

MOBILE MEDIA

as a space for political deliberation in Sub-Saharan Africa

Although Africa may have the lowest infrastructural investment in the world, it is clear that the last two decades have been marked by an explosive growth of mobile telephony, connecting communities that were once perceived as inaccessible to the supposed information economy. The rapid increase has also seen the development of mobile-broadband networks to facilitate high-speed connections and to allow for the transition from analogue to digital broadcasting services as initially proposed by the International Telecommunication Union.

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While it is true that the development of mobile technologies has also taken Africa by storm, the experience has been quite different. In Kenya, Safaricom's M-Pesa¹ has grown to become a leading real-time e-banking platform allowing users to deposit, withdraw, transfer, purchase airtime, and access micro-loans using their mobile phones. Indeed, it is estimated that 43% of Kenya's current GDP flows through M-Pesa. In addition to cutting down transaction costs and extending banking services to all, through M-Pesa services, Safaricom has developed various features allowing for the sharing of pre-paid airtime between mobile subscribers.

Through the Please Call Me feature, South Africa's Vodacom also provides its subscribers with a platform to send up to 10 free text messages daily, to request a callback from users within South African networks². The feature has provided subscribers with the means to keep in touch with family members or relatives without costs, particularly in emergency situations, and significantly reduced the number of prematurely disconnected calls or flashing³.

In this article, I discuss the feasibility of mobile media as a tool to increase civic participation in the context of deliberative democracy. The article will focus on how Ushahidi, a mobile-based digital platform, can be best integrated into civic and journalistic practices to strengthen democratic principles in Sub-Saharan Africa. Although there is a widespread interest in the study of mobile appropriation in Africa, most of this focuses on socio-economic realities discussed above. There is little literature on the potentials of mobile media as a tool to address the challenges of democracy, yet this is a region often riddled by conflicting perceptions over election credibility, patronage politics, and power legitimacy. This article is a modest contribution to this end. The central overarching question addressed is whether mobile media platforms such as Ushahidi provide subscribers with significant forms of direct democracy or they, instead, create new forms of oppression that continue to "enslave" users in the context of digital democracy.

Ushahidi as a democratising and peace-oriented mobile platform

Ushahidi, a Swahili word for testimony, is a localized mobile media platform using the concept of crowd-sourcing to blend citizen journalism, geopolitical information, and social activism. Created as a website

to map out and enable eyewitness reporting in Kenya following the 2007-08 conflicts, Ushahidi has since become a global mobile platform providing users with various features. It offers a dynamic timeline to help track events as they happen and where they occur; provides multiple data streams to easily collect information via emails, text messages, Youtube videos, and twitter; and facilitates an interactive mapping feature to visualise activities on a map. Ushahidi is also a free and open-source platform for all its users, facilitating virtual group formation and collaborative content generation⁴.

One can argue that the fundamental idea behind Ushahidi is not opposition; rather, a demand for open-source governance, as it strives to extend the idea of public sphere to all members of a population in order to stimulate rational dialogue on democratic activities. In this regard, Ushahidi can be considered as a space for political deliberation in Sub-Saharan Africa, marred by conflicting perceptions over freedom of speech, electoral processes, and the pursuit of justice. Several aspects of Ushahidi support its potential use as a discursive political space.

First, by facilitating the creation of common knowledge through collective content generation, Ushahidi somewhat supports consensus decision-making on issues such as power legitimacy and accountability, central aspects of any form of democracy. Thus, journalists can tap into the crowd-sourced database while tracking events as they happen. Ordinary citizens can also contribute directly to the development of this online database, making it difficult for governments to suppress information and smother dissents. As a result, the collective database can serve to document and gauge governments' performance on various issues such as political transparency and accountability.

Second, through its election-monitoring tool called Uchaguzi (Swahili word for election), Ushahidi has the potential to address the complex challenge of good governance in many parts of Sub-Saharan Africa. The real-time sharing of geo-located information about ongoing elections may translate into the adoption of populist or deliberative public opinion with regard to election results. In this case, "cooked results" may be dismissed and trials may be conducted, where applicable, to hold election offers accountable. The monitoring feature thus casts Ushahidi as a space for deliberative democracy, as it increases the scale of

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public participation in overseeing the operation of political systems. Participants take an active role in creating informed, engaged, and reflective public opinions⁵.

Finally, the interactive map provided by Ushahidi can facilitate crisis response by guiding journalists and rescue teams to the most pressing areas, help various actors track cases of human rights abuses and coordinate post-conflict recovery, and assist in the protection of civilians by keeping communities aware of the dangerous zones. With the growing political uncertainty in Sub-Saharan Africa, inter-group conflicts have remained protracted. Establishing humanitarian corridors has thus become a major challenge. The real-time map may, in this case, provide journalists, governments, civil society, NGOs, and other players involved in the conflict, with the means to quickly identify and address the situation before it proliferates.

Challenges of digital democracy in Sub-Saharan Africa

Although it has become commonplace to suggest that mobile media somewhat extends power to the people, the practicability of such tools to create structures for active civic engagement casts scepticism on the idea of digital political deliberation. Connecting communities that are offline remains a very pressing problem. Thus, even though journalists, activists, and the general public can now use mobile media to inspire hope for social change and to draw people to the streets, such technologies have not yet become as prolific a tool in Sub-Saharan Africa as for example the radio.

One of the common problems witnessed is the prevalence of a digital divide, emphasising the disparity in technological access, use, and appropriation between populations. Bridging this gap in a continent most affected by poverty is daunting, despite the fact that several economic indicators position technology as a central aspect of material wealth and knowledge production⁶. With sluggish economic growth, inadequate infrastructure, and insufficient knowledge to make good use of already available web-based platforms, it will be difficult for the majority of Africans to acquire proper technological devices and improve their connectivity, all of which are necessary to support any form of digital political engagement.

Given the explosion of citizen journalism in the last two decades and the development of big data, finding viable information for enlightenment can equally be challenging for the vast majority of Africans who have limited access to web-based technologies. In fact, platforms such as Ushahidi have introduced features such as the SwiftRiver to filter large amounts of information in order to increase authenticity and relevance. In other words, mobile media can be a liability on one hand (since it contributes to the stocks of unverified truths about a given occurrence), and an asset on the other hand (given the diversity of opinions generated and shared online). Creating a culture of online content sharing also means consuming the available information with great caution if rational decisions are to be made about democratic processes.



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Following the concerns over information security and vulnerability of government databases, we have also seen states investing in big data infrastructural surveillance programs to maintain social control. In Sub-Saharan Africa where funds for such initiatives are limited, the fear over the circulation of uncontrolled information has been at the centre of rigid development of ICT policies. Even in well-established democracies such as the US, online surveillance appears to have become an integral part of intelligence collection. The recent cases involving the former systems administrator for the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), Edward Snowden, and Wikileaks' Julian Assange illustrate the growing concern over information security.

For reasons relative to these cases, authoritarian regimes such as the Iranian government have gone to the extent of implanting “fake activists” on popular networks such as Facebook and Twitter to identify and disband opposition networks by slamming their masterminds with hefty fines, including prosecutions⁷. For African journalists and media professionals, navigating through such traps would be the main challenge to reporting on governments' malpractices. For many years, freedom of speech, public security, and the breach of public privacy have been key areas of contention between governments, civilians, journalists, and activists. This may explain why Africa's political elites prefer funnelling political information to the public through television and radio because they have the ability to control the airwaves. Thus, if digital technologies such as Ushahidi are to have any significant impact on the direction that deliberative democracy would take in Sub-Saharan Africa, it is imperative to convince this powerful elite group that such technologies would not clip their wings. This would discourage them from crafting policies that may eventually limit how civil society uses mobile media.

Reinforcing digital democracy in Sub-Saharan Africa

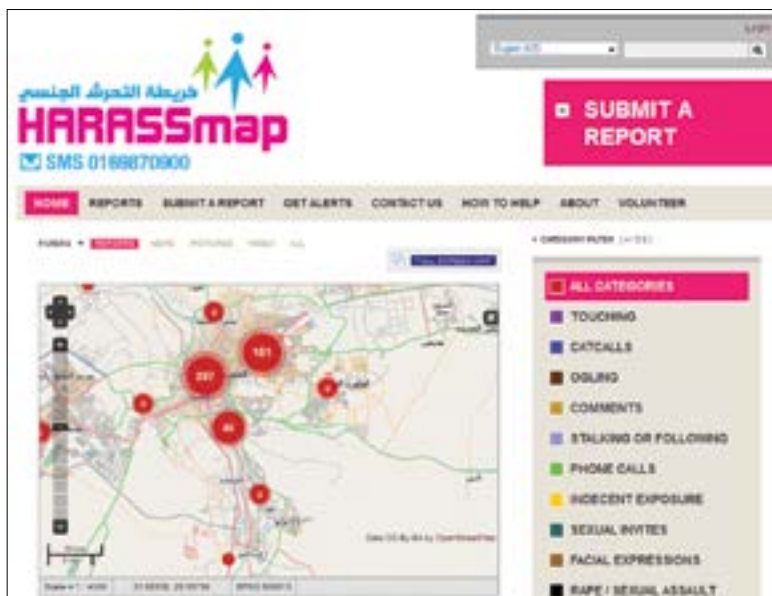
Despite the flourishing growth of mobile technologies in Africa, the vast majority of people do not have internet access. This limits mobile subscribers from maximising the potentials of such web-based technologies. The key question is how to create the conditions that facilitate technological expansion in Africa, specifically for mobile media. Three broad policy recommendations can be drawn from the foregoing discussions.

First, by creating conditions for internet accessibility and affordability, the majority of mobile phone subscribers would be able to enjoy the potentials that these technologies have to offer. This would extend the public sphere, a key aspect of rational discussion, to the ordinary people who, until now, seem to rely on radio broadcast for political information. This can be achieved by working with both technological and manufacturing companies to make sure they produce devices that are not only affordable, but also able to support interactive digital platforms. Cost and quality would, in this case, serve as control variables used to measure the value and impact of policy in this direction.

Second, related to the first, involves technological infrastructure. Setting basic standards for internet operation and supporting them with relevant policy tools would facilitate the development of broadband spectrum that enable mobile subscribers to create and share different forms of content efficiently. This is because mobile media necessitates reliable internet connections. In terms of policy, negotiating the use and license over television white spaces and radio spectrum would be an area to explore. This would allow mobile media operators to tap into the frequencies that have already been allocated but remain unused.

Third, embracing localized platforms such as Ushahidi may be a step forward in ensuring that the appropriation of technology is aligned with Africa's contextual and socio-cultural realities, one of which is the challenge of good governance. While mainstream platforms such as Youtube, Facebook, and Twitter have been used as virtual spaces to generate democratic discussions, they were not created as democratizing tools. This is not the case of mobile media platforms such as Ushahidi and Egypt's HarassMap, whose primary objective is to reinforce transparency and accountability in transitional democracies.

Lastly, it is imperative that such digital technologies attract the right people to enable the generation of content that is aligned with the platform's democratic objectives. A balance is needed between open-data and open-innovation platforms so they do not "overshadow the importance of the accuracy, completeness, and



relevance of what they communicate"⁸. This would allow such technologies to become more reliable.

While there is a steady growth of digital technologies in Sub-Saharan Africa allowing civilians and journalists to gather and share information through these sources, it is not exaggerated to say that users already connected, or rich in information resources are the ones that are likely to explore the potentials of mobile media as a space for political deliberation. Wiring peripheral and/or poorer groups that have not fully embraced the basics of web-based technologies remain the key impediment to the widespread use of interactive mobile media in the context of digital democracy. Unlike radio, these technologies have not

become standard tools.

Thus, it is necessary to create conditions that facilitate the prevalence of mobile media. This may increase connectivity for ordinary citizens and shift dialogic spaces that are characteristic of civic political engagement. Overall, Africa's best hope of strengthening democratic culture through technology partially hinges on the appropriation of localised platforms such as Ushahidi. This is because such platforms were specifically created to address the challenges of local circumstances such as the abuse of political power. Therefore, there is need for increased awareness and adaptation processes to aggregate, support, and harness both the growth and resilience of such localised platforms.

Endnotes

1. M-Pesa is a short form for mobile money in Swahili.
2. See <http://www.vodacom.co.za/personal/services/stayintouch/pleasecallme>
3. "Flashing" has become a common term in East and South Africa describing prematurely disconnected calls. Often, those who "flash" do not have enough airtime to place a call, hence the premature disconnection to signal a missed call.
4. For more information on Ushahidi products and services see <http://Ushahidi.com/>.
5. For more information regarding deliberative public opinions, see Fishkin, JS, Luskin, RC, and Jowell, R. 2000. Deliberative polling and public consultation. *Parliamentary Affairs* 53(4): 657-666.
6. See Fuchs, C and Horak, E. 2008. Africa and the digital divide. *Telematics and Informatics* 25: 99-116.
7. See Howard, P. 2011. *The digital origins of dictatorship and democracy: information technology and political Islam*. UK: Oxford University Press.
8. See Yonazi, E et al. 2012. *The transformational use of information and communication technologies in Africa*. eTransform Africa.

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