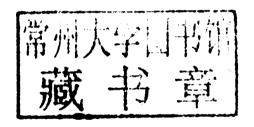


CIVIC ENGAGEMENT, DIGITAL NETWORKS, AND POLITICAL REFORM IN AFRICA

Okoth Fred Mudhai







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On a personal level, this book is dedicated to my valuable companion Flo, who from our undergraduate years put up with my very busy life (initially as a journalist and later as an academic), and to Ruth, Jean, Alex, and near-anagrammatic Fares-Fraser. All of you had to do without my expected presence (physical and mental) on many occasions—enduring my immersion in my work many a times.

More generally and fundamentally, this book is a tribute to all of Africa's genuine, selfless, brave, and dedicated on-the-ground civil society activists and reform advocates who have sacrificed their comforts, and—for some—even their lives, to fight for better conditions in-country and on the continent, as their loved ones endure intolerable hardships. To you and your families, take great pride in your contribution to the greater good in Africa—knowing change would hardly ever "happen," solely on benevolence of politicos, without your often extremely challenging "push" activities and actions.

PREFACE

When the journey leading to this book began in 2000, not much serious academic and general public attention was being paid to the link between digital information and communication technologies (ICTs) and political activities—especially in Africa. At a 2001 event hosted by the British High Commission in Nairobi, a Kenyan politician spoke to me and a senior UK diplomat rather dismissively but politely about any attempts to link ICTs and politics in the Kenyan [and African] context; vet before long in July 2002, in the run up to that year's general election, one presidential aspirant had a huge banner displaying his website above and across a major street leading into the capital city from the upmarket Westlands suburbs. "I love that website, the ideas...," was the comment about the politician's website by a member of one of Kenya's oldest online discussion forums, Mashada. The fact that the website of this former member of parliament did not last long and that his presidential bid was short-lived, because he was up against much more dominant opponents (especially in consideration of ethnic factors) and despite his having proposed a popular but stillborn financial bill, shows the limits to the efficacy of any progressive politics that embrace ICTs without taking into account the local dynamics. All the same such early attempts at doing politics online encouraged me to refresh my interest in new ICT media and politics in Africa, especially in the online-digital activities of the civic-minded citizens.

My conversations with ordinary people in Tunis streets during the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS), in November 2005, revealed a great deal of desire by the younger generation to express themselves freely, especially online, amidst a great deal of fear about heavy state surveillance of off-line and web activities. At that time, hardly anybody could predict that activists who were being arrested as web sites were being blocked during the WSIS event, held in an exclusive upmarket urban village, would slowly build up their networks and anger—leading to the ouster of erstwhile dominant President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali in the January 2011 uprising peak,

and set the tone and trend for North Africa and the Middle East. Despite their fears, a number of youthful Tunisians I had informal chats with in Tunis told me that there were limits to how far and how long the regime could try to cut them off from each other and the rest of the world.

Such personal experiences and interactions whetted my initial appetite in the subject of this book, even though the cell phone networks had yet to penetrate most of Africa as widely as has happened in the last few years, and long before the popularity of social networking sites such as Facebook and Twitter. In the period leading to the publication of this book, I attended, was involved in, or followed a number of activities relating to this topic. Let me highlight a selection of these to depict the attitudes of organizers, and funders, on ICT-politics in relation to Africa (especially sub-Sahara). One category is the Africa promise or Africa potential stance by those who believe in the utility of a specific focus on ICT and politics in Africa, enough to be positively selective in paying attention to the sub-Sahara sphere of the continent. Examples in this category include two linked Africa-US collaborative events in Nigeria, "ICTs and Civil Society: Nigeria" in July 2009² and the follow-up "ICT and Civic Engagement in Nigeria: The 2011 Presidential Election and Beyond" in Abuja, July 2010.3 Another example is the mid-June 2012 London conference, "ICTs, New Media and Social Change in Africa"—which had an open call.⁴ The second category is a selective stance—like conventional news media—linked to publicity, paying more attention to the regions or areas exhibiting the greatest spectacles at a given time without declaring so in the conference title, brief, or theme. Focus for this category is on those geographical areas in the mainstream news discourse, and academic or related voices given platform are either those in the public domain or those well known in Western media theory realms, especially from the United Kingdom and the United States. In this category is the April 2012 London conference "Media Power and Revolution: Making the 21st Century"5 at which there was no visible interest in a sub-Saharan Africa perspective (at least going by the intimation of a London-based academic), with North African happenings viewed much more in terms of the Arab or Middle East perspective than in relation to Africa. The third stance is that of a "global" promise or "global" potential that takes a non-selective or non-discriminative approach in relation to sub-Saharan Africa, focusing on areas in the news as well as regions off-news, and giving platform to voices as diverse as possible. Under this falls the October 2010 "New Media / Alternative Politics: Communication Technologies

and Political Change in the Middle East and Africa" in Cambridge, UK6 and the mid-year "Global Voices Citizen Media Summit 2012" in Nairobi, Kenya.7 The foci, activities, and goals of each of such stances and events depend on the organizers, funders, and context and they all emphasize the increasing engagement with the debates and practices relating to new ICT media in politics.

The biggest challenge is to study and analyze trends that could help in understanding of a buildup to what is ahead, rather than follow news in over-dwelling on what has happened already. Such an approach would have helped us listen more carefully to ordinary Tunisians in 2003 and foresee a buildup to the so-called Arab Spring rather than celebrate how spectacularly 'new' or revolutionary the phenomenon is several years later. In 2003, many analysts would have given strong arguments why such an uprising could not happen in Tunisia or Egypt. In 2012, a number of mostly different arguments have been given why an ICT-catalyzed uprising will for certain not happen in Zimbabwe, South Africa, Nigeria, and many other sub-Saharan African countries. Context is important. While we may be certain of a historical context, we cannot be sure of the ever-changing contemporary context—which is partly formed by new media technologies, whose political uses are often unforeseen by their inventors or policy-makers. This book takes the approach that anything is possible, and nothing can be ruled out—whatever happens depends on local, regional, and global contexts, in that order, rather than on information and communication technologies alone.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I am grateful to all those individuals, groups, institutions, and organizations that have supported through feedback/collegiality/funding, papers and presentations (at seminars, conferences, and workshops) as well as data collection and other research activities related to the content of this book over the past 12 years. Too many to name, but a few deserve mention.

At Coventry University, I am thankful to the following for my short sabbatical in early 2012 among other support: Andrew Noakes, associate senior lecturer in Journalism; Dr. Stefan Herbrechter, MA programmes manager; Gary Hall, professor of Media and Performance; Dr. Shaun Hides, Media Head of Department; professor Martyn Woolley, associate dean of Applied Research, School of Art and Design; professor Ian Marshall, deputy vice-chancellor (Academic). I am also grateful for the contributions of the African Studies Centre and Politics and International Studies research groups as well as the support of the founding director of Coventry's Centre for Media Arts and Performance research group, Karen Ross (professor of Media and Public Communication, University of Liverpool). I should not forget a number of my recent postgraduate students for their input.

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of Stellenbosch through professor Herman Wasserman (currently at Rhodes University, South Africa).

On my attendance at the insightful July 2010 symposium on 'ICT and Civic Engagement in Nigeria: The 2011 Presidential Election and Beyond', I wish to thank associate professor of International Affairs and Interactive Computing Dr. Michael L. Best (The Sam Nunn School of International Affairs, Georgia Institute of Technology, USA) and his team for the event co-organized by Georgia Tech, Harvard University's Berkman Centre for Internet and Society, the US National Democratic Institute, and Nigeria's Digital Bridge Institute, and sponsored by MacArthur Foundation.

My gratitude also goes to the Information Technology and International Cooperation Programme of the U.S. Social Science Research Council for their support through the Information Technology and Civil Society Network (2003-2005). It was an inspiring collaboration that resulted in a book on IT and global civil society (Dean, Anderson and Lovink 2006).

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For those supportive forces I have not mentioned, I extend my thanks to you all for your role. Of course all errors and infelicities remain my responsibility and your input does not imply endorsement of the content or views in this book.

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ABBREVIATIONS AND ACRONYMS [SELECTED]

AU African Union

ATM Automated Teller Machine

BBC British Broadcasting Corporation

BCE Before Common Era, used in place of Before

Christ (BC)

BFN Between Facts and Norms (by Jurgen Habermas)

CBOs Community Based Organizations

CE Common Era, used in place of Anno Domino (AD)

CJA Citizens Journalism in Africa

CMC Computer Mediated Communication
CPJ Committee to Protect Journalists
CSO(s) Civil Society Organization(s)

DFID The UK government Department for International

Development

DSF Digital Solidarity Fund EC European Community

ECA United Nations Economic Commission for Africa
ESD Electronic Service Delivery [especially in e-governance

realms]

EU European Union

FDI Foreign Direct Investment

GII Global Information Infrastructure GCSOs Global Civil Society Organisations

HTML Hyper Text Mark Up Language (for WWW text or

graphics)

ICT Information and Communication Technology

IMF International Monetary Fund IR International Relations ISP Internet Service Provider

IT Information Technology

ITU International Telecommunication Union

LAN Local Area Network

LDCs Least Developed Countries

Movement for Multiparty Democracy MMD

Multinational Corporations MNC

NIGD Network Institute for Global Democratisation

Nongovernmental Organization NGO ODA Official Development Assistance OAU Organisation of African Union

PC Personal Computer SNS Social Networking Site

STPS Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere

(by Jurgen Habermas)

SSA Sub-Saharan Africa

TDFs Transnational Data Flows **TNCs** Transnational Corporations

TNCSOs Transnational Civil Society Organizations UNDP United Nations Development Programme URL Uniform Resource Locator (or web address)

VOA Voice of America

WSIS World Summit on the Information Society

WTM Watch Tower Movement WTO World Trade Organization

WWW World Wide Web

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Introduction