Social Networking Sites in Kenya: Trigger for Non-Institutionalized Democratic Participation

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Abstract

The paper argues that Social Networking Sites (SNS) are creating communicative spaces that enables non-institutionalized democratic participation. The creation of the backbone infrastructure for ICT in Kenya has the potential to contribute to democracy by guaranteeing that access to technology that would lead to greater democratic participation. The paper is based on the computer-mediated communication theory which explores the question of who is speaking, the nature of the medium and the effects of communication events for the participant. It is also based participatory democratic theory which favours more direct forms of democratic involvement of citizens through the media. In addition the theory of media, politics and public opinion acts as a springboard for the paper because it focuses on the relationship between public opinion and the media. The paper concludes that there is a growing trend in Kenya for SNS to shape modern politics than ever before. Increased communicative spaces may serve to promote democracy in Kenya. The paper recommends that focusing on SNS to achieve democratic participation would be in line with achieving vision 2030 for the country.

Keywords: Democracy, Non-institutionalized participation, Social networking sites

Introduction

The ways in which citizens express themselves in the political realm have changed dramatically since the emergence of new media. Innovative ways of civic participation seem to be on the rise in most liberal democracies (Dalton, 2008; Inglehart & Catterberg, 2002; Klingemann & Fuchs, 1995; Norris, 2002; Pattie, Seyd & Whiteley, 2004). One of these ways is through non-institutionalized forms of participation. To understand non-institutionalized participation, it is imperative to draw a distinction between institutionalized participation and non-institutionalized participation. Barnes and Kaase (1979) posit that institutionalized participation is closely tied to the political system and the electoral process. Institutionalized participation may include activities that influence the political system such as party membership, voting and contacting politicians. By contrast non-institutionalized participation is not tied to the political system. It tries to have an indirect impact on the political decision making. Citizens may refrain from participating in formal political institutions (Li & Marsh, 2008). Bang and Sørensen (2001) content that non-insitutionalized participation involves integrating elements of political deliberation in citizens everyday lifestyle decisions while at the same time. Non-institutionalized forms of participation can also be considered to be less demanding in terms of time, commitment, risk or energy. Because participation is often sporadic and opting out is rather easy (Li & Marsh, 2008; Trechsel, 2007).

One way in which non-institutionalized participation is realized is through the Internet. The Internet has become an important channel of public voice and participation in contemporary democracies (Norris, 2001; Norris Walgrave & Aelst, 2005). According to Holmes (2005) the Internet is not an amorphous ocean that individuals dive into, but a galaxy of sub-media. It is therefore important to specify the various sub-media of the internet and their implications.

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This paper therefore focuses on the significant ways in which citizens are expressing themselves through SNS. The term social networking sites refers to web-based tools and services that allow users to create and share content and information. The SNS reviewed in this paper include Facebook and Twitter. These tools are 'social' in the sense that they are created in ways that enable users to share and communicate with one another (Bohler-Muller & Merwe, 2011).

The social networking site Facebook, which was one of the first social media tools of its kind, was launched in 2004 and today has over 600 million users worldwide (Bohler-Muller & Merwe, 2011). Facebook is a free social networking website that allows users to add friends, send them messages, post updates about themselves, share photographs, links and videos, and participate in groups. On the other hand Twitter allows you to use only 140 characters therefore a user writes more specific and direct messages. It is possible to use the sites to organize people for politics, advocacy, or community awareness (Evans-Cowley & Hollander, 2010).

SNS may have a democratic potential for citizens' political participation and engagement. The last US presidential election highlighted the power of SNS in politics. During the 2008 presidential election campaign season, SNS emerged as a prevalent tool for electoral campaigns (Baumgartner & Morris, 2010; Church, 2010). Facebook, Twitter and other social media platforms are making an impact on politics across the African continent. This potential was demonstrated in Tunisia and Egypt unresponsive and out-of-touch governments were ousted using support mainly from social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter as communication tools.

Many key politicians are also engaging the electorate through SNS. Those who refrain from doing so, have fictitious accounts created for them by citizens as a means of deriding them (Aarhus, 2011). This shows that if Kenyan politicians do not take control of their online image and engage with the public, someone else will do it for them. Many media stations have incorporated a social network component in their news and other programs aired. For example NTV have a news component entitled 'The Conversation' where viewers comments posted on Facebook and Twitter are incorporated in the news. Although this is the case, there are no studies linking SNS with a shift in democratic participation in Kenya.

Civic participation in democracy is enshrined in many constitutions in Africa. The constitution of Kenya (2010) article 10 section 2 (a) states that one of the key national values and principles of governance include democracy and participation of the people. For these reasons, SNS has the potential to play an important role in influencing political developments in Kenya. Another feature of this technology that speaks to its potential is that unlike the older forms of mass communication, African governments have generally stayed away from attempts to control the Internet by restricting public access to the gateway.

The Kenyan government's recognition of the strategic role played by ICTs in the economy is an important aspect of the implementation of Vision 2030, the country's development blueprint. Vision 2030's key goal is that Kenya will be one of the top three investment destinations in Africa by 2030. This will be achieved by addressing three pillars – Economic, Social and Political. The political pillar envisages Kenya as an issue-based, people-centred, and accountable democratic political system (Government of the Republic of Kenya, 2007). To achieve accountable democratic political system, civic participation is necessary. This paper argues that this can be enhanced using ICT.

Kenya has a national policy framework that supports access to ICTs. The 2006 National ICT policy deals with convergence, ICT in health, education, e-commerce, e-governance, privacy and cybercrimes. The policy aims to use ICTs for creating employment, poverty reduction, enabling economic recovery and achieving national developmental goals. It is aligned with Vision 2030 (Republic of Kenya, 2006). Yet this policy is silent on the role of ICT in enhancing non-institutionalized democratic participation in Kenya.

Msimang (2011) notes that Kenya's approach to building network capacity has been bullish. It has taken advantage of its strategic location along the East Coast of Africa and used it to strengthen its infrastructure position. From no international fiber optic connectivity at the beginning of 2009, Kenya had three high-speed undersea cables landing in Mombasa by the end of 2010. Although Msimang (2011) notes that this current bandwidth glut firmly places Kenya in a position to participate in the global information economy and is the most dramatic illustration of the country's proactive broadband push, he does not link these developments in technological infrastructure specifically to increased civic participation in democracy.

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Statement of the problem

There is a failure to link SNS to democratization in Kenya. Hyden and Leslie (2002) note that the rapidly growing literature on democratization in Africa fails to recognize the role that communications, or the media, play. The national ICT policy framework encapsulated in the 2006 National ICT Policy which centres on ICT in health and education, e-commerce, e-governance, privacy and cybercrimes fails to directly link ICT access to non-institutionalized democratic participation. Therefore this paper attempts to link the use of ICT to democratic participation. In particular, the paper investigates whether SNS have the potential of shaping the emerging, but still fledgling, democratic culture in Africa. The paper seeks to find out whether SNS are creating communicative spaces that enable articulation of democratic ideas and to what extent this is achieved.

Objectives

The objectives of this paper were:

i) to assess access and utilization of social networking sites for non-institutionalized democratic participation;
ii) to assess the extent to which social networking sites extend the communicative spaces necessary for democratic participation.

Theoretical framework

This paper is informed by the computer-mediated communication theory. According to Holmes (2005) this theory moves beyond the process model and explores the ends of the chain of communication events. It addresses the question of who is speaking, the nature of the medium and the effects of communication events for the participant. The theory sees computer mediated communication (CMC) as generating a form of socially produced space (Jones, 1995). This space is said to be comparable to a kind of electronic *agora*. The *agora*, dating from post-Homeric Greece, refers to an open space in which goods and information are exchanged. In the agora, information is typically relayed by word of mouth or by messages posted on walls. Habermas (1989) notes that this idea is realized in European life in the form of the cosmopolitan coffee house or cafes. The café is attributed with the status of the bedrock of the civil society. Jordan (1999) states that CMC is inherently anti-hierarchichal because identity in cyberspace is seldom identified with off-line hierarchies. He further notes that differentiation based on status is very difficult. In addition the many-to-many capacity of the internet creates a much more inclusive and participatory environment (Holmes, 2005). This therefore implies that SNS are more inclusive and offer a more participatory environment.

The paper is also based on participatory democratic theory which favours more direct forms of political involvement of citizens through the media. According to Michels (2011) participatory democratic theory regards citizen participation as vital to democracy. This notion derives from Rousseau, whose view that the participation of each citizen in political decision-making is vitally important to the functioning of the state. In this paper it is argued that SNS allows for participatory democracy to flourish among citizens because it gives them a chance to have more direct say.

In addition the theory of media, politics and public opinion developed by Walter Lipmann in 1920 serves as a springboard for this paper. Lippmann (1922) focused on the relationships among public opinion, politics and the press. There is a critical assumption that citizens must acquire a competent opinion about all public affairs and that the media have a particular role to play in this respect. The theory argues that through the press citizens are able to create public opinion. The theory of media, politics and public opinion is employed in this study because it recognizes the role of the media including second age media like SNS to continue to shaping public opinion, and ultimately political action.

Media and democracy in Kenya

There is a rapidly growing literature on democratization in Africa but very little of it deals with the role that communications, or the media, play (Hyden & Leslie, 2002). Yet the media have been relatively more influential in shaping the emerging, but still fledgling, democratic culture in Africa. The place of communications in national development received considerable attention in the heyday of modernization thinking in the later 1950s and early 1960s.

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The focus in those days was not directly on democracy but rather on the role of communications for socio-economic development, the assumption being that democracy would only be feasible once society had been modernized (Hyden & Leslie, 2002). In Africa, however, democracy has failed to be materialize as a natural by-product of development.

In Africa the first wave of democratization coincided with the period of decolonization which fell between the end of the second World War (1945) and the early years of independence (1968). The essential feature of the first wave of democratization in Africa was that it was driven by domestic forces. According to Hodgkin (1956) and Coleman (1958) much more emphasis was placed on the role of factors such as social clubs, syncretic churches, trade unions and charismatic figures. Hodgkin (1956) argues that African nationalism really fermented in social and cultural settings before it could be effectively launched in the political realm. Ideas about self-determination and democracy were planted in workplaces and in churches, in dance clubs and in sports stadiums.

The 1950s and early 1960s did constitute Africa's first window to democracy which was much more genuine. The media in the first wave of democratization created a discursive realm. Nationalist debates in those days were conducted in public through the print media. Africans were able to establish a nonhierarchical discursive realm or community, in which communicative competence was developed. The media played an important role in promoting this realm by providing nationalist leaders with an outreach and thus the ability to expand its boundaries to individuals who would otherwise not have been participants.

By the end of the 1960s it had become clear that the political leadership was ready to bar others from using the media to facilitate democratic spaces. Whereas in the past the media was used as a tool for civic participation, it changed to serve parochial interests. The radio and print media became an instrument of political propaganda aimed at serving the interest of the incumbent elite. Consequently the media lost much of the pre-independence influence as a public discursive realm.

The next transition from decades of autocracy took place in the early 1990s. This was broadly characterized as the second wave of democracy which ushered in the liberalization trend. The second wave of democratization in Africa coincided with the development and spread of new information technology, notably the use of computers for communications purposes (Bourgault, 1995). The internet is typically presented in terms that set it in a positive contrast to other media. One considerable benefit associated with the Internet is interactivity. Much of what is being sent through cyberspace may be unimportant personal messages, but the medium is also discussed in terms of its potential for more serious pursuits, notably those associated with the conduct of public affairs.

Social networking sites as expanding democratic space

Bourgault (1995) notes that there is a shift in democratic thought in Africa. Democratic practice in Africa today emphasizes a non-hierarchical, dialogical communication through popular participation. The implication of this new approach is that it places communications in a fresh and more central place than before. In the past government went out of its way to control the flow of news to make information more attuned to what it conceived as its national priorities, but the current interactive approach facilitates a discursive process (Hyden & Leslie, 2002). These new forms of communication have been used to convey messages downward, upwards and sideways. This paper argues that the ongoing efforts to enhance democracy in Africa have gained from the liberalization of mass media in Africa as well as the redefinition of development that stresses interactivity, dialogue and grassroots participation.

SNS have significant potential to mediate state and society in contemporary Africa although they are not always in direct dialogue with agents of the state. In many cases the communications produced in SNS are not very visible and public and they are not explicitly formulated and followed through as if they were part of a direct engagement with the state.

The new communicative spaces created by SNS can be best understood as vital and pervasive undercurrents and reservoirs of political commentary, critique, and potential mobilization. In many cases, the communications that emanate from SNS are diffused dialogues, not direct dialogues, with the state. Sometimes these communications do make incursions into more public political arenas. SNS are therefore a crucial part of civil society and the public sphere, understood most broadly, as the arena where citizens and citizen-based associations discuss state authority, political accountability, and representation (Hyden & Leslie, 2002).

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What is crucial is a notion of these media as participatory, public phenomena, controlled neither by big states nor big corporations. SNS have political content and they have a potential emancipatory function. They allow producers of messages to be also the consumers and receivers to act as distributors. There are multiple sites of (re)production and (re)distribution of messages. SNS draw upon established communication networks (e.g. interpersonal networks in neighbourhoods, the workplace or religious spheres) and established genres of communication (e.g. existing oratorical traditions, song genres, and parodic styles). They function more expressive devices in the formation of group identity, and community or subcultural solidarity (Spitulnik, 2002). The growing availability of SNS has meant that topics that could not be previously breached are now within the boundary of public discussion and public scrutiny.

Internet access in Kenya

A 2008 study which compared Nairobi to 15 other capital cities in Africa, found that Kenyans had the highest rate of using computers for browsing the Internet (Ministry of Education & USAID, 2005). Kemibaro (2010) notes that Kenya has over 4 million internet users in Kenya, as well as 18 million mobile subscribers. Mobile phone looks well set as the new driver of internet access as opposed to computers, thus the form of the hardware (mobile phone) is critical to the success of higher internet penetration making access to a mobile phone the key to full membership of the future society.

Mobile internet, or internet services that can be accessed from mobile phones, therefore remains the most effective way for people in Africa to access the internet. The main contributor to this is the widespread availability of mobile phones on the continent and the cost-effectiveness of accessing the internet through a mobile phone rather than through a wired connection from a personal computer. One of Kenya's greatest successes has been the unprecedented uptake and usage of mobile services. Kenya was a slow starter with only 114,000 subscribers seven years after mobile was first introduced, well below the subscription rates of the country's Sub Saharan peers. Following market reform and liberalization, there were 22 million subscribers in September 2010 for a penetration rate of 60 subscriptions per 100 people (Msimang, 2011).

Synovate (2009) state that access to the internet on mobile phone is growing at the expense of the public access routes. Rural internet access and usage is more driven by mobile phones compared to urban areas. This guarantees participation even in the most remote regions of Kenya. Kenya ICT Board (2010) notes that the TNS multi-country survey showed the web is very important to Kenyan users, outstripping its importance in other countries. The survey also showed that mobile phones have become the main back-up source of internet access. There is high demand for more phone browsing with 50% prefer to use their phone to browse the internet.

Synovate (2011) in another survey conducted a survey in 2011 to find out where Kenyans accessed the internet from. The majority standing at 64% reported that they accessed the internet from their mobile phones as compared 54 % who reported to access the internet from the cyber. Synovate (2009) found out that the time spent on the internet among users increased mainly due to the drop in cost of internet access. On average, internet users spend approximately 70 minutes on the internet per visit. These statistics point to an ever increasing trend of citizen engagement with the internet in Kenya in recent years.

Access to social networking sites

Facebook is currently the most visited website by internet users on the African continent. According to Acounting Diary (2010) there are currently 17 million people on the continent using Facebook. This depicts an increase of 7 million from 2009. Kemibaro (2011) notes that Synovate conducted a research aimed to establish Internet usage trends in Kenya. The outcome, the *Digital Drive* report which is probably the first of its kind in Kenya identified that Kenya now has over 2 million registered users on FacebookThe email is being discarded in favour of SNS like Facebook and Twitter by new Internet users in Kenya. 79% of Kenya's Internet users are members of Facebook. Synovate (2009) conducted a survey to find out which social networking site people visited most. They found out that more than 2 million people are on Facebook, outweighing other social networks. TNS Research International conducted a survey in 2010 to help organizations understand how people in Kenya use the internet. The research found out that out of a sample of 1421 internet users who have visited a social networking site 56% contributed to a discussion (Kenya ICT Board, 2010). The above statistics point to the fact that SNS contributes to non-institutionalized political participation. The SNS today have the potential of building on the backbone of associational life to promote greater democratic participation in Kenya.

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SNS are bringing in a sense of community that we had experienced before independence and therefore SNS have a great potential for changing the way we do politics. Pre-independence attempts at democratic participation succeeded because African nationalism fermented in social and cultural settings. Ideas about self-determination and democracy were planted in workplaces and in churches, in dance clubs and in sports stadiums. Today, the society in Kenya still enjoys a vibrant associational life which finds fulfillment in social media. These associations clustering around friendships, family, relatives, alumni associations, localities, counties, ethnic identity, churches, interest groups, media stations both in urban and rural settings have the capability of increasing non institutionalized democratic participation.

Conclusions

This paper concludes that there is a growing trend in Kenya for SNS to shape modern politics that ever before. We are persuaded that SNS have the potential for ensuring a widening discourse and ensuring democratic participation in the public realm. SNS reduce the risks of central control of media hence it constitutes a radical break with previous communication technologies. For these reasons, SNS will play an important role in influencing political developments. Unlike the 1960s when political leadership failed to take advantage of the technological innovations available at the time to promote a more democratic climate, today most governments, including Kenya are creating backbone infrastructure that supports ICT use. By extension they are championing the role of the media in helping to bring about a stronger democratic consciousness. The paper observes that the increasing pervasiveness of highspeed Internet access and the proliferation of social networking tools mean that new forms and processes of public participation can truly change the way democracy works in Kenya.

The mobile phones have also proved to be an important internet access tool. The growing penetration of mobile phones and mobile internet usage on the African continent increases the potential for the use social media to bringing about democratic transformation especially in remote areas. Finally, SNS have the potential of having a great impact in the developing world where institutional political participation forms are less established.

Recommendations

It has emerged that SNS appear to be effective in helping citizens increase their democratic participation. Facebook is popular with millions of users, and in some ways it appears to be an ideal tool for expanding communicative spaces. The extent to which using SNS tools can be considered to be less demanding in terms of time, commitment, risk or energy needs to be investigated.

The international community has taken an interest in African democratization by funding a broad range of activities. Most of these have focused on reforming state institutions or building civil society organizations. Relatively little support has been given to the media and non to SNS. In recognition of the shift in political participation to the SNS arena, we recommend that the international community can do much more to strengthen the use of SNS to enhance democratic participation.

The question of the digital divide is a major cause of concern. It has the potential of slowing down ICT usage. The rural areas of Africa continue to lack electricity and it will take long time before the majority of the population will be able to use it in their homes. The best that may be expected in the short to medium run is the establishment of telecenters, say in commercial establishments, to enable people to make use of the SNS for democratic participation.

In Kenya SNS may foster a sense of negative ethnicity where people maintain and extend ethnic hatred in a variety of ways. The use of SNS can spew out hatred, foster misunderstanding and perpetuate animosity. They can foster a sense of collective identity that reassures such people that they are not alone. They can use SNS to develop networks of support in which ideas and information are shared to achieve greater social harm. Therefore, the extent to which SNS may perpetuate negative ethnicity in Kenya needs to be investigated.

It should be investigated whether SNS have the potential to facilitate significantly greater political knowledge, engagement or participation. For instance whether active SNS users' political knowledge about presidential candidates and or the election increase significantly. The government can enhance institutionalization of democratic participation by allowing online participation in referendums, enhance digitizing of more of the government services, policy making on Internet usage, regulating the costs, increasing internet connection in rural areas and provide education on how to use the internet and its benefits.

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