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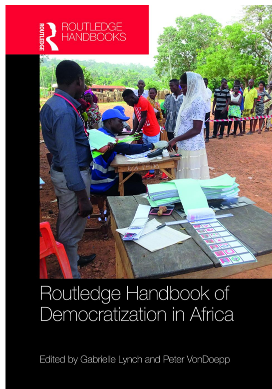

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Gabrielle Lynch, Peter VonDoepp

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DIGITAL MEDIA, NETWORKED SPACES, AND POLITICS

Wisdom J. Tettey

The past three decades have seen major transformations in both the media ecology and the political environment in Africa, with mutual influences and implications. As many countries saw the transition from authoritarian regimes to democratic dispensations in the 1990s, civil society groups and other progressive actors and their supporters ensured that freedom of expression gained visibility. They saw it as a fundamental right, which has to be gained and protected because it represents a key anchor not just for pursuing democracy but for consolidating it. Several governments were thus compelled to make legislative changes that formalized both freedom of expression and the media as part of the repertoire of political changes necessary to build democratic cultures and institutions.

With varying degrees of success, these legislative changes facilitated transformations in the media ecology that have resulted in significant movements away from the authoritarian and centralized models of media ownership, control, and structures, which obtained prior to the 1990s, to a more variegated media landscape that is evident today (Ogola 2015). This landscape provides for a more pluralistic set of media institutions and players, as well as technological platforms. In part, through the dynamic interplay between media and politics that the changes have spawned, the political environment has also morphed in the direction of more competitive contestations around power, voice, and civic engagement.

In the context of these developments, there was heightened optimism regarding the media's role in fostering democratic maturity. This optimism was premised on the normative liberal democratic views of the media as watchdogs that hold state agents accountable and expose any infractions of good governance. Furthermore, there was the expectation that the media would assume responsibility for educating the public, as well as provide a dynamic space in which the public could engage in progressive debate. During the 1990s and early 2000s, these expectations hinged on the mainstream, traditional media—radio, television, and newspapers. Many of them took on the mantle and delivered on the promise.

However, because the mainstream media operate in, and respond to, political and economic environments that are shaped by other forces over which they have limited or no control, or in which they are implicated for self-gain, the quality and extent of delivery are often constrained. The political elite, for example, continues to dominate the media space in terms of which voices find expression and which issues and narratives are disseminated by media coverage. Subaltern voices remain marginalized and are compelled to cede to the hegemony of the elite in the

shaping of national discourses and related developments. For example, Ambala (2016, 46) has voiced concern about elite ownership and, arguably, control of the media in Kenya, particularly during the post-election violence of 2007/08.

Moreover, notwithstanding positive strides in some countries towards media freedoms and pluralism, there continue to be remnants of authoritarianism that refuse to cede ground to democratic forces and institutions (Chama 2017; Kane and Bizimana 2016).

As these critiques of, and skepticism about, the efficacy of the traditional or mainstream media as venues for pluralistic and inclusive expression and political engagement have grown (Malila 2016; Malila and Oelofsen 2016), so have access to emerging communication tools, devices, and platforms. According to Tettey (2017, 686), "the continent is the current global leader in the technology's rate of adoption, with subscription rates outstripping any other region over the last several years." Furthermore, Internet use and Internet/data penetration rates across the continent have improved significantly. In Kenya, for example, "the number of Internet users grew from 31.9 million subscriptions in the third quarter of 2015 to 35.5 million in the fourth quarter, translating to an internet/data penetration rate of 82.6 per cent" (Ambala 2016, 46–7). In Ghana, total mobile data subscriptions stood at 22,865,821 at the end of September 2017, with a penetration rate of about 80 percent (National Communications Authority 2017). Bosch (2017, 224) notes that "Twitter is the third most popular social networking site in South Africa (after Facebook and YouTube) with 6.6 million users, though Twitter has more intensive engagement than Facebook despite having fewer users."

These developments have raised hopes about the denudation of hierarchies and hegemonic control of the mediascape and, hence, the development of a more horizontal power dynamic both among citizens and between ordinary citizens and powerful political actors. Consequently, some observers of the African media scene have looked to the increasing availability of new communication technologies and the various social media platforms that they have enabled as a new nirvana for active citizenship, accountable governance, and inclusive democracy. From the perspective of these analysts, the technologies will foster maximalist media participation (Carpentier 2011), as opposed to its minimalist variant that defines much of the traditional mainstream media on the continent. The latter replicates the duality of hegemony and marginalization at multiple levels of the media–political engagement nexus, with scant opportunities for diversity in media participation, heteroglossia, deconstruction of privileged discursive formations, and disruptions of power structures from below.

This chapter explores the extent to which the online and digital communications systems in this evolving nexus of media and political systems have influenced democratic engagement, institutional consolidation, and political accountability across the continent. It analyzes the variety of media forms and platforms, how they are being used by media professionals and ordinary citizens, and how state and non-state institutions are responding to discourses and actions that these actors have generated. The focus is on political engagement via mobile devices and social media, as well as within the interstitial spaces where cyberspace converges with both mainstream media and real spaces to influence interactions among contending social forces.

As part of that analysis, the chapter assesses whether the quantitative expansion in the number and diversity of media outlets, platforms, and formats has substantively and qualitatively enabled a progressive transformation of citizen participation in the public sphere and in the structures and processes of democratic governance. It will engage this question with particular reference to mechanisms such as political discourses and education, plurivocal democratic deliberations, civic vigilance, political accountability, and elections. The chapter will also interrogate ongoing constraints and discursive tensions that stymie the influence of African digital/social media in the march towards democratic consolidation and inclusive citizenship. In addressing these issues,

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the chapter draws on developments in a representative sample of African countries in order to provide a thick, textured, and comparative perspective of the media–democracy nexus.

Digital media and citizen engagement

Networked devices and spaces have allowed Africans to access information and to engage with political communication in a variety of ways. Ambala (2016, 52) points to the emergence of a

> convergence culture in the digital space [that] potentially opens up the possibilities of disrupting and deconstructing the existing hegemonic broadcasting interactions in a country such as Kenya. It opens up spaces for … maximalist media participation [that] … attempts to maximize participation in media production, opening up spaces for ordinary people to become involved in the process. This is contrary to the notion of pervasive minimalist media participation in which … participation for the ordinary person is limited to access and interaction with content produced by media professionals.

Citizens have assumed the role of content producers, exercising civic vigilance over the activities of the politically powerful, which mainstream media are reluctant or unable to touch because of the negative political and economic ramifications for their operations. This was the case with the expropriation of a school ground in Nairobi by a developer, in order to build a hotel, which was alleged to be co-owned by the deputy president. A citizen-journalist brought attention to the issue, with the hashtag "#occupyplayground," thereby generating significant public discussion of the action and exposing what was deemed an unfair abuse of power (Ogola 2015). Moreover, perennial allegations of corruption within the Ghanaian judiciary and the Ghana Football Association were, respectively, given credibility in 2015 and 2017 because of digital technology-enabled investigations by citizen-journalists (Odartey-Wellington, Anas, and Boamah 2017). The reach of the evidence was amplified as it was disseminated and shared across numerous social media platforms. All across the continent, various websites have emerged to facilitate exposure of corruption among public officials. These include Kenya's now defunct "I Paid a Bribe" and Nigeria's "Bribe Nigeria." These exposures are particularly powerful when they are accompanied by audio-visual evidence, which ordinary citizens can gather via easily operated digital devices. Sites like those run by the African Investigative Publishing Collective, in collaboration with international partners, are using the global reach of the Internet and social media to expose the equally transnational and sophisticated web of contemporary white-collar crime (Allison 2018).

Moreover, the relatively easy access to multiple sources of information, which the Internet provides, means that citizens can evaluate the veracity or credibility of official narratives by juxtaposing them against other available information. Fact-checking sites, such as "africacheck.org," are able to critically review public discourses and subject them to evidence-based contestations. Ordinary citizens are also able to assess claims by state and non-state actors to determine their validity. For example, the office of the president in Ghana was forced to issue an ignoble apology following revelations by netizens on social media that the newly sworn-in president, Nana Akufo-Addo, had plagiarized significant portions of his 2017 inauguration speech from those delivered by Bill Clinton and George W. Bush of the US. This incident was reminiscent of a similar case involving Nigeria's President Buhari, who in 2016 used parts of Obama's 2008 victory speech in a public address without attribution.

Networks of action have defined interest aggregation and political mobilization in Africa for eons, but the concept of digital network action is a contemporary variant that has

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particular characteristics. Significant among these are the capacity of technologies to personalize messages and to share them in order to enable connective action. However, "their logic does not require strong organization control or the symbolic construction of a united 'we'" (Bennett and Segerberg 2012, 748). It is in this respect that Bennett and Segerberg (2012) make the distinction between collective action and connective action, based on the differing logics that animate them. The logic behind connective action flows from a desire to engage in personal action that expresses a standpoint or solidarizes with positions that validate one's own.

An example of connective action from below is the #RMF (Rhodes Must Fall) campaign in South Africa, which mobilized youth to challenge the historical narratives of the country's national story—narratives that elided the devastating impact that actions by "heroes" of those grand narratives had on the lives of the oppressed. Bosch (2017, 221) described the student movement that was mobilized by the campaign as a "collective project of resistance to normative memory production." The campaign, thus, evoked the subaltern's (re-)construction of memory that was at once disruptive and regenerative of self within the contested and discursive political geographies of apartheid and post-apartheid South Africa. There is no doubt that the #RMF movement and similar campaigns that it inspired in South Africa had an impact (Luescher, Loader, and Mugume 2017), not only in changing the political discourse about heroes and symbols of recognition, but also in compelling change.

In addition to helping to facilitate organic challenges to hegemonic constructions of history and of privileged memories, the mobilizing capabilities of social media are also reflected in organized collaborative action to resist state policies and to undermine state constraints. In a discussion of Malawians' protests in 2011, related to fuel shortages, Mare (2013) notes how prominent hashtags on social media were fundamental in raising awareness and increasing participation in the demonstrations. The success of online collaboration and instruction was in part due to the banning of live broadcasts by the Malawi Communications Regulatory Authority (MACRA), thereby forcing "journalists, protesters and ordinary citizens alike to start using social media tools to publicize human rights violations" (Mare 2013, 91).

Through various devices of representation, the protesters managed to create visual registers for political witnessing and visual curation. These registers built relations of affinity among the marginalized in society, while offering fodder for mainstream media that amplified the political developments via their own dissemination channels. This symbiotic relationship, and the attendant convergence of platforms, allowed citizens and professional journalists to undertake their watchdog roles through a process of mutual reinforcement.

It is worth noting, however, that expressions of engagement can manifest at the level of sub-activism, which "is not about political power in the strict sense, but about personal empowerment seen as the power of the subject to be the person that they want to be in accordance with [their] reflexively chosen moral and political standards" (Farthing, cited in Bosch, 2017, 225). While the new "biography of citizenship" that Bosch identifies with sub-activism allows individuals to insert themselves into the public sphere with their unique voices, it does not necessarily translate into a coherent aggregation of interests around which a networked community with shared political visions can be mobilized for collective action. Indeed, social media platforms are strewn with discussion threads that make for interesting, and sometimes vituperative, conversations that often fizzle out without any demonstrable political impact. There is a possibility that the interactants leave these discussions having gained some insights and having expanded their horizons, but there is no definitive evidence that that is always the case. As Conroy, Feezell, and Guerrero (2012, 1544) observed with Facebook political discussions:

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> the information content and quality of most wall posts were found to be very poor, generally lacking support for their claims, incoherent, or simply opinionated. In other words, political group members are exposed to little new or well-articulated information about the political causes around which these groups form. The information is more likely to be reinforcing and therefore mobilizing, but not enlightening and therefore educational.

The potential political impact of discrete, individualized voices, without a mechanism for coalescence of interests, is more likely to be at the level of self-empowerment rather than one that produces transformative, collective, deliberative action that causes structural political change. In fact, similar to what Chibuwe and Ureke (2016, 107) found with regard to newspaper coverage of conflicts in South Africa, these interventions are sometimes bereft of "the underlying structural issues at the root of these uprisings."

Moreover, notwithstanding the fact that digital network actions have spawned and spurred social movements, such successes cannot be attributed singularly to digital technologies. Bennett and Segerberg (2012, 743) observe that there is "understandable skepticism about what is so very new about it, mixed with concerns about what it means for the political capacities of organized dissent." Radsch (2016), for example, offers valuable critique of the instrumentality of social media for the mobilization of dissent and of political action that spawned the Arab Spring. She contends that facile explanations need to be substituted with an engagement of contextual complexities in order to understand why some gains of the movement were not sustained over the long term. The political intimacies that are necessary for effective interest aggregation and mobilization require relationships of trust and attendant co-requisites of transparency, participation, and inclusion that characterize brick and mortar social movements and their organizational structures. Thus, while social media-generated activities may fill the political space, they may be unlikely to rupture the underlying structural anchors of the extant political system.

Some analysts argue that access to technologies such as mobile data services and to political news by many of Africa's youth holds promise for electoral and political participation (Iwilade 2013; Oyedemi 2015; Tufekci and Wilson 2012). This argument is based, in part, on the concepts of turnout contagion and spillover effects, which contend that individuals who are mobilized politically are able to influence others in their social circles to exhibit positive turnout behavior. By sharing knowledge acquired through access to Internet-enabled platforms, those with access to these sources are able to create a more politically engaged household and to facilitate their participation in various aspects of the political process, including voting (see also Bhatti et al. 2017).

A corollary to the contagion effect is citizens' investment in the credibility of election outcomes. They are increasingly deploying the power of digital technology to monitor elections across Africa to ensure that the sanctity of the vote is not compromised by election management bodies. In Zambia, civil society organizations continued the trend across the continent when they "utilized Facebook and mobile phone SMS to conduct parallel voter tabulation (PVT) of the 2015 presidential by-election … and publish election results in real time so as to restore transparency and credibility to the electoral process" (Mkandawire 2016, 81).

The use of social media in elections extends beyond monitoring of the polls on election day. Tettey (2017, 689–91) observes that such media have also become valuable tools for monitoring and assessing the actions of political actors throughout the election cycle; educating compatriots about election structures, process, and campaigns; engaging in personal conversation about issues and options; and facilitating transnational election strategy formulation involving members of the diaspora. They have also been noted to be instrumental in alerting election administrators and other officials to operational concerns and challenges (Bailard and Livingstone 2014), as was

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the case when biometric authentication machines failed during Ghana's 2012 and 2016 voter verification exercises and on election day (see also Cheeseman, Lynch, and Willis 2018).

As alluded to earlier, one of the most significant impacts of the digital technology revolution in the African context is the extent to which it has deterritorialized political engagement and the influence of political actors who are not under the aegis or control of the state. This then creates a link between what Bernal (2013) calls "off-shore civil society" and places of origin. These developments have enabled a more extensive connection between diaspora communities and home, whether by way of active participation in the political activities or as informed observers and influencers. This avenue has been particularly important in contexts where the state's stranglehold on traditional media is very strong and alternative viewpoints are vehemently suppressed. As Bernal (2013, 247) notes, there is "growing political significance of diasporas as non-state actors located outside the territory of the nation who not only participate in homeland politics but are changing the ways national politics are understood and conducted."

Another development worth noting is the convergence of popular culture and social media to create and to amplify a repertoire of political satire, music, and dance that captures the public imagination. These tend to highlight contrarian viewpoints, channel silenced opinions, take subtle digs at the powerful, and mobilize support for those perspectives (Mano 2007). Iazzolino and Stremlau (2017, 2249) disclose that the employment of digital technologies by just a couple of popular musicians "played a critical role during the mobilization [that led to the collapse of the Compaoré regime in Burkina Faso], allowing protesters to listen to banned radio stations that opposed the regime and exchange information on Facebook and Twitter." Social media's enablement of subaltern mockery of the powerful was similarly on full display after President Mugabe tripped at Harare International Airport in 2015. Following the incident, memes of the president started circulating on social media under the hashtag "#MugabeFalls" (*Daily Mail* 2015).

Critiquing Africa's digital media and network spaces

Evidence from Africa indicates that social media spaces do not always reflect the progressive character that is accorded them. This is, in part, due to the lack of a shared ethical paradigm for information sourcing, gathering, and dissemination that is supposed to attend the operations of traditional media organizations and professional journalistic practices. Thus, while the democratization of voice and the exposés about moral turpitude and corruption by politicians that are enabled by digital media are to be applauded, a note of caution is warranted regarding the credibility of some of those voices. Borden and Tew (2007, 300), "using a virtue theory framework … suggest that this distinction between journalists and their imitators is morally significant because it implies differences in the kinds of excellence these moral agents are pursuing in their work." Virtue theory argues that social roles have embedded in them a certain moral ethos that is imperative to the credible exercise of that role. Professional journalists are expected to function within defined ethical frameworks to which they are held accountable. Borden and Tew (2007, 303–4) observe that

> Journalists pursue knowledge through a discipline of verification … providing epistemologically defensible standards for creating and communicating knowledge about the social world. Among these standards are reliability, truthfulness, and independence. Ultimately, the practice pursues knowledge to help citizens participate meaningfully in the public sphere … The practice's purpose and epistemological standards constitute a set of moral commitments that normatively shape journalists' performances of news. …: gatekeeping, factuality, and objectivity.

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Citizen-journalists, on the other hand, are not constrained by these professional imperatives. Indeed, it is their freedom from these limitations that makes them a revered phenomenon among those who extoll their disruptive capabilities. Consequently, there is a tendency for them to be less attentive to the imperatives of professional journalistic standards, resulting in outcomes that may unjustifiably impugn the reputation of others or jeopardize public order, thereby undermining the credibility of these activists or hurting their cause. The loose ethical parameters of netizens are not exclusive to media practices in the digital sphere. Indeed, many "professional journalists" in the traditional media exhibit similar shortcomings. As Chama (2017) notes in a comparative study of some African countries, tabloid newspapers are relentlessly—and oftentimes sensationally—critical of incumbent regimes they ideologically oppose. In doing so, they make regular reference to unnamed and therefore untraceable sources, "a style that opens them to legal and political problems" (Chama 2017, 25).

By being perceived as replicas of their counterparts in the traditional tabloid media, social media actors may risk undermining the benefits of an open and free expression in cyberspace, because they can give an excuse to oppressive regimes to clamp down in the national security interest (as will be illustrated below). This critique does not mean throwing the proverbial baby away with the bathwater. It is to encourage circumspection, diligence, and integrity in the work of netizens even as we appreciate Moyo's (2015, 126) argument asking for "an ontological critique of citizen journalism ethics, where the practice is not always judged in relation to the moral taboos of mainstream journalism."

There is evidence from various African countries to support Erjavec and Kovačič's (2012, 900) findings that "the Internet's interactivity, anonymity, and perceived credibility cumulatively create a powerful tool for persuasion with a positive message, but also with bias and hate speech." Furthermore, "fake news" has become part of the disconcerting register of concerns that attend the digital mediascape in Africa. The forms that these "news" take traverse a full expanse of categories, including the seven that Wardie (cited in Bakir and McStay 2017, 154) identifies:

> false connection (where headlines, visuals or captions do not support the content); false context (genuine content shared with false contextual information); manipulated content (genuine imagery/information manipulated to deceive); misleading content (misleading use of information to frame an issue or individual); imposter content (genuine sources are impersonated); fabricated content (100 per cent false, designed to deceive and harm); and satire/parody (with potential to fool but no intention to cause harm).

At the heart of these concerns is the capacity for emotional manipulation by purveyors of such "news," with potential for political disruption in a context where media literacy in general, and digital literacy in particular, is very low. Mpofu and Barnabas (2016) contend that the April 2015 xenophobic attacks in South Africa were largely "mediated through social media platforms such as WhatsApp, where truthful and untruthful information … was disseminated … to warn targeted recipients of impending attacks … causing undue panic in some sectors of the immigrant society especially." Among the information circulated were images from other temporal and geographical contexts that were presented as contemporaneous occurrences in South Africa. In discussing the effects of media distortions on public trust and the potential impact on fledgling electoral democracies, Kerr and Lührmann (2017, 59) argue that

> increased media freedom may dampen improvements in public perceptions of election quality … This can add to the chronic instability of countries in the grey zone between

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> established democracy and autocracies and the challenges of democracy promotion in such contexts.

A recent survey by Ahiabenu, Kwami, and Sam (2018, 2) also foregrounds the implications of fake news, observing that

> although a lot of information consumers in Ghana receive content via radio, it is important to stress that several media houses rely on social media and online content in their news production processes. This situation poses a major risk since the use of social media and online content is now the norm in most newsrooms across the country. As a result, fake news is not only an online and social media occurrence since its influence on traditional media is now a reality.

The preponderance, speed, and time-space compression that characterize the dissemination of social media communications means that, oftentimes, fake news takes hold before the truth is able to counter or undermine the false narratives (Vosoughi, Roy, and Aral 2018). Indeed, mainstream Ghanaian media fell prey to, and published, fake news claiming that Ghana's former president, John Kufuor, and South Africa's former president, Thabo Mbeki, has passed away, only to find out—to their utter embarrassment—that that news was false. These incidents undermine the reliability of the professional gatekeeping role of the traditional media and their credibility as reliable news sources. The errors expose, at best, their lack of capacity to accurately evaluate feeds from social media platforms or, at worst, their rush to benefit from the sensationalism of these stories via breaking news. A more insidious version of the fake news phenomenon takes the form of revenge journalism, where political adversaries intentionally propagate falsehoods with the aim of injuring the reputation of their opponents for political gain (Tettey 2017, 689). The tendency to choose the convenience of simplicity at the expense of the depth of complexity among many in an information-saturated and mediated world partly explains the inimical impact of fake news, especially in societies where media literacy is limited among a significant portion of the citizenry.

Furthermore, the opening up of media spaces has not necessarily resulted in a rise in the quality of deliberative engagement. In tandem with the thoughtful, engaging deliberations that can be observed on the commentary sections of new sites and listserves are the unsavory parts of digital discourse, where the politics of unwarranted and/or unsubstantiated vilification hold sway. Gyampo (2017, 134) illustrates the latter phenomenon in the context of Ghana thus:

> excessive politicization and polarization in Ghana's body politic is typically reflected in social media in a manner that undermines the expression of very reasoned and properly thought-through views in support for or in opposing key topical issues under discussion … [P]arty supporters only sought to re-echo their respective party positions, interlacing their points with insults, without advancing cogent reasons.

Similarly, in Zimbabwe, "even though Facebook provides an alternative public sphere, it can also be 'pulverised' by irrational debates" (Chibuwe and Ureke 2016, 1247). The foregoing exposes African electorates as suffering from the same affliction of partisan credulity that Haigh, Haigh, and Kozak (2017) observe among the American electorate, where voters shun facts that challenge their views and only gravitate towards opinions that reinforce theirs. What these developments show is that even as the media landscape has changed significantly, certain characteristics of the old media dispensation continue. This is because partisan political affiliations dominate interactions to the extent that "political affiliation leads to anti-professional attitudes, when the political sympathies

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overwhelm the professional principles and drive journalists [and citizens] into lying insulting the challengers or using xenophobic arguments to defend their candidate" (Frére 2011, 12).

Moreover, digital and networked media technologies embody the hierarchical and exclusive forms of their mainstream counterparts. As Chuma et al. (2017, 105) argue, the severe socioeconomic and political asymmetries in some societies means that the technologies are unable to reorder power dynamics in a manner that upsets established systems of authority. Access to technological affordances and knowledge of the architecture and registers of cyberspace are constricted for many Africans (Mosime 2015, 56; Mutsvairo and Ragnedda 2017). Consequently, grassroots control of discourses within the multi-furcated and hierarchically organized public spheres, whether real or virtual, continue to be severely constrained. It is in this respect that Bosch (2017, 224) observes that

> the Internet and its related communicative spaces may thus not always be truly liberatory, as they could reflect offline power structures and hierarchies. A small number of citizens are politically active on social networking sites, and … do not always reflect the views of a broader population.

Nevertheless, it is important to acknowledge the value of emerging middle classes, especially those that are engaging and challenging the status quo via the Internet, even if their motivations are still largely characterized by elite interest. While the majority of Africans still access information by other means, such as radio (Tettey 2017, 690), these social media platforms and discourses constitute sites of concern for repressive regimes, because of "what they represent in terms of a young, critically and digitally literate … populace in the making" (Workneh 2015, 12).

State response to the politics of cyberspace

As the media terrain and character of political communications evolve to decenter power and facilitate the generation of alternative narratives, African states are being compelled to respond and adapt in ways that protect the interest of those who wield power. Among the measures taken are new legislative and other regulatory regimes. The response has been varied, with some choosing to clamp down vehemently and others employing more subtle mechanisms. Instances of violent state suppression are exemplified by The Gambia under Yahya Jammeh, where the Information Communications Act of 2009 imposed penalties "of up to 15 years in prison and fines of up to 3 million Gambian Dalasi (US$100,000) for using the Internet to criticize, impersonate, and spreading false news about public officials" (Chama 2017, 19).

The Ethiopian government, for its part, enacted laws that constrain free expression in cyberspace, ostensibly in the national security interest. These include the Anti-Terrorism Proclamation of 2009, which allows the government to intercept communications. That law was evoked in 2014 to charge and incarcerate seven members of "Zone 9," a well-known Ethiopian blog, and three journalists, because they had encrypted their online communication (Lemke and Chala 2016, 172).

Some oppressive regimes have employed more subtle tactics, choosing to saturate the mediascape with their own version of the "truth" rather than clamp down on the Internet. According to Bernal (2013, 249),

> the Eritrea state has not attempted to block access to any websites. Its strategy appears to be one of attempted media saturation of Eritrea's population with pro-government

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> propaganda, using conventional media platforms of television, radio, and newspapers that reach wider audiences within Eritrea than does the Internet.

Economic strangulation is another strategy being employed by intolerant governments to curb free expression on social media. In Tanzania, the government put in place rules that required bloggers to pay US$920 for the privilege of posting content online, although implementation of the rules was halted in May 2018 by a high court order (*BBC News* 2018). A similar approach has been adopted in Uganda where a new law imposes taxes on citizens for the use of social media. President Museveni (2018) justified the tax, arguing that:

> Social media chatting is a luxury by those who are enjoying themselves or those who are malicious … As to social-media tax, all the moral reasons are in favour of that tax. The social – media users have no right to squander the dollars I earn from my coffee, my milk etc by endlessly donating money to foreign telephone Companies through chatting or even lying and, then, they are allergic to even a modest contribution to their country whose collective wealth they are misusing.

Another way in which governments are responding to critiques coming out of the relative comfort of digital platforms is by ratcheting up surveillance measures that aim to intimidate or apprehend those whose activities are deemed unsavory or unpalatable to those in power. The following excerpt about the Ugandan government's response to presumed threats of online discourse is illuminating:

> Last June [2017] the government-appointed Uganda Media Center announced it had established a monitoring unit that scans the profiles of social media users to find critical posts. In July, the *Daily Monitor* newspaper reported a deal with China for assistance on a comprehensive cyber-security strategy, including monitoring and preventing social media abuse. Last month, much in the footsteps of Tanzania, the government called for the registration of online content providers including streaming services … The crackdown on digital access is also prescriptive of the government's efforts to restrict digital activism and the awareness campaigns mobilizing for internet freedom.
>
> *(Dahir 2018)*

The impact of these measures is palpably felt by government critics in Africa who have been arrested for "insulting the president," an anachronistic, yet typically used, legislative phrase that is deployed by autocratic regimes to silence those who dare to question the actions of leaders who deem themselves infallible and above critique. In July 2018, for example, the security authorities in Tanzania continued the trend of using such legislation to arrest citizens and politicians who had the effrontery to question President Magufuli's actions. According to the news reports:

> Posting a question "Who is the President, really?" on his Facebook page was enough to get Julius Mtatiro arrested. Police detained him as they found this phrase offensive to the president. They went on to search Mr Mtatiro's home for the device used to post on social media. Mr Mtatiro had reposted in solidarity with a young man in North Western Tanzania, who originally raised the question on his Facebook page and himself got arrested three days ago.
>
> *(Standard Media 2018; see also Chama 2017, 43)*

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Some governments have gone to the extent of compelling telecommunications service providers to block access to the Internet in order to stem the flow of alternative information to citizens. This was the case during the 2016 presidential elections in Uganda, when the Uganda Communications Commission instructed companies to "block social media access in the country" (Mohammed 2016). Such directives are complemented in some cases by surreptitious spyware, with the alleged complicity of Western firms, such as Germany's Gamma International and Italy's Hacking Team, to monitor the activities of citizens via their digital devices (MacDougall 2016).

Certain governments have also limited possibilities for credible, evidence-based critique of their narratives of reality by making it difficult for citizens and the media to access public service records. They continue to manage information in anachronistic ways and use all sorts of tactics to scuttle legislation that will facilitate access to the records of public institutions, as has been the case in Zambia and Liberia (Phiri 2016; Svärd 2018). The situation is made more challenging by the fact that traditional media's capacity for investigative journalism to uncover malfeasance, breach of trust, and other legal violations among government officials and the political elite is becoming increasingly limited by various resource constraints, including personnel and financial. The Internet consequently serves as a major source of alternative information on the basis of which citizens monitor actions and transgressions of state actors in order to hold them accountable. Concerned citizens also use social media platforms to share what they know or want the public to believe, thereby taking on the watchdog role that has traditionally belonged to professional journalists. Under these circumstances, the disinclination of African governments to facilitate access to information creates fertile ground for speculation to spread as "fact."

In recognition of the valency of online engagement, politicians are adopting tools of the digital environment to enhance interaction with citizens and to undermine counter-narratives. Some have dedicated personnel managing their social media platforms, while some leaders, such as Rwanda's Paul Kagame, have gained a reputation for being very active on social media. Facebook, Twitter, WhatsApp, and similar platforms are increasingly being used by politicians, political parties, and governments to reach core supporters and to woo "independents" for purposes of mobilization around particular causes and activities. Even though politicians recognize the limited impact of these platforms in raking in votes and donations (Gyampo 2017; Kamau 2017; Tettey 2017), they understand the symbolic disadvantage of not having an online presence or of not making an effort to reach out to the growing numbers of citizens, especially the youth, who are accessing social media more than they are traditional media.

Conclusion

It is clear from the foregoing that social media and related networks are enabling political engagement among Africans. They have offered opportunities for citizens to be heard, to challenge the state, and to offer alternative versions of reality. They do not, however, necessarily demonstrate a unilinear pathway to increased participation, progressive politics, empowerment of the grassroots, or a fundamental recalibration of power. For instance, while social and digital media have allowed alternative narratives to be injected into the public discourse, it is important not to assume that those narratives are bereft of the complicities and cooptation that attended traditional media. Following the revival of media freedoms in the early 1990s, some "journalists turned into propagandists, and governments and other belligerents attempted to control the circulation of information" (Frére 2011, 5). Thus, when we evaluate citizen engagement in the enabling environment of digital spaces, we need to be mindful of the nuances of motivation

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that are not reducible to new discursive capabilities, but may rather accentuate the hegemony of the status quo.

This does not mean that genuine contestations of established power relations, articulations of counter-narratives, or desires for new dispensations of participatory governance and accountability do not exist. Rather, the argument here points to the need to be more cognizant of the motives behind the discourses in cyberspace and to recognize that the manifest voices and actions need to be unraveled to determine whose latent interests are served. Indeed, it is fundamental that concepts of power remain central to analyses of information and communication technologies and their role in democratization, particularly as "it is becoming increasingly apparent that the 'horizontal' or supposedly democratizing and leveling effects of social media are just as malleable to power as traditional media" (Iazzolino and Stremlau 2017, 2243–6).

The foregoing analysis raises some issues that would benefit from further investigation by scholars of the contemporary African media ecology. The literature would, for example, be enriched by comparative studies of the correlation between the increasing use of social media by African youth and the impact on their political participation, including their voting behavior, relative to age cohorts that are less active on social media. It will also be interesting to explore the extent to which the Internet presence of political parties in Africa affects their electoral fortunes, relative to the use of traditional campaign methods, such as radio, door-to-door solicitations, and campaign rallies. Finally, it will be valuable to move beyond the largely normative approaches to the digital media/democratic change narrative to undertake in-depth studies that isolate the specific impact of digital media on political change in particular contexts, in order to determine the key ingredients that foster a recalibration of structural power such as reorders existing dynamics between political leaders and ordinary citizens.

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