

Chapter 17

Information Flow and Democratic Governance: An Analysis of the African Experience

F. A. Aremu

University of Ilorin, Nigeria

H. T. Saka

University of Ilorin Library, Nigeria

ABSTRACT

Information is the life-line of governance. This is particularly true with democratic political systems. Even undemocratic regimes require steady information flow to sustain their power base. Indeed, the effectiveness in the management of information flow distinguishes a functional political system from a dysfunctional one. With the emergence of new media in the information matrix, there has been a dramatic democratization of content development which had hitherto been the exclusive preserve of “experts” in the media arena. The expansion of space in content development and dissemination of information through the various internet-based mechanisms has proven to be a double-edged sword: a force for popular mobilization and participation in the governance process and a source of destabilization. Depending on the political system in question, information science and technology is exerting tremendous influence in the governance arena. This chapter examines the unfolding dynamics in Information Science and Technology and its place in the democratization of the governance process in Africa. It dwells on the changing contexts of information content development besides engaging the core conceptual issues. It also explores the nexus between the “democratization of information content development” and democratic consolidation in Africa.

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INTRODUCTION

The information and communication technology revolution has spurred debates in intellectual and policy circles. Given the possibility of moving high volume of information at unprecedented speed, attention has been drawn to how the changes in information landscape are impacting the political arena. From historical hindsight, secrecy was part and parcel of governance during the years of empires and dynastic rules (Poluha, and Rosendahl, 2002). Violation and breaches of such secrecy rules attract punishments and sanctions. Symptoms of such aversion to open access to information are common in modern day dictatorships and authoritarian regimes where stringent regulatory rules on information flow and obnoxious anti-sedition laws are the norm. Through strategies that include discriminatory media registration, licensing and accreditation procedures, undemocratic and authoritarian regimes are able to exercise effective control over information content and public access.

Even though undemocratic regimes are often inclined to stifling media freedom with a view to manipulating information flow into the public space, information and communication technology revolution has gradually weakened such overwhelming control. The internet revolution in particular has given birth to a stream of media outlets (e.g., blogs, Twitter, Facebook, Youtube, etc.) that are similar to the traditional media (electronic and print) in terms of content and audience but are different in the sense that content development are less restrictive than the traditional media. In terms of the organic filtering mechanisms that contributions in the traditional (or 'old') media are usually subjected to, the 'new' media allows contributors the opportunity to get around the 'organic' filters. This generates an unprecedented amount of materials that would otherwise not have been published. Therefore the emergence of the 'new' media as a result of the internet revolution has led to democratization of

information generation and dissemination (Kline and Burstein, 2005; Bruns and Jacobs, 2006).

The effects of information democratization on political systems are still unfolding. Irrespective of the nature of political system, the advent of 'new' media in the information matrix is generating widespread impact. In other words, even established democracies with strong tradition of media freedom are not immune from the forces and controversies generated by the 'new' media outlets. The United States of America was evidently rattled by the massive disclosure of sensitive classified diplomatic information by a 'new' media organization, Wikileaks. If established democratic systems are susceptible to the forces of democratization of information flow, authoritarian regimes are especially vulnerable to the phenomenon. Recent developments in Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region provide graphic illustrations of how the 'media' is changing the information landscape and generating turbulent socio-political transformations. Indeed, it has become clear that authoritarian regimes that are generally averse to freedom of information flow could hardly survive the unprecedented democratization of information that the internet revolution has engendered. In this chapter, our aim is to examine how the democratization of information content development affects or influences the process of democratic consolidation and the quest for good governance in Africa. In order to achieve this objective, it is necessary to begin with a conceptual exploration of the core issues that are raised in the chapter. First, we begin with the concept of democratic "good" governance.

Conceptualizing Democratic "Good" Governance

The whole idea of democratic governance revolves around attempts to make political systems and public institutions respond positively and appropriately to the aspirations of the people. Essentially, attention is usually focused on three components:

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