Bruce Mutsvairo
Editor

Digital Activism in the Social Media Era

Critical Reflections on Emerging Trends in Sub-Saharan Africa

Foreword by Herman Wasserman

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Editor
Bruce Mutsvairo
Department of Social Sciences, Media Research Group
Northumbria University
Newcastle upon Tyne
United Kingdom

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Foreword

Digital technologies have disrupted the way media are practised and consumed globally—they have posed serious challenges to legacy media, increased the range of outlets for political discussion and debate, and brought the means of media production within the realm of the everyday.

Digital media have, on the other hand, also often served as channels for hate speech, intolerance, and increased the disempowerment of those citizens who lack access or the ability to use these platforms to full effect.

Both the positive and negative impact of digital media can be noted in the African context. But despite the often pessimistic accounts of connectivity levels in Africa, digital media have been appropriated and adapted to the African context with such speed and breadth that it is now clear that vibrant digital cultures and practices have developed in Africa despite infrastructural, political and economic obstacles (Mabewazara 2015, p. 1). While earlier approaches to digital media on the continent have often been biased towards a technologically deterministic focus on development impact, more recent studies of digital media on the continent have tended to shift the attention to the lived experience of African users of digital media and their appropriation, domestication and adaptation of these technologies to suit their economic, social and political circumstances. Simplistic assumptions about the direct democratizing effects that might result from the introduction of digital media have been thoroughly critiqued since the rise and wane of the 'Arab Spring', and have alerted us to the importance of studying digital activism within the specificities of context and the vagaries of history.

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This book brings together examples of such assessments, spanning a range of countries, political environments and causes for activism, and rising to the challenge of exploring new theoretical frameworks and methodologies for analysis. These contributions are valuable illustrations of the broader theoretical argument that Africans engage with digital media in different ways, and in various dimensions of their lives, whether these are social, political, intellectual or personal.

Probably the most important platform for digital media in Africa today is the mobile phone. The penetration of mobile phones into the African continent remains one of the most astonishing examples of how media technologies are adopted and adapted to suit the specific contexts into which they are appropriated. It is now a well-established fact that mobile phones have enabled African societies to 'leapfrog' over the fixed line stage of telecommunication to become so pervasive in sub-Saharan Africa that mobile phone ownership is as common in South Africa and Nigeria as it is in the United States (Pew 2015). The uses of mobile phones in Africa extend beyond voice communication, to include text messaging, photo and video, banking, citizen journalism and, increasingly, accessing the internet. The latter, as this volume shows, is particularly important for engagement in political activities, democratic debate and social activism. Social networks like Twitter and Facebook, as well as messaging platforms such as Whatsapp, have become crucial spaces for the expression of dissent, the mobilization of activists and conduits to influence mainstream media agendas. This volume brings together a diversity of perspectives on such activism, and provides a range of examples from different African countries to illustrate how mobile phones have become vital tools for dissent, mobilization and activism. These avenues are especially important spaces in countries such as Zimbabwe, where the ability of formal media outlets to serve as platforms of critique are curtailed through political repression (see for instance Admire Mare's study of the Facebook phenomenon Baba Jukwa in that country), or where vast socio-economic inequalities have resulted in grassroots protests developing with such speed, and in locations out of earshot of elite sources, that the legacy media could not keep up (the student protests in South Africa discussed in Tanja Bosch's chapter is an example). Social media also have the potential of disrupting dominant hetero-normative narratives, which in many African societies are state-sponsored and culturally sanctioned. Several chapters in this volume illustrate how social media have managed to create spaces for African LGBTI communities to resist draconian legislation and counter oppressive mainstream discourses. Similar opportunities

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have arisen for feminist groups to puncture patriarchal narratives that dominate legacy media and formal political discussion.

In all these developments the youth are playing a central role. Whether using mobile phones to access reinvigorate political debate and discussion to counter widespread civil and political apathy (as Samuel Kamau argues in his chapter on youth, social media and civic engagement in Kenya) or where mobile phones are used to establish a hashtag politics in the South African #FeesMustFall movement, it is clear that African youth have appropriated mobile technologies in ways that are likely to shape the future of political engagement on the continent in future.

Although the majority of the chapters in this collection seem to take an optimistic view of the potential of digital media for activism and political engagement, there are also some that hint towards the flipside of these technologies. We should continue to remind ourselves that digital media can also reverse democratic gains through providing outlets for hate speech, amplify political repression through heightened surveillance strategies, or even just result in misguided involvement of extraneous actors that can undermine activists' intentions, as Currier and Moreau show in their discussion of African LGBTI organizing. We also know that the economic conditions on the continent continue to militate against premature celebrations of the potential of digital media to overcome centuries of economic oppression or to overturn authoritarian regimes overnight. The challenge for scholars of activism in Africa is to remain cognizant of both the potential and the pitfalls of digital media as they seek to better understand how these various forces interact in political practice, social activism and everyday life on this diverse continent.

University of Cape Town Herman Wasserman

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