Blogs in the Kenyan elections 2007: a case study of the democratic role of social networks in developing countries

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ABSTRACT

The Kenyan general elections of 2007 were followed by an outburst of violence which only ended two months later after the two main candidates signed a power-sharing agreement. The ban on live broadcast that followed the elections left most of the population in the dark about what was going on in the country. However, a noteworthy community of internet activists and amateur reporters set up online networks that were particularly active in providing news, comments, campaigns, appeals and a platform for discussions. The emergence of social media, with particular reference to bloggers, provides an almost instantaneous global flow of information, lifting barriers and allowing for the democratic participation of citizens in a shared knowledge that can affect decision-making processes. This research suggests that online networks of blogs and other websites form a new interconnected space, which has the potential to increase democratic participation in developing countries and to bring problematic areas of crisis to the attention of the word.

The horizontal, transnational, flexible and open structure of the networks, as theorized in particular by Manuel Castells, has been particularly useful for new social movements. Such networks allow for the sharing of information, the coordination and organisation of locally situated groupings around issues of global concern. Alternative media has become the preferential tool of counter-power movements and has often supplemented the information provided by mainstream media. With the use of IssueCrawler, this research analyse the network of blogs and other websites that, during the elections in Kenya, provided a space for "citizen journalists" to report events and perspectives from a local point of view. The research argues that blogs watched over the electoral process, encouraged forums of discussions, challenged the government's version of the events and critically discussed the stereotypical framing often provided by foreign media and the pro-government coverage of national media. Despite the fact that global divide represents the main hindrance for online social networks to become new public spheres, the exponential growth of the Internet in Africa raises hopes for the development of new forms of democratic participation.

INTRODUCTION

On the 30th of December 2007, three days after the vote, Kibaki was announced winner of the Kenyan presidential race. That same day, the government issued a five-day ban on live broadcast. The following 59 days of violence, which ended with a power-sharing agreement between Kibaki and the opposition leader Odinga on February 28, 2008, left over 1000 people dead and more than 300,000 displaced.

After the ban people turned to other means to share and get information, such as SMS and social media.

Despite the fact that only 10 percent of the population has Internet access, amateur reporters and activists quickly built a wide online social network in order to report information on the violence, promote appeals for peace and fund-raising campaigns.

When formulating the subject of the thesis, I was motivated to write something about new media in developing countries. Social networked media has been welcomed by scholars as a new sphere of public discussion and has been used in the last decade by global social movements to share information and campaign for their causes[1]. Nowadays mainstream media is only one of the possible options for readers, while social media such as Facebook, Flickr, YouTube, Twitter, Wikipedia and blogs, among

1 A recent example is the release of the Malawian gay couple, Steven Monjeza and Tiwonge Chimbalanga, who were sentenced to 14 years' hard labour for daring to get married. They were subsequently given a pardon by the Malawian Prime Minister, following an international campaign for their release spread also in social networks, blogs, NGOs' and other activists' websites (see for example http://www.amnesty.org/en/news-and-updates/malawian-couple-sentenced-14-years-hard-labour-gross-indecency-2010-05-20 and http://www.facebook.com/photos.php?id=600799644#!/group.php?gid=398504985371).
Another case is the ongoing international mobilization to save the Iranian woman Sakineh Mohammadi Ashtiani, sentenced to death by stoning for adultery by the Iranian government (see for example http://freesakineh.org/, http://www.facebook.com/savesakineh , http://www.huffingtonpost.com/bernardhenri-levy/an-international-appeal-t_b_642265.html , http://www.gopetition.com/petitions/save-sakineh-mohammadi.html and many other websites). On August 28, 2010, activists organized manifestations in about 100 cities around the world in order to urge Iran to lift the death sentence. Reports of the manifestations are collected in the following website: http://stopstonningnow.com/wpress/2889.

others, has become an increasingly important tool for “citizen journalists”. Mainstream media companies are also more and more often concerned with keeping up with new participative forms of technologies, creating spaces for blogs and ways of interaction with the readers.

As we will see in Chapter I, the potential for new social media resides in its networked horizontal structure. An enhanced interactivity allows readers to take part in the process of the creation of news and engage in discussions about issues of common concern. Some researchers consider online networks as new public spheres of discussion and a tool for democratic participation of the citizens in the decision-making process:

> The internet is potentially our first public sphere, a medium through which politics could made truly participatory at both regional and international levels. (Downing, 2001: 202)

In the African continent, where in some cases democracies are still in an embryonic stage – one only needs to think of Robert Mugabe's dictatorship in Zimbabwe or Yoweri Musaveni's amendment of the constitution to allow himself to run for a third term – citizen awareness and participation is decisive for any potential democratic improvement. Nonetheless, a global democratic participation is still hindered by a huge gap in Internet access between countries. Even if by 2000 all 54 countries in Africa were providing Internet access, at least in their capital cities, lack of appropriate telecommunication infrastructure in Africa has limited the growth of the Internet in the continent (Sonaike, 2004: 42-46).

At present, the number of Internet users in Africa is around 111 million out of a population estimated at one billion, which means that only around 11 percent of the population have access to the Internet, compared to a world penetration of 31.8 percent. However, in the past ten years, the number of Internet users in the continent has increased by 2,357.3 percent, compared to a worldwide use growth of 420.4 percent. This means that, despite the difficulties, Africa shows an exponential increase of Internet penetration, even if large disparities between countries remain. Kenya, in

particular, is one of the countries with the highest Internet access: there are almost four million Internet users out of a population of 40 million (10 percent penetration, that is 3.6 percent of African Internet users), preceded only by Egypt, Morocco, Nigeria, South Africa and Algeria (http://www.internetworldstats.com/stats1.htm).

Given this rapid growth and the characteristics of the Internet that I will discuss in the first Chapter of this work, in this research I will argue that social media has the potential to contribute to the construction of a democratic discourse in developing countries, with particular reference to Kenya. It offers unmediated perspectives, grassroots opinions and transparency of editorial decisions. Social media challenges traditional media power and, given the difficulties to control and repress its networked and global structure, is able to circumvent the power of the ruling classes, particularly in countries where this power is aimed at restricting freedom of expression[2].

As yet the Internet is not a viable option for most Africans. Even still I believe that during the Kenyan elections of 2007 and the aftermath, online networks, particularly local blogs, were a topical case of the Internet's potential to enhance democratic participation.

As Goldstein and Rotich noted in one of the few studies available on the case, despite the fact that there is not enough data so far to assess the impact of new technologies in Africa

> incidents like the crisis in Kenya provide a flesh of insight into the emerging power of these tools (Goldstein and Rotich, 2008: 3).

2 The proliferation of Internet access in Iran is an example of the threat presented by the Internet to the power of regimes. Since the 1990s Iranian web surfers realized the potentail of the Internet to circumvent state censorship and blogs and websites proliferated. Activists and journalists published their material online after facing censorship in traditional media. The regime reacted through filtering, blocking, censoring content and through arrests, detentions, torture and the use of criminal law (IHRDC, 2009: 10-12). Nonetheless, as the IHRDC reports, Internet surfers

> "continue to navigate through the maze of laws restricting expression. They find ways around the regime's efforts to alter and control the Web through the use of proxy servers to gain access to blocked sites and anonymizer proxy tools to avoid being traced online. [...]Many have paid the heavy price of leaving their homeland in order to express themselves freely. Some have paid with their lives" (IHRDC, 2009: 45).

Moreover, global social movements, as discussed in Chapter II, have increasingly made use of online networks to raise awareness about problematic areas of crisis and human rights abuses worldwide. The Internet has become a medium to seek wider mobilization in campaigns and to connect culturally situated identities under global issues and concern (Cottle, 2008: 862). In this sense, transnational movements are made up of different units, each with a specific cultural identity, horizontally linked through computer networks and mobilized around common cultural values. To put it into Manuel Castells' terms (2001: 140), "the Internet becomes an essential medium of expression and organization". The crisis that followed the elections is likely to have spurred a number of appeals and campaigns for aid. The aim of the research is also to assess the use of blogs and their links to a wider network of websites in spreading information about forms of aid and mobilization during the post-poll crisis.

In Chapter III I will discuss the characteristics of blogs, blog producers and blog users and I will provide some examples of blogs' impact and effectiveness in the media-scape. As we will see, politics is one of the main topics of discussion in many blogs. Several studies have been carried out on the political use of social media in western countries, as in the case of the US elections.

In the case of Kenya the political issue at stake combined with a ban on mainstream media that most likely forced the citizens to look for alternative sources of information in order to keep abreast and informed of what was happening in the country. Thus it provides a valuable insight into the use of social media. Goldstein and Rotich argue that Kenyan blogs in particular

> became a critical part of the national conversation, starting during the three [sic] day ban on live broadcast, when the web traffic from within Kenya shot through the roof (Goldstein and Rotich, 2008: 8).

The influence increased when radio broadcaster began to read influential bloggers on air, reaching 95% of the Kenyan population (Goldstein and Rotich, 2008: 8). Given also the great amount of suspicion that surrounded the election results, I hypothesized that

Kenyan bloggers were likely to challenge the government version of events.

The outburst of violence that followed the elections was often depicted by mainstream media as ethnic-based hate crime. As we will see in Chapter III, blogs in general are often very critical of mainstream media. According to studies, mainstream media tends to portray developing countries in a stereotypical manner, focusing on violent conflict and crisis. The news-flow tends to be ethnocentric and it is generally dominated by western countries, while international news tends to emphasize social disruption and natural disaster (Herbert, 2003: 44-45). Third World countries often claim that they are "underrepresented and the reports are inaccurate and biased" (International Commission for the Study of Communication Problems in Herbert, 2003: 50). Journalists sometimes lack sufficient background knowledge about the country, ignoring the root causes of the crisis, and relying on simplified frames of discussion that focus on tribalism, anarchy, or state implosion to account for crises in African countries (Allan and Zelizer, 2004: 157). Therefore, it is likely that bloggers who were personally experiencing the events were able to provide different perspectives on them. Aim of this research is also to assess the presence of critics to traditional media in the blogosphere and the presence of a more knowledgeable and critical coverage of the events. Given the blogs' transnational outreach, I also intended to analyse the impact of blogs on a non-national audience, who commonly rely on international media for coverage of foreign countries, with specific reference to the Kenyan diaspora displaced all over the world[3]. Giving the number of Kenyans living overseas, who often have more chances to access the Internet than their fellow citizens at home, my hypothesis is that Kenyan social media had a strong expatriate influence.

Kenya's network of websites will be analysed in the last Chapter of this research. In order to outline the presence of an online network in Kenya which focused on the elections and their aftermath, I will use IssueCrawler, a type of software that locates and

3 For history and data about the Kenyan diaspora see
http://www.migrationinformation.org/feature/display.cfm?ID=150

visualize networks in the web. The research is largely descriptive, based on a content analysis of blogs' posts and comments. The core elements of the analysis are the information provided by blogs, the connectivity among blogs and their shared sense of community, and the level of participation and discussions among readers in blogs with focus on the elections.

CHAPTER I

NEW TECHNOLOGIES AND THE NETWORK

In this Chapter I will focus on the features of a network considered as a paradigmatic concept of the structure of social movements and social media. Connectivity, interactivity, hypertextuality will be analysed as the main characteristics of networks in the Internet while redistribution of power and counter-power will be assessed as consequences of wider global dynamics to which new social movements relate. In Chapter III I will discuss how the features of a network are reflected in a community of bloggers.

In *The Network Society* Castells defines a network as

> a set of interconnected nodes. A node is the point where the curve intersects itself. A network has no centre, just nodes. Nodes may be of varying relevance for the network (Castells, 2005: 3).

With this definition Castells highlights an important feature of networks, namely connectivity. In this sense connectivity is what gives shape to the network. Information flows between nodes through the channels of connection.

Castells argues that the coming of the network society and the transition from a hierarchical form of organization to a horizontal one was made possible by the evolution of communication technologies. This is not to say that we live in a society where power is equally distributed among its actors, but that the evolution of communication technologies enabled new actors and new contents to take part "in the process of social organization, with relative independence of the power centres" (Castells, 2005: 5).

The network as a paradigmatic concept presents three features that can be found in the organization of networked movements:

> - Flexibility: networks can reconfigure according to changing environments, keeping their goals while changing their components.
> - Scalability: they can expand or shrink in size with little disruption.
> - Survivability: because they have no centre, and can operate in a wide range of configurations, network can resist attacks on their nodes and codes because the codes of the network are contained in multiple nodes that can reproduce the instructions and find new ways to perform (Castells, 2005: 6).

Given its characteristics, the strength of the network resides precisely in its connections. As we will see, the high changeability, fluidity and complexity of networks is what characterises new networked social movements:

> the Internet does not simply provide the technological infrastructure for computer-supported social movements, its reticulated structure reinforces their organizational logic. Decentralized, flexible, local/global activist networks constitute the dominant organizational forms within global justice movements (Juris, J.S. in Castells, 2005: 349).

Wireless communication enables the continuous inclusion of new actors, but the importance of a node resides in its connectivity to other nodes of the network[4].

The concept of "rhizome" as formulated by Deleuze and Guattari in *A Thousand Plateaus* allows us to further illustrate the issues of networks and connectivity[5].

The two authors employ the concept of rhizome, distinguished from that of roots and radicles, to describe the nature of a specific system.

A rhizome is a concept akin to a network and presents a series of characteristics that can be retrieved in the structure of a network:

> 1)-2) "Principles of connection and heterogeneity: any point of a rhizome can be

4 Indeed, even if particular nodes or hubs die, the network is maintained (Couldry and Curran, 2003: 20), also thanks to redundancy of links within the network (Couldry and Curran, 2003: 22).

5 In the next Chapter we will analyze the rhizomatic approach as one of the four approaches proposed by Baley et al. to understand social movements' use of alternative media.

connected to anything other, and must be" (Deleuze and Guattari, 2004: 7). As we have seen, the network is made of connection between nodes, each one with its own specificity.

3)"Principle of multiplicity: […] a multiplicity has neither subject nor object, only determinations, magnitudes, and dimensions that cannot increase in number without the multiplicity changing in nature" (Deleuze and Guattari, 2004: 8): a network can expand or shrink by adding or subtracting nodes, and these changes affect the nature of the network itself.

4)"Principle of asignifying rupture: […] a rhizome may be broken, shattered at a given spot, but it will start up again on one of its old lines, or on new lines" (Deleuze and Guattari, 2004: 10), in the same way as connections between nodes of a network may be broken or nodes may be destroyed but the network will reconfigure itself with new nodes and new links.

5) and 6) "Principles of cartography and decalcomania: a rhizome is not amenable to any structural or generative model. […] A genetic axis is like an objective pivotal unity upon which successive stages are organized" (Deleuze and Guattari, 2004: 13). In other words, a genetic, tree structure, is hierarchical; a rhizome, like a network, is not. The rhizome is a map: "the map is open and connectable in all of its dimensions; it is detachable, reversible, susceptible to constant modification" (Deleuze and Guattari, 2004: 13). A rhizome has multiple entryways.

Therefore connectivity and links between nodes define the structure of a network and allow the network to expand/shrink and reconfigure itself without loss of efficiency.

It is clear at this point that connectivity relates to the flow of information, while nodes contribute to its creation: the core of connectivity is the open share of information and the possibility for social actors involved to modify it. This is not an accidental feature of the Internet, but is the result of a precise Internet culture that, according to Castells (2001: 37), is characterized by a four-layer structure: the techno-meritocratic culture, the hacker culture, the virtual communitarian culture and the entrepreneurial culture.

The hacker ethic in particular plays an important role in spreading a set of values based on freedom:

> freedom to create, freedom to appropriate whatever knowledge is available, and freedom to redistribute this knowledge under any form and channel chosen by the hacker (Castells, 2002: 46-47).

Even if the Internet is all but free from the influence of corporate and institutional powers, the culture of the hacker community is ideally based on free and independent creative self-production of programmes whose ultimate goal is to benefit the community in its entirety[6].

Moreover, interactivity in the Internet, differently from other traditional media, enables forms of participation in the construction of meanings and discourses. In general terms interactivity

> or two-ways communication, occurs when the roles of the message sender and receiver are equal and interchangeable and the speed of communicating are close to real-time (Kiousis in Gao and Martin-Kratzer, 2009: 4).

Interactivity in new technologies involves at least two consequences: it creates a virtual sphere of public discussion that is disconnected from a space-situated communication and unhinges the logic of one-way message to a mass audience typical of traditional media[7].

There is another important consequence of interactivity. If interactivity allows the inclusion of several actors in the discourse the boundaries between producers and receivers of the information are blurred. This is particularly evident in “open content” or

6 According to Castells "while the hacker culture provided the technological foundation of the Internet, the communitarian culture shaped its social forms, processes, and uses” (Castells, 2002: 53).

7 Morris and Ogan (in Scammell and Semetko, 2000: 42) identify three ways in which the Internet reconfigures the traditional mass communication model of source-message-receiver. Communication in the Internet can be:

a) one-to-one asynchronous communication (i.e.. E-mails);
b) many-to-many asynchronous communication (i.e. Electronic bulletin boards);
c) synchronous communication that can be one-to-one, one-to-few or one-to-many (i.e. Chat rooms).

"open publishing"[8] types of information – a term that relates to "open source" softwares of hacker subculture –, such as Wikipedia or Indymedia, where everyone is allowed by licence to copy and modify the information. However, new technologies are only the apex of the processes of "death of the author" and of the work of art conceived as "work in progress" or "open work" (Eco, 1967) which occurred during the 20th century. These two processes pertain more generally to the realms of literature and art, which are not the focus of my research. However it has to be noticed that in the 20th century a shift of attention occurred from the work of art conceived as final product to the work of art conceived as a creative process whose aim is not anymore the final product, but the process itself (Pareyson, 1960: 11). Pareyson notices that the aim of shaping in art is the shaping itself, the "work in progress"[9]. An open work is a work that, even before the physical act of being manipulated by other authors, is open to infinite interpretations. The shift is conceptual: modern authors acknowledge that the significance of the text can neither be fixed nor predicted by the author himself, nor can it be determined by assigning an author to a text. Translated to the realm of information in new technologies, this concept describes the "openness" of information as a flow where the receiver can turn him/herself into the author and information itself never reaches a static condition. The absence of the author is described by Barthes as a characteristic of the modern text:

> to give an Author to a text is to impose upon that text a stop clause, to furnish it with a final signification, to close the writing (Barthes, 1967).

In his critique of classical literary criticism, Barthes points out that the source of significance of a text is not the author, but the reader:

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8 "Open publishing means that the process of creating news is transparent to the readers. They can contribute a story and see it instantly appear in the pool of stories publicly available […] Readers can see editorial decisions being made by others. They can see how to get involved and help make editorial decisions." (Arnison in Couldry and Curran, 2003: 46)

9 According to Umberto Eco the concept of work of art as work in progress appeared for the first time with Joyce's *Ulysses* (1921) and *Finnegans' wake (*1939) (Eco, 1967: 35).

> the reader is the very space in which are inscribed, without being lost, all citations a writing consists of: the unity of a text is not in its origin, it is in its destination (Barthes, 1967)[10].

Finally, what changes with digital technologies is the format of content. Castells (2005: 10) calls this format "hypertext". The Internet has the "potential ability to link up everything digital from everywhere and recombine it" (Castells, 2005: 10). The hypertext is a combination of "images, sound, text, animation and video" that tries to reproduce the sensorium of human experience (Bolter, J.D. And Grusin, R. in Bucy, 2004: 53-54). Bolter and Grusin (in Bucy, 2004: 55) consider the concept of "remediation", which is the way in which digital technologies incorporate and borrow formats from old media, taking their properties and reusing them to produce content: at one extreme they identify the way in which new media re-present old media trying to provoke in the user the same experience that he/she would have if he/she was confronting the original medium . At the other extreme, new media "remediate by trying to absorb the older medium entirely", with the purpose of effacing it.

Power and counter-power

The network provides social movements with a platform for a leaderless, horizontal and inclusive structure. The horizontal structure of new social movements was made possible by the evolution of communication technologies (Castells, 2005: 5). This structure opposes the hierarchical, vertical structures of traditional political organizations such as parties, trade unions and interest associations then redistributes power among media actors. According to Foucault, a hierarchical structure is an

10 This discourse is of high importance to my research on blogs. Bloggers in general take into high account their audience and acknowledge the open-endedness of their message, thus giving up their authorship – in stark contrast with traditional journalism - and allowing readers corrections and addictions of information. The more a blog is open to comments and responds to them, the higher the credibility of the blogger and of the information provided.
If Wikipedia can be regarded as one the highest expressions of "open content", the possibility for readers to comment and add information to bloggers' posts is also a dynamic process of construction of meaning.

instrument to impose discipline, and therefore exercise power:

> the distribution according to ranks or grade has a double role: it marks the gaps, hierarchizes qualities, skills and aptitudes; but it also punishes and rewards (Foucault, 1991: 181).

To go back to the concept of rhizome, hierarchical power owns a roots-trees structure:

> arborescent systems are hierarchical systems with centres of significance and subjectification […]. An element only receives information from a higher unit (Deleuze and Guattari, 2004: 18).

To these systems Deleuze and Guattari oppose

> acentered systems, finite networks of automata in which communication runs from any neighbor to any other, the stems or channels do not preexist, and all individuals are interchangeable, defined only by their *state* at a given moment – such that local operations are coordinated and the final, global result synchronized without a general agency (Deleuze and Guattari, 2004: 19).

This is exactly the way in which new global movements tend to organize themselves and communicate[11]. The definition is also relevant because it highlights an important aspect of a new way of thinking about power: power is no longer conceived only in terms of distribution and control of economic resources but as control over information and flows of information or, as Melucci (1996: 179) puts it, "control over master codes, over those powerful symbolic resources that frame the information"[12].

11 It has to be noticed however that this dual distinction is only notional: no systems are either completely hierarchical or rhizomatic. For example, even within a network, some nodes act as primary "gatekeepers" of information, as well as in a tree structure power is differently distributed among its ramifications.

12 For example, in the past 15 years the Chinese government has worked in the direction of an exponential Internet growth, which became the centerpiece of China's new economy and societal transformation but also provided means of expression for a myriad of grassroots social forces. Internet grew in a political contest where there's no distinction between "censorship" and "regulation" (Castells, 2004: 100-110). While grassroots movements that challenged the Chinese state power spread through China and in the world, such as the movement *Falun Gong* (Castells, 2002: 138) and the free-Tibet movement, the Chinese government empowered its tools of censorship with the complicity international corporations such as Yahoo!, Microsoft, Google and Cisco. Forms of censor for example are exerted on the search of terms like "Tibet independence", "Li Hongzhi" (Falungong leader) or "Tienanmen Massacre" (Human Rights Watch, 2006: 27); blogs were shut down when posting words like "Tibet

Castells (2007: 239) defines power as "the structural capacity of a social actor to impose its will over other social actor(s)" and counter-power (2007: 248) as the "capacity by social actors to challenge and eventually change the power relations institutionalised in society".According to Foucault, discipline, as a modality for the exercise of power

> proceeds with the distribution of individual in spaces [...] Each individual has his own place; and each place its individual. Avoid distributions in groups; break up collective dispositions (Foucault, 1991: 141-143).

Global movements therefore, gathering masses both virtually, in online networks, and physically, in protests and rallies, challenge the main rule of power. As it was for the workers' movements in the 19th and 20th century that challenged the principle, typical of factories, of "distributing individuals in a space in which one might isolate them map them" (Foucault, 1991: 144), social networks and social movements, given their changeability, can be neither isolated nor mapped in a definitive way. Discipline

> must neutralize the effects of counter-power that spring from them [organized multiplicity] and which form a resistance to the power that wishes to dominate it: agitations, revolts, spontaneous organizations, coalitions –anything that may establish horizontal conjunctions (Foucault, 1991: 219).

However power is not anymore, or not only, exercised through control on bodies[13]. Less violent and visible forms of control are implemented thanks to the means offered by new technologies and through the use of new forms of regulations[14]. Understanding

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independence" or "Falun Gong"; terms like "democracy" and "freedom" in the titles of Chinese blogs were censored with the complicity of Microsoft. (Human Rights Watch, 2006: 5; Deva, 2007).

13 "The classical age discovered the body as object and target of power" (Foucault, 1991: 136). For example, according to Naomi Klein, torture, "from Chile to China to Iraq […] has been a silent partner in the global free-market crusade [...] It is also a metaphor of the shock doctrine's underlying logic." Milton Friedman's "shock doctrine" promotes the idea that a "fundamentalist form of capitalism has always needed disasters to advance" (Kelin, 2007: 15), such as in the cases of US influence in Latin America dictatorships or the "War on Terror", an "almost completely for-profit venture" (Klein, 2007: 7-12).

14 Singapore is an example of how civil society has been able to use the Internet to broaden freedom of expression, despite the use of state censorship for political control (Castells, 2002: 164). It also shows how the exercise of state power has shifted from flagrant censorship and violence against writers to a more subtle "technologically embedded means of censorship."

'the powers that be' is necessary to understand counter-power projects of global movements and nowadays both powers operate in a new technological framework (Castells, 2007: 239). Hence, the issue of power in relation to social movements is relevant in two ways: in relation to media power itself, which stems from control over knowledge and information; and in relation to new forms of power that emerged in the process of globalization which challenged traditional forms power such as the nation-state[15].

As regards the power of the media, Couldry and Curran argue that the media has become increasingly important in mediating all forms of social action, thus giving voice to forces and actors outside the media[16]. Castells argues (2007: 242) that "the media are not holders of power, but they constitute by and large the space where power is decided". However, Couldry and Curran (2004: 3-4) propose a second direction of analysis that rejects this idea that media themselves have no power as such.

> Conflict that appear initially to be about other forms of power turns out, in part, to be about relative control over society's representational sources (Couldry and Curran, 2003: 4).

"The Internet [...] offers new technological means of censorship that can be integrated within the medium, rendering it invisible and anonymous to most users." (Chalaby in George, 2009: 4).

Highly visible forms of oppression, such as violence against individuals, are being substituted by less visible and more efficient forms of censorship such as technical filters and restrictive content regulations. Singapore was the first country in the world to attempt the implementation of Internet content regulations in 1996 (George, 2009: 5-7)

15 For example, since the 1990s, the increasing power of multinational corporations such as Microsoft, Monsanto, the World Trade Organization, Nike or Wal-Mart, has become the target of new anticorporate movements (Kelin, 2000: 326-329). While the power of these corporations have grown so big that they have "superseded government" (Klein, 2000: xxi)

"older groups, previously focused on monitoring governments, have reconfigured their mandates so that their primary role is tracking violations committed by multinational corporations" (Klein, 2000: 325).

Traditional media are not immune from heavy corporate pressure and the Web is anything but an exception to this trend:

"on the Web, marketing language reached its nirvana [..] Many media outlets have also used the Net to blur the line between editorial and advertising much more aggressively than they could in non-virtual world" (Klein, 2000:42).

16 The anti-war movement for example has made large use of new communication technologies in order to organize day-to-day activities but also to mobilize new activists (see Gillan et al., 2008). At the same time however, Internet powered terrorist groups like Al Queda and its related organizations, which are made of multiple nodes with little central organization (Castells, 2004: 35).

In this sense media power itself is a "theme of social conflict in late modernity" (Couldry and Curran, 2003: 4).

The media owns what Couldry calls "symbolic power", understood as the

> capacity to intervene in the course of events to influence the action of others and indeed to create events, by means of the production and transmission of symbolic forms (Thompson in Couldry and Curran, 2003: 39).

Traditional media institutions are holders of this power. They

> depend on a silent division, reproduced across social space, between those who make stories and those who consume them (Couldry and Curran, 2003: 42).

Therefore lack of power doesn't correspond to deprivation of information. People from most developing countries nowadays are widely exposed to the media. Lack of power is the "deprivation of control over the construction of meaning" (Melucci, 1996: 182).

In this sense, the media becomes a target, not only an instrument, of political and social action, even in cases where the final goal of the movement resides outside the media itself. The most specific expression of collective action for, and not only through, the media, is represented by democratic media activists: the primary objective of this movement, which arose in the mid-1990s in Anglo-American liberal democracies, is to "democratize the content, practices and structures of dominant media" (Carroll and Hackett, 2006: 83). Media becomes the sphere of political action. Carroll and Hackett (2006:84) argue that the strength of this movement is its ability to benefit other movements which seek democratization *through* the media by contributing to the democratization *of* the media itself [17].

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17 They do this through four predominant forms of action:
"- influencing content and practices of mainstream media […];
- advocating reform of government policy/regulation of media in order to change the structures and policies of media themselves […];
- building independent, democratic and participatory media […];
- changing the relationship between audiences and media by empowering audiences to be more critical of hegemonic media" (Carroll and Hackett, 2006: 88-89).

This movement seeks to empower democratic media and produce collective goods to be exploited by other activists and movements. It has to be noticed however that these movements are not discernible one from another in a definitive manner: contests of structures of media power easily overlap with contests to other forms of power (Couldry and Curran, 2003: 41).

Couldry and Curran (2003:44) suggest that long term shifts in media power depend on three dimensions: new ways of consuming the media, new infrastructures of production and new infrastructures of distribution.

As we have seen, the networked structure of new media, Internet in particular, lends itself to changes in ways of consumption, production and distribution of information and, therefore, of redistribution of symbolic power itself.

According to Castells (2005: 31-33), in a network society "power holders are networks themselves". Power depends on the ability to program the network by creating an effective process of communication and persuasion. In this sense, proposing a more holistic approach to the concept of power, Castells argues that power cannot be viewed as a single entity: there is no power elite such as the military, or the global financial marker, or a capitalist class or governments. Similarly, Melucci highlights the increasing complexity and mutability of contemporary socio-political systems where the proliferation of political agents requires a "transition from a totalizing approach [to politics] to the dimension of particularity" (Melucci, 1996: 212).

If power is the ability to exercise control over others, in a world of networks this control depends on two mechanisms:

> the ability to program/reprogram the network(s) in terms of the goals assigned to the network; and the ability to connect different networks to ensure their cooperation by sharing common goals and increasing resources (Castells, 2005: 32).

Counter-power movements, as products of the process of globalization, follow the same logic. Thanks to new communication technologies they are able to organize themselves by "practicing simultaneity without contiguity" (Castells, 2005: 36) – what Castells call

the “space of flows”. Local and global actions are simultaneously programmed and coordinated through global networks. We will see in the next Chapter how these processes are also made possible by the high permeability of these movements to different identities that do not necessarily share the same ideology as it was for movements of the past (Couldry and Curran, 2003: 31).

Different movements coordinate on specific occasion to reach specific goals[18]. According to Melucci (1996: 114), leadership in these new social movements is “not concentrated but diffuse […]. Different individuals may, on occasion, become leaders with specific functions to perform”.

Even if the Internet is a privileged channel for counter-power movements, it is not the ground of a netwar against traditional media: the distinction between mainstream media and mass self-communication media is, one more time, only notional. Traditional media is facing a substantial change to a more participatory form of information. Audiences require increasing interactivity and participation and media business are becoming “less one-directional in their communication flows, as they relentless scan the blogosphere to select themes and issues of potential interest for their audience” (Castells, 2007: 252). At the same time activists try to influence the information agenda of mainstream media.

However, the transformation of the relationship between communication and power within the sphere of the media took place in a context characterized by several major trends. In particular, the decision-making ability of sovereign states is increasingly weakened by globalization, pressure toward deregulation and a general crisis of political legitimacy (Castells, 2007: 239-240)[19].

The latter stems from the increased importance of personality politics. Media, with their capacity to influence people's mind, are the instrument used to convey a political message. Campaigns are increasingly personalized and focused on candidates’ values

18 The frequent assemblies of thousands of bicycle activists for "Critical Mass" demonstrations (Bucy, 2004: 232) or the protests of the anti-globalization movement in occasion of the various G8 summits are some example of "smart mobs" gatherings.

19 Realpolitik, a state-centric approach that focuses on boosting the power of the state in the international arena, is contrasted by what Arquilla and Ronfeldt call “noopolitik”, global political issues arising from a global information environment and related to networks of states (Castells, 2002: 160).

and trustworthiness, rather than on issue-based platforms. Therefore, opposition parties try to discredit other candidates by "finding damaging information about the opponent, manipulating information, or simply fabricating information for that purpose" (Castells, 2007: 243). This kind of process leads to scandal politics that weakens the credibility of candidates and provokes indifference and distrust among the public. However, Castells (2007: 246) argues that distrust of the system does not lead to depoliticization of society, but to new forms of mobilization linked to new media spaces. Grassroots movements exploit the potential of new media in providing a platform for self-generated content and many-to-many communication, thus creating networks independent from the institutions of society that they oppose. As we will see, this was also the case of Kenyan blogs during the disputed elections of 2007. Researchers have analysed the changing scenario of political decision-making and political campaigns that results from the interplay between new media and political actors[20]. A good example is the use of the Internet in candidate Howard Dean's campaign for the Democratic nomination in 2003 in the US.

However, as we will see in the next Chapter, the scope of the action of social movements is only partially referable to national political action. New social conflicts are differentiated from political action (Melucci, 1996: 198). Movements mobilize for a whole range of issues and interests such as the environment, human rights, peace, woman's rights, religious issue and others. While national states or blocs of states seem no longer able to tackle these transnational issues, movements create a global arena that bring these problems to global attention (Melucci, 1996: 193).
Therefore in the next Chapter I will discuss how a network, with its intrinsic characteristics, lends itself to be exploited by the media activists of trans-border social movements in order to share knowledge, coordinate and mobilize people all over the world around common interests and campaigns. I will discuss in detail the rise, features and strategies of new global movements and their use of alternative media.

20 For further research see Castells, 2005: Chapter 16; Castells, 2007: pp 254- 258.

CHAPTER II

SOCIAL MOVEMENTS AND ALTERNATIVE MEDIA

In Chapter I I have discussed the network as a paradigmatic concept to interpret structure and forms of organization of new social movements. We have seen how new technologies, the Internet in particular, is altering the distribution and production of information, changing the organization of power understood as control of the construction of meanings and discourses. Social movements are exploiting alternative media to exert their counter-power actions. In this Chapter I will analyse the features of new social movements and their relationship with the so called alternative media.
We also have seen how the concept of social movement in our society implies a wide range of different actors and goals. In *Challenging Codes* Melucci highlights the difficulty in defining the concept of social movements:

> what in fact is in question are heterogeneous and fragmented phenomena, which internally contain a multitude of differentiated meanings, forms of action, and modes of organization, and which often consume a large part of their energies in the effort to bind such differences together (Melucci, 1996: 13).

To answer one of the questions posed in Chapter I for example, explaining collective behaviour in terms of the beliefs held by its actors creates a circular impasse: interest in a common cause by itself does not make a social movement since its actors' beliefs depend on networks of relations in which they are involved. Such a model doesn't explain how a certain subject comes about and how it goes from the private sphere to the public one (Melucci, 1996: 15). Social movements cannot be defined but in terms of networks and relationships.

Therefore providing a conclusive definition of social movements is a difficult task.

Melucci identifies six specific features of the agents of collective actions in contemporary society: "the heterogeneity and low negotiability of the goals posed for the action"; they "ignore the political system and generally display disinterest towards the idea of seizing power […]; they challenge the modern separation between the public and the private"; they show a "certain overlap between deviance and social movements"; they share the objective of solidarity and search for a communal identity and they seek participation and direct action (Melucci, 1996: 102-103).

I will take up the features of new social movements later on in this Chapter.

However, what holds my interest in this research is the network of websites dealing with the issue of Kenyan election and its aftermath which spread information through the networks they created in the Internet and coordinated large-scale communities by exploiting alternative media[21].

Participation and mediation between the private and the public are common features of movements which act and communicate through new technologies and exist as global entities thanks to them.

Bailey at al. propose a multi-theoretical approach that combines more essentialist with more relationalist approaches in order to provide an overview of the relationship between alternative media and civil society. The four models proposed include both

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21 The concept of "alternative" media as well lends itself to a number of definitions. In *Contesting media* Power Couldry and Curran intend "alternative media" as

> "media production that challenges, at least implicitly, actual concentrations of media power, whatever form those concentration may take in different locations "(Couldry and Curran, 2003: 7).

However, Downing notices that the "multiplicity of formats and technologies involved" makes it difficult to produce a tidy definition of alternative media (Downing, 2003: 625).

Even though there is no doubt that alternative media tends to pose a threat to concentrations of media power, such a definition suggests that alternative media acts only in opposition to traditional media. my understanding is that this is not always, and not only, the case. Rauch define alternative media :

> "alternative can describe the content media provide (devotion to oppositional issues, events and opinions not regularly advocated elsewhere), the channel through which content is provided (such as photocopied flayers, pod-cast or hand-made buttons), the source featured in that content (including unofficial, poor, minority and dissident voices), or the modes and values they espouse " (Rauch, 2007: 996).

static features of social movements and their contingent, fluid relational practices (Bailey et al., 2008: 5). Each of these approaches puts different emphasis on some characteristics of networked social movements, namely: the global connection of locally situated units (deterritorialization), the emphasis on participation, the sharing of an identity, a horizontal and leaderless structure, the democratic use of the media, contingency and elusiveness.

The first approach in particular, focusing on the concept of community, highlights the impact of alternative media in forming "communities of interest", which differs from previous definitions of communities in two main features: first of all, communities have been redefined as non-geographically located, which means that geographical proximity is not anymore a necessary condition for a community; secondly, the structural/material quality of a community has been supplemented with the cultural one (Bailey et al., 2008: 8).

"Communities of interest", also described as "communities of practice", are defined by Wenger at al. as

> groups of people who share a concern, a set of problems, or a passion about a topic, and who deepen their knowledge and expertise in this area by interaction on an ongoing basis (Wenger et al. in Bailey et al., 2008: 8).

The deterritorialization of these communities is made possible by "transnational communication and delivery systems" that facilitate "the internationalization and even globalization of some protests" (Cottle, 2008: 855). They communicate through a media system, the Internet in particular, which is both local and global and that, according to Castells (2008: 90), is the arena of a new global public sphere. These movements follow the globalized structure of power and address globalized problems such as management of the environment, human rights, social justice or global security (Castells, 2008: 82). They act as global networks but maintain their local identities: "they think local, rooted in their society, and act global, confronting the power where the power holders are" (Castells, 2007: 249).

However, such a global scenario problematizes the issue of identity in the movements. Models based on individual values and beliefs, as I have already argued, don't explain how single actors come to connect, "form a collectivity and recognize themselves as being part of it" (Melucci, 1996: 69).

Melucci (1996: 70-71) argues that the formation of collective identity is a process that involves "cognitive definitions concerning the ends, means, and the field of action"; the concept of collective identity refers to a "network of active relationships between actors who interact, communicate, influence each other, negotiate, and make decisions" and it requires a "certain degree of emotional investment". The inner complexity and changeability of new movements and their being less rooted in geographical places makes their identity neither fixed nor stable in time; instead, it is continuously negotiated between groups according to the circumstances (Gillan et al., 2008: 65). There's no such a thing as a definite social movement since, as we have seen, the networked/rizhomatic structure of a movement provokes continuous changes in its nature. Different groups within a movement come together from time to time according to circumstantial needs and define their collective identity around ever-changing goals[22]. Diversity, more than identity, is what characterizes global movements. A common political affiliation that typified membership of such movements in the past is no longer a requirement. Even the already cited media activists hold multiple identities "with one foot in a movement such as feminism, labour or environmentalism and another in media activism" (Carroll and Hackett, 2006: 93-94).

Sunstein highlights that one of the consequences of the high differentiation among communities in alternative media and of the need to filter the huge amount of

22 The nearly 50,000 people gathered in Seattle and many others in other cities around the world (Lance Bennett in Couldry and Curran, 2003: 31), who coordinated using wireless communication and mobile social networks to protest against corporate globalization in November 1999, were made up of environmental, labour, economic justice activists and many others (Juris in Castells, 2005: 345). On 15 February 2003 over two million demonstrators gathered in Rome, "over 1 million in Barcelona and in London […] and hundreds of thousand in cities as diverse as Berlin, Melbourne and New York to protest against the war in Iraq" (Gillan et al., 2008: ix). In April 2007, people in no less than 35 countries took to the streets to protest against the genocide in Darfur, Sudan (Cottle, 2008: 854-855). The Chinese movement *Falun Gong*, that challenged the power of the Communist Party, used the Internet to coordinate tens of millions of supporters (Castells, 2002: 138).

information is the creation of what he calls "cybercascades". People tend to filter information according to their point of view and tend to listen to information that they find more agreeable (Sunstein in Bucy, 2004: 247). Most notably in a globalized context, where local identity is weakened and leads to an "ontological insecurity" (Cottle, 2008: 30), people tend to link with like-minded people "ending up thinking the same thing that they thought before - but in more extreme form" (Sustein in Bucy, 2004: 250)[23]. If on the one hand the Internet allows the formation of global movements, on the other, it increases group polarization, exclusion of opposite points of view and the development of extremist movements. However, Lance Bennett (in Couldry and Curran, 2003: 28) argues that individuals looking for an identity engage in deeper processes of discovering the self and spiritual quest, becoming "more able to identify with the experiences of 'other' classes, causes, cultures, and places".

Participation is the third feature highlighted by the approach focused on the concept of community. This concept, which Tönnies distinguished from the one of society, implies interaction and social cohesion among the actors of a community (Bailey et al., 2008: 7). In Chapter I, I have already discussed the concept of interactivity as a feature of the Internet that allows users to take part in the construction of meanings and discourses. Internet-based forms of communication allow the "participation of non-professionals in the production of media output" (Bailey et al., 2008: 11), strengthen democratic attitudes in the audience, enhance a higher level of public involvement in global and local issues and allow the expression of minorities and marginalized groups. In other words, alternative media can give voice to "ordinary people", enabling the rise of what Castells calls "mass self-communication" which is

> self-generated in content, self-directed in emission, and self-selected in reception by many that communicate with many (Castells, 2007: 248).

23 Kerbel, in his study on political blogs in the US, noticed the existence of two distinct blogospheres, a progressive one and a conservative one, with strong identities but loosely interconnected one another (Kerbel, 2008: 2).

Nonetheless, it stands to reason that this is not true for all societies. In reality, participation regards only a small percentage of worldwide population. Internet access is unevenly distributed around the world according to wealth, technology and power. Even within the same country rural areas and small towns lag behind in their access to the Internet (Castells, 2002: 212)[24]. Key business areas are "glocal nodes" connected around the world but often loosely integrated with their surrounding hinterland (Castells, 2002: 239).

The second approach focuses on the counter-hegemonic critique of mainstream media by alternative media, defined in a negative relationship with mainstream media.
This type of approach is based on the idea that alternative media express "an alternative vision to hegemonic policies, priorities and perspectives" (Downing in Bailey et al., 2008: 15). In the next Chapter I will analyse some of the features that distinguish information in blogs from information in more traditional formats. However, it has to be noted that this approach stresses the importance of the horizontal and leaderless structure of alternative media in contrast to corporate mainstream media [25].

The third approach links alternative media to a new concept of civil society and public sphere, seeing them as protagonists in the process of democratization of information and

24 In the case of China for example, Castells reports that, in September 2000, the three largest cities, namely Beijing, Shanghai, and Guangzhou, accounted for about 60 percent of the Internet users nationwide (Castells, 2002: 212). Even if in 2002 there were 59.1 million users in China, they accounted for only 4.5 percent of the population and disparities depended on factors such as income, education, gender and age (Castells, 2005: 103).

25 Users in particular tend to consider mainstream media as

"- large-scale and geared towards large, homogeneous (segments of) audiences;
- state-owned organizations or commercial companies;
- vertically (or hierarchically) structured organizations staffed by professionals;
- carriers of dominant discourses and representations" (Bailey et al., 2008: 18).

In her researches, Rauch found that audiences of alternative media tended to value three ideals in alternative media: "a non profit and non-commercial orientation; a commitment to social change through education; and a decentralized or non-hierarchical organization that encourages participation" (Rauch, 2007: 1001). Other characteristics of alternative media are their small-scale size and orientation towards specific communities and the presence of counter-hegemonic discourses (Bailey et al., 2008: 18).

active citizenship.

Both in generalist conception (Hegel, Marx) and in minimalist ones (Gramsci, Habermas), civil society has been described as a sphere analytically separated from the state and the market (Bailey et al., 2008: 21). It can be defined as

> a sphere of social interaction between economy and the state, composed above all of the intimate sphere (especially the family), the sphere of associations (especially voluntary associations), social movements, and forms of communication (Cohen and Arato in Bailey et al., 2008: 21-22).

Several researchers have tried to evaluate the impact of new communication technologies on public discourse[26]. Citizens tend to form their opinions in a public sphere characterized by disclosure of procedures, dissemination of information and equality of opportunity for participants (Gimmler, 2001: 27): internet technology, for the characteristics I have discussed, supports equality of access to information, unrestricted means of access and offers opportunity for interaction among participants (Gimmler, 2001: 12). Actors in civil society, such as NGOs, civil organizations, social movements and individual citizens – including bloggers - take advantage of the Internet, using it as a platform to discuss topics of interest to them, publishing news "with relative independence from media rules, such as Agenda setting and Framing, which govern other areas of mass media" (Gimmler, 2001: 33). They become the subjects of the response to global challenges in what Castells calls a "global civil society", undermining the role of governments and states already weakened by a general crisis of legitimacy (Castells, 2008: 80-84).

Froomkin (2003: 860) notices that the "blogosphere" as well "shows some signs of potentially evolving into a miniature public sphere of its own, a sphere of shared interests rather than shared geography". Lee, J.K. (2006a: 17) argues that the blogosphere has both potential and limits in approximating Habermas' concept of public sphere, but neither the Internet nor, consequentially, the blogosphere as yet constitute a

26 For further research see Gimmler, 2001; Castells, 2008; Froomkin, 2003.

public sphere. According to Lee, even if the blogosphere enhances inclusivity, provides equal opportunities to participants, promotes rational discourse and is autonomous from corporate power and the state, these characteristics are limited by problems such as the digital divide; the fact that a small number of bloggers dominate the attention and the flow of information, so that not all bloggers are guaranteed the same opportunities; the fact that rational discourse is hindered by the presence of online irrational behaviors, mostly in comments and forums of discussion; and the potential interest of bloggers to pursue publicity through state and corporate sponsorship, let alone states where freedom of expression in general is not guaranteed (Lee, 2006a: 17-19).

The fourth approach considers alternative media as rizhomatic structures. As seen in the first Chapter of this study the horizontal structure of rizhomatic networks opposes to the hierarchic, linear structure of arboric ones. It also allows networks to be highly changeable and heterogeneous without loosing efficiency. The approach focuses on three aspects of alternative media:

> their role at the crossroads of civil society, their elusiveness, and their interconnections and linkages with market and state (Bailey et al., 2008: 27).

The elusive nature of alternative media makes it more difficult to regulate and control, thanks also to its ability to cut across borders and deterritorialize communities of interest. This characteristic is accentuated by the fact that the spread of the network is made easier by the "ubiquity" of new media, a characteristic defined by Terry Flew as

> the extent to which the proliferation of digital devices, the density and interconnectedness of networks, and both multiplicity of forms of use and the routine nature of uses of new media see new media increasingly embedded in all aspects of everyday life (Flew, 2007: 35).

Citizens around the world are able to spread information of any kind in real time with virtually no mediation by institutions and authorities. Social movements have often

made use of this potential, for example using mobile phones to spread news about events while they were happening. In this sense they also avoid the risk of being misrepresented by mainstream media as happened for movements in the past[27]. At the same time, however, they seek the attention of mainstream media through new forms of "dramatized" events, including "performances" and "carnivals", whose aim is to attract the attention of the media and de-legitimize its typically violence-orientated output (Cottle, 2008: 864).

The four approaches discussed above are meant to bridge a possible conceptual gap between social movements, which by nature belong to civil society and whose goals address social and political changes, and the "virtual world" of network technologies discussed in the first Chapter of this study. I highlighted the main features of new movements in order to explain why the Internet, with its networked horizontal structure, is a preferential and powerful tool of communication for these movements and for other forms of counter-hegemonic expression.

As we will see in the next Chapter, blogs are part of wider networks of websites. The common practice of most bloggers to link to other blogs, websites, organizations' sites and news outlets creates a sphere of shared knowledge where information flows from one node to another.

However, the blogosphere is not a mere sounding board of news published elsewhere. As we will see, bloggers provide a platform for discussions, comments, testimonies and local perspectives, thus supplementing rather than simply reproducing already existing information. In some cases, bloggers are also ahead of events which would otherwise go unreported.

27 Students for a Democratic Society in the US in the 1960s for example were "subject to media framing that increasingly trivialized, polarized, marginalized and disparaged the protesters and their aims, and emphasized the violence of demonstrations" (Gitlin in Cottle, 2008: 856).