Chapter 6
New Media and Gender in East Africa:
Assessing Media Dependency and Public Attitudes

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ABSTRACT

This study set out to ascertain the use of and dependency on new media technology for political communication by voting- age citizens of the three main East African countries, namely Kenya, Uganda, and Tanzania. We learn the importance of new media communication opportunities towards the struggle for liberal democracy, which is demonstrated by the unanimity of respondents' attitudes that their governments suppress political discourse. But the degree of use and dependence on these new media instruments are not uniform across the region. Gender and level of education are two salient factors that create these differences in the use of and dependency on new media technology for political communication in East Africa. But our findings have no bearing on the authenticity of the messages sent through these new media technological devices, or the extent of divisiveness or unity that such messages might engender among citizens in the region in times of political crises. Our primary contention is that such citizens now depend on these technological devices to serve their informational needs moreso when political and other forms of national emergency situations arise. This dependency phenomenon is partly the consequence of the existence of media laws enacted by governments in the region to hamstring mainstream media houses.

INTRODUCTION

This chapter investigates the use of new media for political communication by voting-age citizens across three major East African countries: Kenya, Tanzania and Uganda, accounting for gender differences and levels of education, with primary focus on women in the broader scheme of new media use and dependency. One of the major reasons for focusing on these countries is because of their dominant presence in the region, which dates back to 1967 when they formed what is arguably the nucleus of the East African Community (EAC). The EAC now embraces five countries in the region.

Developments in new media technology have had significant impact on the content and delivery of messages in political communication, especially in periods of electioneering campaigns. King (1997) argues that elections are tripartite affairs between the contestants who are encoders of political messages, the electorate or decoders, and the media which serve as the bridge between both groups. However, the reality in modern times is that the institutionalized media's monopoly of the "bridge" is no longer tenable. Also, the flow of messages has ceased to be vertical or uni-dimensional.

With the increasingly pervasive use of new media technologies, message source in political communication has been decentralized (Anduiza, 2009), with the electorate being transformed from mere "passive receivers of a message constructed and controlled by established institutions" (Turiera-Puigbo, 2009, p. 14), to people who simultaneously produce, disseminate and consume political information.

This opportunity to construct and share information by the electorate poses new challenges to political parties and candidates in their role of mobilizing people for political participation (Anduiza, 2009; Montero, 2009). It was in response to this challenge that campaign strategists for John McCain and Barack Obama extensively used the internet and other media platforms to reach the electorate in the 2008 U.S. presidential election (Kreiss, 2009; Turiera-Puigbo, 2009).

The impact of new communication technology in political communication is also substantial in other parts of the world such as South Korea (Lee, 2009) and the Philippines (Karan, Gimeno & Tandoc, 2009). In Europe for instance, the influence of political parties is on the decline due to the communication technology revolution (Zittel, 2009) and in China, the use of cellular phones is now an important factor in communication (Latham, 2007).

How about Africa, especially East Africa, which is the focus of this chapter? We acknowledge that the three main countries in that region – Kenya, Tanzania and Uganda – have always had political parties in their practice of democracy. However, the opposition in those countries have generally been marginalized or incapacitated by autocratic regimes since the countries gained independence. In reality, each of these nations is a *de facto* one-party state where government direct or subterranean control of communication channels has been prevalent. But, the advent of new communication technology now appears to offer citizens an alternative to controlled government sources of information.

For instance, the figures below show the level of cellular phone and internet opportunities available to the citizens of the three nations. According to the *World Factbook*, cell phone use in Kenya and Uganda in 2008 was 16.2 million and 8.6 million respectively, while Tanzania had 14.7 million users in 2009. Internet access in Uganda was 2 million in 2007 and 400,000 in Tanzania in the same year. Kenya's figure for 2008 was 3 million. The foregoing data show a modest explosion in the availability and use of new media communication channels in the East African region for mass mobilization, political contestation, and communication.

With regard to political participation and the extent of women's engagement in politics in the

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