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Digital Democracy

Who Holds Sovereignty Over the Internet?

Social Media and Democracy in Africa

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In Africa, the continent with the greatest democratic deficits, the internet, and above all social media, offers new opportunities for civic participation, transparency and public access to information. Yet the initial euphoria about the emancipatory potential of social media is increasingly being tempered by scepticism. It is hard to ignore the internet's dark side, such as the spread of hate speech and fake news. Meanwhile, Africa's autocratic regimes are becoming more adept at instrumentalising social media to serve their own ends.

Social Media – A Double-Edged Sword

The digital revolution is changing democracy and, above all, social media is exerting a growing influence on political developments. Just a few years ago, the focus was generally on its positive aspects, and a certain sense of euphoria emerged in the wake of the Arab Spring.[1] All of a sudden, social media was viewed as a catalyst for social and political change. Positive effects for the development of democracy were widely expected, such as: diversity of information, a networking of progressive forces, new forms of political communication, digital transparency and accountability initiatives, new spaces for activism, and online mobilisation of civic engagement. But a growing sense of disillusionment has set in. The hoped-for new wave of democratisation has failed to materialise. Instead, liberal democracy seems to be coming under increasing pressure all over the globe. Some observers believe social media has played a key role in this, with others even seeing it as a threat to democratic society.[2] In fact, the focus has shifted more and more to the internet's dark side, where disinformation and fake news are rife, along with targeted manipulation, data abuse, cyberbullying, hate speech, and the polarisation and radicalisation of social groups. In Africa too, there is a light and dark side to social media and to its political significance. Both aspects have huge potential, with democratic and undemocratic forces taking advantage of the new opportunities presented by the digital sphere. The battle for internet sovereignty and opinions on social media is in full swing.

The Internet and Social Media in Africa

In June 2019, over half a billion people in Africa accessed the internet[3] – a number surpassed only by Europe and Asia. However, this mass of users does not detract from the fact that Africa still has a great deal of catching up to do. In terms of the proportion of the population with internet access, Africa lags behind every other region, at just 40 per cent.[4] There are considerable regional differences within Africa itself, but the proportion of internet users is growing by around 20 per cent a year – faster than anywhere else in the world.[5]

The fact that more people in Africa are not using the internet is primarily due to a lack of infrastructure, and high costs. Remote regions are particularly badly served, often struggling with poor bandwidth or no internet access at all. Yet digital transformation is continuing apace, and the big technology companies have long been pushing hard for African markets. The mobile phone sector is booming, and this is how the majority of Africans access the internet. However the high cost of data connections remains a major hurdle – these charges are more expensive in Africa than anywhere else in the world.[6] Despite this, the spread of the internet – and social media in particular – have had a significant impact on political and social

developments in Africa, largely driven by the continent's growing young, urban population. Statistics show that Africans, on average, spend considerably more time on the internet and social media, and that political content plays a more important role than in Europe or North America.[7]

Democratic Awakening through Social Media?

Little has remained of the hype about social media being a "liberation technology"[8], but we should not underestimate the impact of social media on the spread of democracy. Particularly in the political context of Sub-Saharan Africa with its many democratic deficits, online platforms are important tools for promoting democracy and civic engagement. The digital sphere provides new spaces for open political discourse and interactive exchange, transcending geographical borders, the constraints of political power structures, and state control. It also opens up new possibilities for the organisation of civil society. Particularly for countries ruled by autocratic regimes, it is not just a place for sharing information but a way of mobilising protest. Online campaigns can put pressure on politicians and ensure certain issues are put on the political agenda. But they can also go beyond the digital sphere and act as a catalyst and resource for protest movements and civil resistance. They help to attract an (often global) audience and allow observers to participate directly in events. Live tweets and smartphone videos attract attention and solidarity, making it difficult for state propaganda to control the narrative and sweep events under the carpet.

Ten years after the Arab Spring, it has become clear that social media is not the key to a successful revolution. Nevertheless, it can still be an important element in social and political change, as has been demonstrated by recent events and trends in Sub-Saharan Africa.

In October 2014, the former president of **Burkina Faso**, Blaise Compaoré, tried to amend the constitution in order to extend his term of office. This led to mass demonstrations that finally sealed the end of his 27-year presidency. The uprising was mainly driven by young people, who coordinated the protests on social media.[9]

In **Gambia**, social media played an important role during the elections of December 2016. Opposition groups and young activists took to Facebook, Twitter and WhatsApp to mobilise voters and counter government propaganda. As a result, Gambia's long-time dictator and president, Yahya Jammeh, was narrowly defeated at the polls. When he rejected the outcome of the vote, the protesters took to social media and their message was heard far beyond the borders of this small country. In the end, ECOWAS, the sub-regional body of West Africa, launched a military intervention that forced Jammeh to step down. But it was the protests of young Gambians, both online and on the streets, that paved the way for the ultimately peaceful transfer of power.[10]

In **Zimbabwe**, protests against the country's political and economic situation under dictator Robert Mugabe broke out in mid-2016, but they were initiated on social media.[11] All over the country, people took to Facebook, Twitter and WhatsApp to coordinate the so-called Stay-Away day on 6 July 2016. This one-off strike action was followed by weeks of protests, which were reignited by a military coup in November 2017. Thousands of demonstrators showed their support for the coup and demanded Mugabe's resignation. After a few days he gave in to pressure from the military and resigned as president, a post he had held for almost 30 years.

Since 2018, **Ethiopia** has been on a – sometimes bumpy – road to reform under Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed. This would have been unthinkable just a few years ago. Here too, social media has played a not insignificant role in bringing about change. In late 2015, a storm of outrage was triggered by the violent suppression of protests in the Oromia region. The protests quickly spread to other parts of the country and increasingly began to focus on more general grievances. They were often coordinated via social media,

bypassing state censorship and attracting strong support from the diaspora.[12] The government's brutality against the protesters was also continuously documented and denounced. Finally, the government was forced to change tack by releasing political prisoners and removing blocks on critical websites. In February 2018, Hailemariam Desalegn finally resigned as prime minister and the ruling party elected Abiy Ahmed as his successor shortly afterwards.

Sudan is the most recent example of an effective popular uprising in Africa. In April 2019, after months of relentless protests and numerous deaths in the capital, Khartoum, the military finally ousted dictator Omar Al-Bashir, who had ruled the country for almost 30 years. After his removal, citizens kept up their protests against the military council that supplanted him and forced a compromise by forming a joint civilian-military ruling body to install a transitional government. The protest was coordinated on platforms such as Facebook, Twitter and the instant messaging service Telegram. The protests, and the brutality of the security forces were also widely reported on social media, with dramatic photos and smartphone videos being viewed all over the world. The regime responded by blocking internet access, but activists quickly found ways of circumventing this by using VPN services. They thus continued to tell the world what was happening in Sudan and kept up the public pressure.[13]

Revolutions still take place on the streets, not online.

Unlike with the events of the Arab Spring, no-one referred to the above as examples of "Facebook revolutions". Social media does not trigger such uprisings, nor is it the most important factor in ensuring their success. Revolutions still take place on the streets, not online. Yet the above examples highlight the significant impact that social media can have on events. It can raise the collective awareness of shared problems and convey a sense of community and solidarity. Social media opens up alternative channels for communication and coordination, help to circumvent state censorship, mobilise resistance and create public awareness. In the examples given above, without social media it would have been nigh on impossible to mobilise so many protesters in such a short time, and to allow people all over the world to be part of events as they unfolded.

But a complete picture also includes the realisation that the euphoria that follows successful uprisings swiftly gives way to disillusionment, and that supposed democratic awakenings often fail to deliver on their promises. This is currently being demonstrated in Burkina Faso and Zimbabwe. In Sub-Saharan Africa, too, the bitter lesson of the Arab Spring is confirmed: It is much easier to overthrow a regime than to build the hoped-for stable democratic future in its wake. Social media appears to be far more useful in achieving the former than the latter.

Beyond Revolution: Different Contributions to Democratic Development

As a result, we should not expect too much of social media when it comes to radical democratic change. But democracy is more than simply a question of whether and how the balance of power can be shifted. Any substantive understanding of democracy has to include how citizens interact with each other and the state. It has to consider participation in decision-making processes, individual rights and freedoms, transparency and accountability. Going beyond dramatic uprisings and revolutions, this is where social media can make a contribution in Africa:

- Political movements and parties now have access to new forms of communication, which gives them more direct contact to their members and voters, helping them to coordinate political activities and mobilise support. The established media often leaves little space for criticism and opposition,

whereas social media offers alternative platforms for conveying political positions.

- Social media offers alternative channels for disseminating independent and uncensored information, particularly when the traditional media are controlled by the state. Indeed, many young Africans see Facebook and Twitter as their main sources of information. As a result, the gatekeeper function of conventional mass media is becoming less and less important. Information lands on the internet regardless of editorial priorities and government censorship. Every single citizen becomes a potential source of information. This means that topics and voices that would otherwise be excluded are now part of the public debate.

- Social media can foster greater transparency and accountability. Government institutions can proactively seize digital opportunities to ensure that information and services are available online. For their part, citizens can use the platforms to demand their rights, air grievances and raise specific concerns. Public institutions find it much harder to ignore problems when they have been shared on social media. Social media also provides opportunities for fighting corruption. Whistle-blowers in both public and private institutions can share their allegations outside of the (sometimes untrustworthy) official channels, as can ordinary citizens who have become victims of, or witnesses to, corruption. Experiences in Uganda have shown how social media can make an important contribution to greater transparency, civic participation and the service orientation of authorities at the local level.[14]

- Particularly for younger target groups, social media offers additional, innovative approaches for educational and awareness-raising activities, especially in the areas of human rights and civic education. State actors, such as human rights commissions, electoral commissions and non-governmental organisations already use online platforms

in a variety of ways to convey their key principles and values – not only, but particularly, with regard to elections.

- Social media can promote new forms of civic engagement. It can help people to identify shared concerns, and to create a sense of community and solidarity that ideally translates into collective action. This does not necessarily have to involve protests. There are many opportunities for constructive engagement, such as the dissemination of online petitions, promoting fundraising campaigns for social and humanitarian concerns, and coordinating a rapid response to crisis situations, such as the Westgate terrorist attacks in Kenya.[15]

Revealing the Ugly Face of Social Media

In December 2019, when Ethiopia's Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed accepted the Nobel Peace Prize in Oslo, he had a clear message: Social media was being used to sow hate and division and preach "the gospel of revenge and retribution."[16] At first glance, given the vital role social media played in the political changes that swept Ahmed into office, this might seem an astonishing statement. However, the dark side – the ugly face – of social media, is increasingly being revealed, and Ethiopia is no exception.

Over the last few years, people in Africa have become much more aware of the negative effects of social media. They are realising that social media can polarise and radicalise society, rather than having the unifying effect described above. Africa has also seen the tone of internet discussions become increasingly harsh. Day in and day out, the social networks are filled with toxic hate speech. The effects of algorithms, filter bubbles, and echo chambers mean that many users do not expand their horizons by assimilating a range of information. Instead, they shore up their existing world view by engaging solely with like-minded people. This is particularly dangerous in the context of the ongoing conflicts and ethnic tensions that are rife in many African countries. South Sudan is an example of how social media can exacerbate conflict. According to a 2016 study, 60 per cent of users have been involved in spreading posts that fuel ethnic tension and incite violence. Political leaders on both sides of the civil war that raged in South Sudan took advantage of this, often via deliberate manipulation aided by fake news.[17]

Governments in Africa are becoming increasingly aware of how to instrumentalise and manipulate social media for their own purposes.

When the dark side of social media is discussed, fake news generally seems to be today's hottest topic. From the brazen lies of individual users to the misleading propaganda of political groups – day after day, Africa's social media is flooded with falsified or completely invented information. It is becoming increasingly difficult for ordinary users to assess the truth of news, and to filter out reliable information. Targeted disinformation campaigns, particularly during election campaigns, are not uncommon. In 2019, fake news was an issue in every national election in Africa, fuelled by the ongoing revelations about systematic manipulation on the part of Facebook et al. In May 2019, Facebook announced the suspension of an Israeli consulting firm for coordinating a network of fake user profiles that systematically tried to influence political sentiment in several African countries.[18] In October there were similar headlines about the blocking of hundreds of fake accounts, which had been used to try to influence elections in eight African countries. This time the connections led back to Russia.[19] Back in 2018, it came to light that the notorious company Cambridge Analytica was at work in several countries,

← Will the radio become irrelevant? Social media offers alternative channels for disseminating independent and uncensored information. Source: © Adriane Ohanesian, Reuters.

including Kenya and Nigeria, where it was harvesting and abusing massive amounts of Facebook data and spreading targeted disinformation in an attempt to influence voter behaviour.[20]

The Response of African Governments: Control, Manipulate, Block

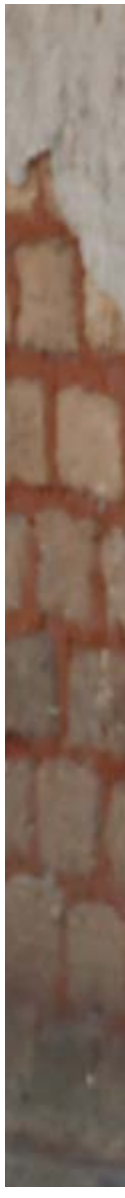
These indications of targeted manipulation point to another reason for the growing scepticism towards social media: Governments in Africa are becoming increasingly aware of how to instrumentalise and manipulate social media for their own purposes, spying on the online activities of their own citizens and, in case of doubt, restricting their use through regulation and blocking. The aforementioned discussions about hate speech and fake news play into their hands, because they provide a welcome justification for stricter controls.

Of course, the classic instruments employed by authoritarian regimes to deal with their critics – which are well known to journalists working for traditional media outlets – are now also being used for social media. Censorship of critical online content, and the regular arrest of bloggers and activists are taking place. If African governments find they lack the necessary tools to control online content, they increasingly resort to the most radical instrument at their disposal – blocking internet access altogether or, where technically possible, access to certain social networks. Over the last few years more than a dozen African countries have been affected by such shutdowns, at least temporarily. These have mainly been triggered by nascent or escalating protests or "preventive" blockade measures around elections.

Many countries are also tightening their laws. Tanzania has passed a strict cybercrime law, which its opponents see as just another way of silencing critical voices. In Nigeria, plans for a similar law are being met with considerable resistance.[21] Meanwhile, Uganda has been pioneering a different approach: taxing social media. Since July 2018, Ugandans have had to pay a special tax to access online services like Facebook, Twitter and WhatsApp. The government justified this step by claiming the need to increase tax revenues but added that it would also curb "irresponsible" social media use. Five other African countries have already implemented similar policies or have them in the pipeline. Reporters Without Borders has condemned the taxes as a massive restriction of freedom of information, which undermines democracy.[22] In a recent paper, lawyer Justine Limpitlaw came to the conclusion that the Ugandan model – akin to the licence fees for publishing online content in Tanzania that affect bloggers amongst others – constitutes a violation of international human rights.[23] At first glance the fees might seem small, but they are beyond the reach of the majority of poor people in the countries concerned, thus massively restricting access to information.

China not only exports its technology for digital infrastructure and surveillance, but also its idea of "cyber sovereignty" to Africa.

With these technical steps to monitor the internet and the legal measures to regulate it, many African countries are following the example of China, which has massively expanded its political and economic influence on the continent in recent years. In its 2018 report "Freedom on the Net", US think tank Freedom House gives a detailed description of the global rise of "digital authoritarianism", driven largely by China.[24] China is not only exporting its technology for digital infrastructure and surveillance, but also its idea of "cyber sovereignty", in which the state exercises full control over the internet and the digital sphere. It is no coincidence that the legislative measures taken in Uganda and Tanzania were preceded by intensive training for government officials regarding the Chinese model.[25] Zimbabwe is currently laying the legal and technical foundations for a surveillance



system based on the Chinese model.[26] On top of this, there are persistent allegations – initially made by the Wall Street Journal – that the Chinese technology company Huawei helped the governments of Zambia and Uganda to spy on members of the opposition.[27]

The South African think tank SAIIA (South African Institute of International Affairs) warns of a creeping trend towards "digital dictatorship" in view of the measures taken by African governments:

"African leaders have now realised that they can control technology and manipulate the freeness and fairness of political processes. Slowly, they are pushing the boundaries of what is and is not acceptable. Whereas social media and

Surveillance: Governments in Africa increasingly manage to spy on the online activities of their own citizens and, in case of doubt, restrict their use through regulation and blocking. Source: © Goran Tomašević, Reuters.

the internet were initially seen as a threat to the closed and restrictive culture of Africa's old guard of leaders, governments and political parties have flipped the equation and are now using digital technologies in their favour."[28]

Conclusions for Pro-Democratic Engagement

The examples of democratic change mentioned at the beginning of this article should not conceal the fact that, with just a few exceptions, democratic development in Africa is currently stagnating rather than progressing. Most African nations are still in the grip of old, authoritarian rulers, and successful protests remain few and far between. Current developments give reason to fear that social media will not bring about much change in this respect. Nevertheless, it would be wrong to ignore its role or reduce it to the negative aspects. This article has attempted to shed equal light on the light and dark sides of social media. The first priority is to recognise this inherent contradiction.

Pro-democracy actors would be well advised to take these developments seriously and explicitly include them in their considerations when planning their campaigns. For their part, governments in liberal Western democracies must develop convincing alternative concepts for dealing politically with the opportunities and challenges of social media, and promote their implementation. Of course, this also raises the question of the legal framework and the need for regulation, especially in view of the role of major technology corporations and providers of online platforms. However, the top priority must be to defend freedom of information and freedom of expression, including – and especially – in the digital sphere. Under no circumstances should the West allow China and other authoritarian regimes free rein in Africa, despite the fact that their models appear to be attractive to many African governments.

It is also worth looking at Africa's younger generation of activists and innovators who are striving to find answers to these challenges. There are many initiatives that should be supported, including campaigns against online hate speech such as #defyhatenow[29] in Southern Sudan, and initiatives to unmask fake news, such as those being undertaken by Africa Check.[30] It is also important to continue trying to strengthen traditional media. Part of the problem lies in the loss of trust in established media formats. At the same time, the fight against disinformation in the digital sphere can only succeed in conjunction with independent, quality journalism.

Africa also has a particular need for more investment in its digital infrastructure, as digital inequality remains a fundamental problem. As long as large sections of the population in many African countries remain excluded from modern technology, and thus from access to information, the hoped-for emancipatory, democratising effect of the digital revolution will remain illusory.

Ultimately, when considering social media, we come to the rather clumsy realisation that it is not technology that is the problem per se, but how we deal with it. This puts the user in the foreground. Thus, the most important and yet most difficult task is probably the education and information of citizens. The internalisation of basic values such as tolerance and respect, and a sense of critical awareness on the part of internet users – not only about how the technology works, but also about their rights and obligations – are key factors in ensuring that the positive aspects of social media outweigh the negatives. In other words, the best strategy is a responsible, enlightened citizenry – which, of course, is also the key to a functioning democracy.

–translated from German–

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