

INTERROGATING AFRICAN DIASPORA MEDIA: THE CHANGING ROLE OF MEDIA IN A NETWORKED WORLD

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INTRODUCTION

The events known as “The Arab Spring” took centre stage when a Tunisian man set fire to himself in order to protest his harassment at the hands of a local official. Social media brought this action and the protests which followed around the Arab world to the global community. This is one of the powers of social media. It enables individuals to empower themselves to take control of stories and, ultimately, a sense of identity for themselves and others. It has long been surmised that Africa doesn’t play much of a role in the social media community due to extreme poverty and lack of resources. But, more recently, Africa has joined the international community of digital media. Bringing computers, mobile phones and other digital technologies to the African people has forever altered the relationship between the people and the media, just as it has in other countries around the world. Africans are just beginning to realize their potential in the use of this media. They will, of course, be influenced by their own cultural values, norms, rituals, and beliefs. Social media may be used differently in Africa and for different purposes. However, many recent examples demonstrate the possibility that the virtual city of interconnected online participants represents a new type of civic environment which transcends and impacts the physical city. This paper will explore the ways in which Africans use digital media for political purposes, in the composition of public online discourses and in the patterns of communicative interactions.

The continent of Africa has long endured crushing poverty, unstable political regimes and even genocide (Darfur). Still, it continues to rebound and has more recently joined the online, international discourse via social media. The ways in which African peoples use social media and the Internet are reflective of the cultures within the larger geographical space. They cannot be expected to communicate in the same ways as North Americans, Europeans, Latin Americans, Australians, or Middle Easterners due to the unique nature of African modes of discourse and cultural context. Furthermore, Africa has suffered a long history of colonialism by European powers which have attempted to diminish and marginalize African identity. Africans have begun to reinvent themselves by using the new social media to help define themselves to the outside world and describe their own communication needs.

The ways in which the world communicates has been radically altered since the invention of the Internet. It has globalized the world in new and unexpected ways. The spaces and discourses created on the Internet are reflective of the new ways in which the world communicates with each other. The Internet brought instant global communication, so that events taking place around the world are now immediately broadcast to everyone. A small event such as a local political protest becomes international news. Now, everyone knows and is involved. Hardey (2007) explained, user-generated technologies which shape how users interact with it are also shaped by those interactions. This dynamic reshapes how people conceive of their urban environments and of themselves as citizens

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within it. In the West, the ‘synergistic relationship’ which is created between the city and the people generally emerges as social networks and individually tailored user experiences, while in disadvantaged areas it can solidify cultural identities and lead to the creation of new communities which organize to resist government repression and protest corruption (Parks, 2010). Online communities, organized through social networks, can be considered as a second city, a virtual city whose citizens can transcend the physical and social boundaries of their physical location. Not only does this allow for local protest movements, and much activity that is not political in nature, it allows coordination and community-building between individuals and organisations in different cities and other nations.

Yet, this easily-accessed information and opportunity to forge and participate in the new virtual city isn’t necessarily for everyone. According to Beckett (2012) there is still a digital divide, meaning that the communications technologies upon which this involvement depends are not available to those without the means to afford them. Wealthy Africans live significantly different lives to those suffering from extreme poverty. Those who are poor do not have the money or technical ability to take part in the global conversation, even though those are the populations who could stand to benefit the most from organisation and participation. However, there are many instances in which previously marginalised groups have harnessed the power of the communities created by social media to not only broadcast their concerns to the world, but also to confront oppression in an organised manner.

Those communities can also serve as interpreters to the larger world concerning the events occurring within their countries. The events of the ‘Arab Spring’ are an excellent example of the ways in which the Internet provides the means to understand the broader implication of events in the Middle East. The reporting from Syria by courageous, knowledgeable and skilled professional communicators like the late Marie Colvin was vital but it would have been impossible to understand fully what is happening there without the slew of video and audio material produced by anti--Assad activists (Beckett, 2012, p. 10). Similarly, events unfolding within Africa or other nations about which the rest of the world may lack adequate understanding can benefit from a vocal online presence explaining local situations to the global audience. For example, the world has a much greater understanding of the terrorist group Boko Haram due to a successful Twitter campaign.

In order to understand the ways in which the new media is conceptualized and used in Africa, it’s vital that any analysis strives to understand it from an ethnological perspective. That is, while Western culture/society views and uses media one way, they do so from a Western-centric perspective. This would not be a viable template for African society. It is a myth that the new technologies are unavailable in Africa, although they are only recently developing there. In Africa the people are becoming much more involved in their society and getting their voices heard. “A new African public has also emerged from the 1990s reforms; one that is being transformed from a passive to an *aroused* public” (Blankson, 2002, para. 6).

African nations are certainly transforming, however there are also traditional aspects of African society that must be acknowledged and respected. These include chieftaincies, communities of elders, and self-help organizations. While the new media can become integrated into African society, and will enable people to communicate in new ways, the traditional norms, values, and rituals must continue to be honoured in African cultures. Technology use adapts to the culture in which it is being adopted as much as it changes that culture. Therefore, it’s unlikely that social media in Africa will ever reflect the

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relationship it has with Western culture. In order to fully understand new media in Africa, research will also need to understand the changes in African societies. “Scholars should also examine the changing character of the African public, its evolving role in the society, and its relationship with the state, the media and other civil society institutions...” (Blankson, 2002, para. 27).

The term ‘live-streaming’ has become common in social media normally used in reference to live video, in conjunction with other “live” blogging platforms which allow users to constantly upload and broadcast information in real time. This relatively new phenomenon was one of the empowering factors in the Arab Spring, enabling the people of Egypt, for example, to express their anger and frustration with their leaders to the world. Even though governments were trying to block certain websites, other websites such as Google were making it possible for information to get through (Bohler-Mulle & van der Merwe, 2011). This gave a global voice and face to the protesters. Suddenly online and offline worlds were intersecting. Virtual reality and physical reality began to blend into what has been termed *technosociality*. During the Egyptian revolution, when websites were blocked, people turned to digital cameras. When these were taken away, people used their cellphones.

Through these changes and political revolutions, social media actually developed a political power. Historically, people gathered as mobs in marketplaces or squares. Today people gather around their computers, cameras, kindle readers, and cellphones. They may not be storming the Bastille, but they are breaking down the bastions of old ways of communicating. “Social media at the moment partly plays the role of this public space, facilitating social interaction, information sharing, and fast and easy communication” (Bohler-Mulle & van der Merwe, 2011,p.6).

Another prominent change in Africa is increasing urbanization. It is expected that by the middle of this century it will be predominantly urban, a shift which promises to create large-scale social and economic consequences for African peoples. “The convergence of African urbanization, technological change and digital media are driving major changes” (Powell, 2012, p. 7). The desire for the new technologies is highly appealing. Even middle class to poor Africans want to be connected to the rest of the world. Irrespective of the cost, many are willing to give up important life sustaining goods in order to have the most basic of the new technologies. It has been noted that some people in Kenya’s slums of Nairobi would rather sacrifice a meal in order to get that all important cellphone (Powell, 2012). The digital divide still exists, but Powell (2012) describes the high penetration of cellphones into Africa, and the projected growth in the market. Far from being luxury items, cellphones are regarded as necessities because they offer advantages which can transform their lives through improved access to information and material resources. The production of cable lines for emails and other technologies, the pricing of services, the companies or governments which get these contracts, all have social and political consequences (Powell, 2012).

The fact of these changes is one that has occurred throughout African history. For centuries Africans have been fighting against larger enemies, such as colonialism and slavery. The fight for their freedom and the right to their culture has often been portrayed in the public media. In fact, telling the stories of various African struggles are endemic to the ways in which Africans live. “African theater and cultural forms became elements of resistance and the struggle for independence. Songs, dances, and ritual dramas mobilized people to understand and reject their colonial situation” (van der Puye, 1998, para. 6).

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These struggles are now being played out in the new social media. In recent weeks, the abduction of several hundred girls in Nigeria has gained a voice and presence on Facebook. Their signs that read “Bring Back Our Girls” has touched millions of hearts around the world. These profound messages of loss are being discussed on Twitter, Facebook, and can be searched via Google, AOL, and others. In fact, one could suggest it is the fact of social media that has brought their pain and loss to the world. Just as radio and TV were once a profound part of African life, so now the new media is an integral part of the continent and its changes. The use of social media may, in fact, be the ultimate medium for social change in Africa. The protests and subsequent changes in Tunisia, the protests in Egypt, and now the abductions in Nigeria are all taking centre-stage on the world’s social media sites. “If events in Tunisia and Egypt are anything to go by, it is reasonable to be cautiously optimistic about the potential of social media to encourage political participation and active citizenship” (Chatora, 2012, p. 1). In fact, the international attention garnered by the Bring Back Our Girls online activism was responsible for coercing the United States and other global powers to involve themselves in the search for the kidnapped girls, lending surveillance and technological support to a campaign which may have gone unnoticed just a few years ago (Hinshaw & Nissenbaum, 2014).

It is vital to insert here that cellphones and email are just the tip of the iceberg. They by no means represent the sum total of digital or social media inculcating into Africa. Virtual games, X-Boxes, picture-sharing sites, social networking, video content sharing, and blogs represent just a small list of what is now available to people through the new technologies. One of the questions will surely be; ‘how will these new technologies frame the political and social discourses in Africa and thus change the nature of political and social participation in African life?’ Powell (2012) notes that, while radio broadcasts still reach more listeners in Nigeria, the proportion of users who access information through their mobile phones is growing rapidly. However, the movement to Occupy Nigeria in response to president Goodluck Jonathan’s deregulation of the oil industry demonstrated the power of social media platforms, specifically Facebook and Twitter, to mobilise activists. Ibrahim (2012) discovered that during the protests there was a significant overlap between those who participated in online discussions of the government’s activities, and those who participated in person. His study discovered a very “strong affinity between real public sphere and networked public sphere” (Ibrahim, 2012, pg. 55).

Ibrahim’s (2012) research demonstrates a close link between real-world physical places and online environments, where individuals are connected in ways that transcend the limitations of their immediate environments. Social media is redefining the community in African nations in important ways, expanding it to include the vast online connections between individuals. These online connections have evolved to the point where they actually have real impacts in the physical space of the community and have effectively become a part of it. The continued protests of the Occupy Nigeria movement were very different from previous protest efforts provoked by government corruption. Whereas previous protests were sporadic and mostly ineffectual, whereas the Occupy protests represented a sustained effort maintained by online activists (Sachs, 2012). In some ways, the virtual city has become just as important as the physical one.

“The current Internet penetration rate in Africa is low but, paradoxically, the continent has been experiencing a general upward trend in the use of social media” (Chatora, 2012, p.2). It is the ability to use this social media that is changing the public discourse in Africa and the nature of communication and interactions. To delve into the nature of public discourse and politics, one needs

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to take into account that there are a number of ways people can engage in “the political world”. People can vote, support, and campaign for candidates, attend civil protests, or engage in lobbying and advocacy. The reasons people involve themselves in political actions vary according to gender, age, educational status, and a myriad of other variables. However, in poor countries and communities, people are more likely to be concerned with their own survival rather than a political protest. Still, social media offers the potential for political discourse in a number of new and exciting ways.

One of the reasons people do not participate, however, is lack of access to information. This has certainly been the case in rural Africa and in poor, urban communities. “There is a dearth of reliable information in many African countries and some governments heavily curtail access to what is available” (Chatora, 2012, p.4).

Powell (2012) has noted that the use of cellphones in Africa is actually beginning to alter peoples’ identities. Political instability is often a way of life for many in Africa; they are often on the move, or they have no fixed address. Many live in or have even been born inside one of the myriad refugee camps. Yet, it’s not as simple as giving people cellphones as it is in the Western world. In that culture, people grow up with and are accustomed to the constant changes in technology. Cellphones for many Africans are still new. Therefore, they have to learn the language. In other words, they have to be literate enough to use them. Another way, cellphones are altering identity in Africa is the notion of the individual. Historically, Africans have lived a communal life (Powell, 2012), but the use of technology such as cellphones is causing people to increasingly identify themselves as an individual.

Mobile phones are also being used to increase peoples’ awareness of the issues, to raise peoples’ consciousness and public awareness. But, there is a certain vulnerability in this practice due to the existence of repressive regimes. The increase in information via mobile phones enables people to do something about a situation which in times past they would have had to ignore. It creates new ways of communicating and creating identity. It also creates new ways for citizens to monitor and petition their governments, as well as new avenues for governments to reach and influence citizens, for good or ill (Powell, 2012, p. 30).

Bennett (2012) noted that social networks empower people to become involved in social and political discussions more readily than ever before. He states that they enable people to become “...catalysts of social action...” (p. 22). People develop new networks, contacts and support through social media as never before in human history. The violent eruptions in Africa have created a vision of a new means of social change. The people in Africa now have an avenue for expressing their fears, frustrations, and anger at the repressive states they often have to endure. Social networks enable them to instantaneously post photographs of the violence they witness which the rest of the world might have never seen.

While access to these new social networks are enabling African peoples to communicate more readily with the rest of the world, some researchers fear the new media will erode traditional practices. Exposure to influences from outside the culture seems to threaten the practices which define traditional culture and the natural means through which they are normally passed from one generation to the next. “It is true that advanced technology seems to erode our reliance on these natural media. Moreover, tribal marks are no longer in vogue; tattoos now reign supreme among the youths...” (Ajala, 2011, p. 10). However, the changes taking place in African society are not unusual.

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Researchers note that the new social media is altering the ways in which people share information and how we communicate the world over. There are new rules for the new media. Our relationship with the media outlets of the world are changing. “The emergence of digital and social media needs to move beyond simple models of substitutions versus complementarities, as they have created a much more complex ecosystem for the creation and distribution of news” (Newman, Dutton & Blank, 2012, p. 17).

The emergence of the new media in Africa affords individuals the type of communicative power they never had in previous times. Peoples’ individual phones and the images they send through them have the power to change their lives and disrupt the status quo in their countries. Strelitz (2004) refers to the “global culture” that has now emerged as a result of the proliferation of these new technologies around the world. The international discourse that now takes place has the ability to shape peoples’ norms, values, beliefs, and rituals as never before. As Ajala (2011) noted, the importance of traditional communications methods, such as bead configuration and female hairstyles, are losing their traditional meaning. Many youth Africans have shed their traditional dress in favour of jeans and t-shirts.

Some would suggest that these changes have the potential to help preserve indigenous culture across the African continent. Just as Africa is exposed to cultural information from outside sources, Africans now have the power to transmit their cultural information to others, and preserve it for themselves. The introduction and expansion of social media technologies create new opportunities for development agencies, businesses, NGOs, and information agencies, including schools and libraries, to partner with rural communities, national governments, and social entrepreneurs to create, manage, and preserve knowledge and skills that are unique to communities in East Africa (Owney, Khanjan & Maretzki, 2014, p. 5).

Social media is a means for people to share user-generated content”. This empowers people to become the source of news for the entire world. In a continent as large as Africa with such widespread issues such as poverty, hunger, repressive regimes, HIV/AIDS and other medical problems (and a dearth of good medical personnel), the advent of cellphones and the introduction of people to social media becomes a means to a way for marginalized or oppressed groups to unite and act together. It is a life where individual voices can now be heard. The poverty of remote villages can be seen. The needs of the African people can be known. They are now part of the global village and the global discourse. From the protestors at the Arab Spring to youth living in the slums, ghettos, and streets of East Africa, social media and mobile technologies have changed the way people earn their livelihoods and live their lives (Owney, Khanjan & Maretzki, 2014, p. 6).

Politics is now transforming into a far more personalized space than ever before. As stated earlier, one person with a cellphone can reach the world. They have the ability to start a new discourse rather than be isolated with their fears. Consumers now act on their anger towards corrupt regimes by simply pointing their cellphone camera at the growing violence and disruption.

CONCLUSION

Irrespective of these changes there is a caveat to this discourse. While the protestors in Egypt brought their anger to the world, that did not necessarily mean that all change moved in a positive direction.

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Regarding these events journalist Tony Cadman notes this: “It is deeply regrettable that the euphoria that surrounded the end of the Mubarak reign was short lived” (2014, para. 23). While the cellphones can point and click, it doesn’t necessarily mean the actions will end in the desired result. It does mean, however, that people in Africa have now become empowered to advocate for change whereas in previous times they might have simply endured. The new social media helps to give them that power which they richly deserve. Whether the Arab Spring was sparked by cultural the social media sharing or not, it is inarguably true that the internet made space for these local protests on an international stage and gave Africans a voice which they had not possessed before.

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