



New Media Influence on Social and Political Change in Africa

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BOOK REVIEW

Interrogating the impact of new media in Africa

If a free and thriving media is an intrinsic part of a genuine democracy, what does that say for democracy in an age where everyone who has access to the internet – via computer or smartphone – is essentially a part of the media?

We have seen a number of examples recently of peoples using this “new media” to speak out against their governments. The Arab Springs are hailed as an illustration of the power of social media. Some even go so far as to claim that social media was a key instigator of the uprisings that swept across the Arab world in early 2011, that discontent expressed first on the internet developed into protests through the real world streets. If new media has the power to bring about political change, then it could very well serve to initiate a third wave of democracy and have a huge impact on the future of the African continent. But is it realistic to attribute so much influence to a medium in its infancy on a continent where many people do not have access to ICTs and where even those with such access might be faced with other digital divides like language, literacy and tech-savvyness?

These questions are addressed in *New Media Influence on Social and Political Change in Africa*, a collection of individual academic essays that seek to interrogate, on a case-by-case basis, the impact that new media has had on politics on the continent in recent years.

The first section of the book deals with how new

information and communication technologies have informed traditional media’s struggle for political and social reforms in Africa. The second section asks, “How have new media transformed Africa’s social and political landscape?” The editors explain that the question is intentionally broad, inviting a wide range of views on diverse experiences.

While the editors and many of the authors are not based in Africa, there is something to be said for an outsider’s objective perspective. In the first few pages the editors are clear to point out how a western framework is problematic when dealing with the African context. As a result the text manages to avoid the failings of so many other works which would seek to examine Africa through a lens that taints it as the troubled dark continent. In each article the unique cultural and political setting is taken into account. Overall the book is well-balanced and commendably objective, seeking neither to hail new media as some great equaliser of all, nor to understate the possibilities present when technology has put mass communication within reach of a significant portion of the population.

While new media in general and social media in particular has been the subject of much discussion in recent years, it is refreshing to read an examination focused on the local context. I would recommend the book to any student of the media studying in Africa and hoping to gain an understanding of the larger role of the media, old and new, in politics.

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