Chapter 12

Institutionalism, Social Media, and Democracy in Africa:
An Inquiry Into the Potential of Digital Democracy

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ABSTRACT

This study focuses on the process of institutional change with regard to the capabilities of African political systems to embrace the conditions that instill and support democracy in the context characterized by pervasive social media consumption. The author wonders in what way institutions and individual behaviors can integrate social media in order to consolidate democracy. In other words, is social media-supported democracy sustainable in Africa? The study analyzes the patterns of social media consumption in its functionality for democratic change in Africa. It examines patterns of institutional change on the basis of the impact of social media consumption in African politics. It highlights two theories of institutional change—structured institutional change and evolutionary institutional change—based on their relevance to the impact of social media consumption in African political settings.

INTRODUCTION

This study is motivated by the following question: in what way social media constitutes a reasonable and reliable support for democracy in Africa. Based on this question I wonder whether the limited influence of social media on democracy in Africa is due to the limited implementation of the policy adopted by the political leadership. The African Information Society Initiative is a framework that upholds an "African digital vision and agenda," and calls for the improvement of communication services and the creation of "a continent-wide information and telecommunication network that will allow for fast and reliable communications to and from the continent" (United Nations Economic Commission for Africa, 2008). Although the use of digital media has increased in Africa, internet access is still limited for many

Africans, and in some cases, access is not possible because of internet shutdowns for political reasons. Apart from the limits related to information technology infrastructure, other issues such as regulation impede the development of digital democracy. The study is an exploration of the type of institutional approach most suitable for the deployment of digital democracy in Africa. In other words, it is an inquiry into the institutional framework that could support the enactment of technology through digital democracy in the continent.

Participation in democratic processes reflects the assumption that political involvement gives meaning to one's life and interaction in society. This is facilitated through institutions, which have the necessary mechanisms for regulation and support of individual political behavior. Institutional mechanisms, such as social media and democracy interact with others, guide and strengthen political behavior, and these capabilities cannot achieve their assigned objectives unless they are fully developed and soundly established. The use of social media venues is viewed from an institutional perspective insofar as the practice embedded in them is not merely the repetition of tasks and the consumption of information, and social media are much more than a set of data-producing resources and tools. The exchange and communication taking place through social media venues in the context of digital democracy are loaded with intentionality, that is, the production of, and search for, political, economic and cultural meaning.

In the process of institutional anchoring, Segaard (2017, p. 124) points to congruence as "an important condition of successful communication between voters and politicians." The search for congruence drives the implementation of adequate technological settings and institutional parameters with the purpose to make communications between different political stakeholders effective, and create the institutional and technological conditions for digital democracy to deploy its full potential. That is the underlying concern of this study, which implies the argument that the result of institutional anchoring is a more effective use of technology fostering digital democracy. Would the institutional anchorage of social media venues create the conditions for institutional change in order to make digital democracy a reliable, constructive determinant for social and political development in Africa?

The central argument of this paper is stated as follows: unless social media in Africa are supported by an institutional perspective that reinforces transformative capabilities rather than self-interestedness, and are enacted as institutions rather than amorphous technology, their relation to digital democracy will be nonconsequential in terms of forward-looking social and political development. After the initial step of the literature review focused on the three key concepts of institutionalism, digital democracy, and social media consumption, I delve right into the exploration of social media consumption in African political settings, which reflect the struggle to institute democratic change trough social media. Then I analyze the transformative capabilities of social media, in an effort to decipher the institutional significance of the trajectories social media consumption can induce by connecting African societies with the global community through the deployment of their cognitive and structuring capabilities. Last, based on relevant theories of institutional change I examine the patterns of social media-induced institutional change, presenting the effects of change through social media and digital democracy in African particular cases.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Three concepts stand out in this study and for this reason, they are the focus of this review of literature. They are: institutionalism, digital democracy, and social media. First, institutionalism constitutes a determinant organizing principle that structures political performance and interactions, such as admin-

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