Africa goes digital: where and how?

by Aleksandra Tor

The impact of Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) on Africa's political culture and civil society development in the recent decade has been profound. The number of people having Internet access has grown tenfold since 2005. Over 63% of Africans have mobile phones and, over the last five years, sub-Saharan Africa has been the world's fastest growing mobile access region. In the last decade the increase in mobile phone usage has been around 350%, and it is estimated that mobile services will reach 725 million unique subscribers by 2020. Moreover, the number of technology hubs across the continent has reached 300+ and doubled in less than a year.

With such vibrant development in the digital domain, ICT solutions have the potential to generate change in Africa's public sphere.

Informing

One of the main challenges for Africa's political systems is the low level of media freedom, with most of the countries ranked by the 2017 World Press Freedom Index as in a 'difficult' or 'very serious' situation. This is due to the fact that the vast majority of traditional media are controlled by the governments. In this context, online news platforms can offer independent sources of information to wired citizens.

African countries have struggled with a lack of media pluralism since the end of colonialism. In numerous countries newspapers played an important role in mobilising people around the cause of independence: the editors of newspapers like Kwame Nkrumah in Ghana, Jomo Kenyatta in Kenya or Nnamdi Azikiwe in Nigeria, later became presidents of sovereign African states. The same leaders then kept control over the same media, seeing them as instruments of state authority and vehicles of official propaganda. Today, two-thirds of African countries still have state monopoly in television broadcasting, and national governments remain the largest source of revenue for news organisations (in Rwanda, for instance, with the 90% of total advertising revenue). Moreover, governments still control (and often censor) newspapers using threats that range from military seizure of newsrooms, to blocking printing or harassing journalists.

Cyberspace, however, is less easy to control, and a number of already existing projects are addressing the issue of guaranteeing access to reliable sources of information. The Code4Kenya initiative by the World Bank's Innovation Fund and Governance Partnership Facility, in partnership with the Africa Media Initiative's Digital Projects Division, provides access to a fact-checking website and non-government independent data sources. In Tanzania, WhatsApp it is becoming a significant first source of information with people subscribing to group chats where users read the news before the traditional media. Radio still remains the most common source of information for Africans and Internet radios, like News24 in Zimbabwe, can serve as a source of independent news.

Monitoring

ICT platforms also provide tools for fast reporting of government or security forces misconduct. Social media often played the role of watchdogs during elections in Ghana and Nigeria. The Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) in Nigeria was encouraging citizens to use hashtags for reporting voting frauds across the country; thanks to that the election observers, along with their traditional monitoring methods, were following social media posts to identify problems (over 12 million tweets were posted). The Kenyan platform Ushahidi (evidence) is an open source software that allows users to add information – through SMS, Facebook, Twitter or E-mail – about political violence or election fraud occurring in real-time.

Another quite distinctive example is African 'hacktivism'. African hackers claim, at least officially, to be fighting corrupted governments and exposing frauds. An anonymous group operating under the #OpAfrica hashtag claims to target those responsible for corruption and child labour in Africa. In 2016 the group attacked 20 government sites in Angola and hacked into the Kenyan government website exposing security arrangements, armaments deals with Namibia and other international trade arrangements. In January 2016 some Senegalese hackers penetrated a money transfer website: they did not steal any data but just left the message that they wanted to raise awareness regarding cybersecurity which, according to them, is largely neglected in Senegal.

Participating

Digital solutions can also solve the problems of citizens who cannot actively participate in the public sphere due to lack of a platform for debates, infrastructural and economic challenges or social and cultural disadvantages.

Online platforms like JamiiForums from Tanzania enable people to discuss and debate important social and political issues in local languages. Mobile services like Kenyan Bunge SMS allow people to send messages anonymously to their local MPs, reporting problems but also influencing decisions on community projects.

Blogging and citizen journalism enable people to generate information themselves and be actively involved in the public discourse, which is especially important for people living in remote areas and for women, who are often excluded from other opportunities for knowledge and empowerment.

Social media is also one of the most important tools for shaping African civil society. Not only do social media channels make it possible for people to organise themselves against human and civil rights abuses, but they also make those visible globally, often through proper 'hashtag' campaigns that have real impact and alert the international community. Some campaigns worth mentioning are #MyDressMyChoice in Nairobi, which resulted in a march with hundreds of people protesting against sexual assaults; #PayBackTheMoney, which exposed the fraudulent behaviour of South Africa's president Jacob Zuma in 2014; and #JusticeforHanna, which demanded an open dialogue on gender-based violence after the rape of a young Ethiopian girl.

Thinking ahead

There are, however, structural limitations to using and spreading ICT tools. The most basic one is lack of infrastructure. To start with, only around 40% of Africans have reliable energy supply: there are still frequent electricity blackouts with more than 30 countries facing regular power outages and still a relatively small Internet penetration rate of 25 % for the whole continent. The inequalities in Internet access are also substantial, with South Africa and Seychelles having over 50% of Internet users and Eritrea, Somalia and Chad not even reaching 2%.

The digital divide can also be observed in the affordability of ICT services. Only six countries (Seychelles, South Africa, Mauritius, Gabon, Cape Verde and Botswana) offer basic mobile broadband plans at prices corresponding to 5% or less of average per capita income. The least affordable services are offered in the landlocked parts of the continent, notably Rwanda, Chad, Burundi and Burkina Faso.

The social constraints include an average literacy rate of 63%, very low media literacy (i.e. the ability to analyse, evaluate and understand media content) and a lack of awareness among the population of available alternative sources of information. There are also political issues, with some governments trying to extend their censorship from the sphere of traditional media to the Internet by restricting access to certain content or by banning Internet access altogether, as can be observed mainly during elections or on polling days.

Nevertheless, the African continent – with the fastest growing and youngest population worldwide (200 million people aged between 15 and 24, projected to double up by 2050), which will inevitably come of age in a more digitalised environment – has a huge untapped potential to use ICT tools to (re)shape the social and political landscapes of numerous countries.

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