest happened to coincide neatly with two other factors, which turned his self-immolation into the potent catalyst it would become.

The first was decades-long discontent in Tunisia, and other parts of North Africa, that had simmered for too long. Bouazizi's act

served as a powerful symbol of the frustrations of millions.

The second was the technology available to those sympathetic to Bouazizi's course. Technology that multiplied a voice to a shout, that bypassed news gatekeepers to reach its audience instantly, and was cheap and freely available.

What traditional media could not do over decades, social media did in a matter of weeks.

There is of course much debate over how much of a role social networks have played in the popular uprisings in the Arab world since December. But few would disagree with the fact that it was a major factor, particularly in Egypt where the famous January 25th uprising was organised -- and popularised -- via social networks like Twitter and Facebook, with Egyptian Google executive Wael Ghonim instrumental in providing the necessary IT skills to help the movement gain the momentum it did.

The technology affected the language – and humour – around the uprisings. People are more likely to remember it as the #Jan25 revolution, after its Twitter hashtag, and a joke doing the internet rounds played on technical internet terminology back then:

"DEMOCRACY IN AFRICA" Program installation:

GUINEA: 100% Complete...

TUNISIA: 100% Complete...

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EGYPT: 100% Complete...

LYBYA: Downloading...

ALGERIA: Downloading...

IVORY COAST: 60% [Alert: Virus-Gbagbo detected_Trojan Horse-Ouattarra in Quarantine]

CONGO: Connection lost since 1997

ZIMBABWE: 404 Error - Server not found

The joke reflected a real concern: what did the uprisings mean for the rest of the continent?

The Region: "The Egyptian Way"?

In Zimbabwe a gathering of 46 activists, students and trade unionists tasted the paranoia around the subject when they were arrested in February 2011 and charged with treason after watching videos of the uprisings in Egypt and Tunisia. Prosecutors accused the organisers of trying to "organise, strategise and implement the removal of the constitutional government of Zimbabwe ... the Egyptian way".

Zimbabwean President Robert Mugabe, who has been in power for more than 23 years and has yet to hold an intimidation-free election, may be getting worried as dictatorships continue to topple, or at least sway, in the north of Africa.

Will Sub-Saharan Africa see similar revolutions? It's a complex question, as internet penetration in the region is considered dire, especially when compared to the North African countries that saw successful social media-aided uprisings.

Tunisia has one of the highest internet penetrations in the continent, with about 35% of the population with access to the web. Most countries in Sub-Saharan Africa fall far below 10%.

But on the flipside Sub-Saharan Africa has seen immense growth in internet use as mobile phones have fast taken over from

expensive bandwidth and desktop computers. And hand-in-hand with that growth is a dramatic increase in social networking activity on the continent, becoming the number one web activity according to some estimates.

In recent months Facebook – currently the most visited website in most of Africa – has seen massive growth on the continent. According to the UN's Africa Renewal magazine, the number of African Facebook users in early 2011 stands at over 17 million, up from 10 million in 2009. More than 15% of people online in Africa are currently using the platform, compared to 11% in Asia. Two other social networking websites, Twitter and YouTube, rank among the most visited websites in most African countries.

The numbers would have been unthinkable two years ago. In August 2008 Twitter stopped offering mobile text services in Africa, which allowed users to receive tweets for free on their phone and send out tweets at standard SMS rates. The news caused hardly a ripple at the time beyond a few blog posts pondering the lost potential. Sixteen months later Twitter was being used to help topple governments on the continent.

The SMS service has been reinstated for some countries, including Cameroon in November 2010. However the Cameroonian government suspended the mobile service this year as President Paul Biya, in power since 1982, battled calls for an uprising against him circulated on the internet and via text messages.

It is one of many ways that dictators are trying to control – or co-opt social media, to their benefit. Witnesses in Libya's violent uprisings claimed in early March that the country's public telecoms company sent SMS messages calling on subscribers to attack foreigners and accusing them of wanting to "sow trouble" and "destroy" the country.

But on the other hand there a number of "techno savvy" politicians in the region, who have taken quickly to the medium.

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Ruanda: A President Showing Up Unexpectedly

Rwandan President Paul Kagame is a flawed hero. He ended the Rwandan genocide but has since been accused of intimidating opposition parties and allowing human rights abuses by his forces in neighbouring Congo. But he has been the driver behind the East African country's so-called ICT revolution, and is incredibly active on social media sites. His Twitter page consists almost solely of replies to his 7000+ followers. Rwandan blogs are rife with anecdotes of the president's personal Twitter responses and even his acceptance of invitations on Twitter and showing up at events unexpectedly. There are two Facebook pages under his name, one with 15 362 fans and the other with 13 565. Both have regular status updates, video clips of interviews and photographs of the president's activities.

But there's a catch. Kagame may seem on the opposite pole of his paranoid peers in the continent, in his support for freedom of speech. But the leader has been accused of harshly, and often violently, curtailing the freedom of journalists and traditional media. Independent and critical media coverage has been all but squeezed out in the country. In this, as with other criticisms, Kagame seems to fall back on the spectre of a repeat of the genocide, should he not be guiding the country's development. It's one of many contradictions that have led Ambrose Pierre, Africa head of Reporters Without Borders, to note that: "Kagame's policy is similar to that of China's – embracing technology but controlling and censoring it."

South Africa: A Tremendous Growth

With about 10,8 percent of its population online, South Africa has the highest number of internet users in Sub-Saharan Africa and has seen a tremendous growth in social media. Over 70% of online users (3 761 160 people in March 2011) are on Facebook, ranking the country number 31 in worldwide users, while about one million South Africans have Twitter accounts.

In keeping with the national leaning towards Facebook, the more established social networking platform, South African politicians have largely been wary of Twitter, or slow on the uptake. Many, like the ruling African National Congress's notorious Youth League, held it in suspicion after parody accounts were created after its leader. But from 2011 the league along with a handful of other politicians, have tentatively taken to Twitter. The majority of social networking by South African politicians however takes place on Facebook, where politics and debate often mixes with personal asides and more social content.

Opposition parties, particularly, have effectively used social networking in their campaigning. Much of this is borne out of necessity: the monolith ANC, with two-thirds of the vote and many donors, has a massive marketing budget when it comes to advertising the party ahead of elections. Opposition parties must find other ways to get their message across. The official opposition, the Democratic Alliance (DA), launched a comprehensive and well-researched social networking campaign ahead of the April 2009 elections, inspired in no small part by the success of US President Barack Obama's election campaign in the same year.

In the same elections, a small break-away party called Congress of the People (Cope) split from the ANC. In the hype that followed, the nascent party – with little structure or organisation – relied heavily on social media to get its message across. The party would later be torn apart by internal disputes but the campaigning on Facebook in particular attracted much attention at the time. The party's Facebook group quickly gathered 20 333 members in the excitement that the political landscape may be changing. "FORGET branch meetings! Robust debates now take place on political parties' group pages on social networking websites like Facebook," announced one blog at the time.

The opposition's engagement with social media stands in contrast to the ANC, who have relied on more traditional campaigning methods, not properly developing the token

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social media presence they established as part of their campaign. However, they still saw their customary massive win, proving perhaps that even in South Africa, low internet penetration means that social media is not yet the best way to reach the majority of voters.

Zimbabwe: Facebook-User Arrested

Despite a failing economy, over the past decade Zimbabwe has seen a dramatic increase in internet access, with about 12% of the population now online. The ruling party, Robert Mugabe's Zanu-PF, are more likely to be suspicious of the medium, with barely any presence on major social networks.

Besides the arrest of the group of 46, a Bulawayo-based Facebook user was arrested in February after posting a message on a Facebook page dedicated to Prime Minister Morgan Tsvangirai referencing to the Egypt uprisings, again on the charge of "subverting a constitutional government".

Opposition figures, however, are sprawled across different networks in different forms (On Facebook for examples they have a combination of pages, groups, and personal profiles). There is little coherency to their strategy. There are several groups and pages on Facebook dedicated to one individual, while tweeting is often haphazardly done.

MDC politicians like David Coltart, Nelson Chamisa, Obert Gutu, Gordon Moyo, Welshman Ncube, Tendai Biti and Jameson Timba are among politicians with Facebook pages, while Prime Minister Morgan Tsvangirai has a fan page with over 60 000 fans, Zimbabwean newspaper The Standard reported in January.

Only two Zanu PF ministers maintain a presence on Twitter while Ncube and Coltart update their Twitter accounts most regularly of the lot.

Indeed Ncube has the most comprehensive social media strategy of any Zimbabwean politician. He has released entire state-

ments, regarding his split with the main MDC, in a series of two dozen tweets. In addition he has consolidated his Facebook presence into one official Facebook page, where he regularly engages with his some 900 fans and responds to their criticism. There is also talk of a new website in the pipeline. Considering Ncube's tentative position in Zimbabwe's political landscape -- fighting against both Zanu-PF and Tsvangirai's MDC -- this is clearly part of a strategy to win him more support and clean up his image as a divisive figure.

Tanzania: Facebook-Users Befriended

Tanzanian voters were surprised to find that their president, Jakaya Kikwete, was following them on Twitter ahead of Kenya's October 2010 general elections. He was joined by other big names in Tanzanian politics: political party Chadema Tanzania, Kikwete's wife Salma and Vice-president Mohamed Bilal did the same. Kikwete and Chadema presidential candidate Willibrod Slaa were also eager to befriend voters on Facebook.

It soon became clear, despite the stream of campaign updates via these accounts, that they were set up by supporters and not necessarily sanctioned by the politicians themselves. Jiang Alipo, a columnist in the country's Daily News paper noted at the time of the elections that Kikwete had 369 followers on Twitter, and followed 374, while Slaa had only 34 followers and was following 26 people: unlikely numbers for the real deal.

Parliamentary candidates however seemed to genuinely be on the platforms themselves like Zitto Kabwe on Twitter and January Makamba on Facebook.

The Outlook

The future for broadband access in Africa is increasingly bright. The Seacom cable, which snakes along the East African coast, providing international fibre optic bandwidth that connects southern Africa to the rest of the world for the first time, heralded that change. More cables are scheduled to go live and Africa's telecoms landscape is set to change dramatically.

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It will lead to an explosion in growth of broadband internet access. In addition decreasing costs, better competition and increasing availability of cheap smart phones and tablet PCs will further drive the broadband revolution. 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.

The trend thus far has been for politicians who most need to be heard -- generally those in opposition -- to use social media most effectively. While they have been on the vanguard of using social media, they will need to move to mobile and other platforms quickly to position themselves for the internet explosion that will be hitting Sub-Saharan Africa in the next five years.

Social media is also likely to remain one of the top web activities, as new social networking sites pop up all the time and existing ones continue to gain traction.

It's granted that much of this frantic exchange of information will be focused on entertainment, personal relationships and lifestyle content. But a significant amount of users will focus on social and political issues -- particularly in countries where those issues are of pressing concern.

Ultimately, social media is like a mirror; it can only reflect what is happening among its users. The difference is this mirror faces another so that it repeats things into infinity. The viral potential of social media is what makes it so powerful. The content is largely the same as we would see on any other platform where people are allowed to make themselves heard. But here the protestor's placard is given the distribution that a news broadcast would normally enjoy, allowing grassroots change to become a reality.