Online Political Activism among Young People in Sub–Saharan Africa

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INTRODUCTION

The article undertakes an in-depth discussion of the impact of new media technologies on online political activism among young people in emerging democracies, with particular emphasis on Sub Saharan Africa. Further, a discussion of the various forms of new media used by young people in Sub-Saharan Africa is undertaken. The article also analyses the shift in political discourse among young people that has been occasioned by the emergence of web 2.0 that creates a platform for the growth of social networking sites whose existence is spearheaded by their interactivity nature and user generated content. Examples of the role played by social media in fostering political activism are discussed, citing from various countries in Sub-Saharan Africa. The objective of this article, therefore, is to undertake a detailed discussion of how young people in Africa are using new media formats, with particular emphasis on social media, to foster political activism. However, the article will also discuss the challenges posed by social media as a tool for online political activism in Sub-Saharan Africa. Finally, the article will sum up by giving the way forward for utilizing social media to promote political interest and engagement among young people in Sub-Saharan Africa.

BACKGROUND

The focus of the article is on Sub-Saharan Africa, which refers to countries that are geographically located south of the Sahara desert. The countries are generally categorised under four broad regions; that is eastern, southern, western and central African countries. The article focuses on Sub-Saharan Africa, which with the exception of South Africa, has been characterised by poor governance, drought, poverty, poor infrastructure,

high illiteracy levels, ethnic conflicts and/or civil wars coupled with human rights abuses. The myriad challenges have subsequently affected the access and utilisation of media for civic engagement by young people in Sub-Saharan Africa.

In addition, the media as an institution in Sub-Saharan Africa has also borne the brunt of state terror domination, terror and harassment (Mukhongo, 2009). This has been witnessed in countries such as Angola, Nigeria, Kenya, Ethiopia, Zimbabwe, Uganda, and Cameroon. However, during the 1990s, a period which has also been termed as the second liberation of Africa, the media underwent great changes, witnessing its involvement in renewed calls for press freedom and democratic governance in Sub-Saharan Africa (Mukhongo, 2010). Consequently, a look at the history of media in Kenya, Sierra Leone and Ghana, reveals an institution that has played a key role in contributing to political reforms and democratic change (Mukhongo, 2009). As a result, governments in Sub-Saharan Africa are becoming more tolerant towards the media. Unfortunately, unlike print media, electronic media has remained under strict government control and ownership, and therefore the Sub-Saharan governments still have enormous control over the media and its coverage of political news (Mukhongo, 2009). This has been the case in countries such as Zambia, Zimbabwe, and Angola. In South Sudan, after 22 years of civil war, the government has committed itself to improve press freedom and guarantee the freedom of expressions of the citizens, however security forces still hold a lot of power in the nation, and so have a lot of leeway to manipulate and control the media.

However, the media landscape in Sub-Saharan Africa is changing. While the youth are often a marginalised group with regard to politics, they are active uses of the Internet. In Kenya, the youth are by far the majority age-group, yet their role in politics is hampered by their inability to access mainstream political

information (Otieno & Mukhongo, 2013). Faced with lack of a truly independent and representative media, social media has become an alternative platform for the political engagement of the youth (Storck, 2011). This has been enabled by the fact that Internet access is on the rise and the youth are the main drivers of Internet use through networking activities, with exceptions of countries such as South Sudan, Niger, Equatorial Guinea, DR Congo and Mali which have very low levels of Internet penetration. With the re-emergence of a strong civil society in Sub-Saharan Africa, coupled with increasing access to Internet in Africa, the advent of new media (social media and mobile phones short text messaging) as an alternative form of political communication, particularly for the youth in shaping the future of African politics is a foregone conclusion. Countries such as Malawi, Kenya, Ghana and Nigeria have witnessed a steady increase in the youth uptake of social media, particularly, Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, Netlog, Swahili Nation, Naijapals (launched in Nigeria), and an emergence of political bloggers.

The Internet has been used for political activism since its early days as a result of its ability to provide ties/connections between diverse networks of activist groups and social movements for the effective coordination and global diffusion of protest and solidarity (Theocaris, 2012).

The Internet has therefore, provided a platform for the youth in Sub-Saharan Africa to seek and acquire politically relevant information, making new media an indicator of youth interest in politics (Otieno & Lusike, 2013). For example, the active users of Twitter in Sub-Saharan Africa are between the ages of 20 and 29 years old, and about 60% of them access twitter through their mobile phones (Omanga & Chepngetich-Omanga, 2013). Consequently, Twitter has been a key central organising medium in popular movements and protests in countries such as Kenya (Omanga & Chepngetich-Omanga, 2013). The emergence of new media, and the fact that the youth drive the adoption of such new information sources, provides them with an opportunity to play their role and exert deliberate influence in Kenya's politics (Otieno & Mukhongo, 2013). As a result, in recent years, youth driven, social activist networks that address a variety of social, political, and cultural concerns have become abundant and prominent (Wilson, 2006).

Youth political participation refers to numerous ways of involving young people in the decision-making process (Auskalniene, 2012), in order to influence political outcomes. However, it is necessary to point out that political participation can be either institutionalised political participation or extra-institutional political action. The focus of this article is on the online forms of political activism, which often are extra-institutional political actions that the youth in Sub-Saharan Africa engage in. They range from online political discussions, attempts to persuade other users about an issue, political debates, online protests, hacking into government websites, lobbying, signing Internet petitions, fundraising and boycotting certain products. For example, during periods of political upheavals, users have mobilised citizens to boycott buying certain newspapers they consider to be mouthpieces of the government.

While the Internet has been used for political communication since its inception, the arrival of Web 2.0 marked the beginning of a different and a previously unimagined conceptualisation of the Internet's political potential (Theocaris, 2012). For instance, in the evolution of technology of Web 2.0, users are active and not passive participants on social networking sites and blogs. They are therefore, active agents in the domestication and adaptation of online resources for their own objectives and interests (Aibar, 2010). Consequently, social networking sites such as Facebook, YouTube and Twitter have transformed online activity from a model of media consumption to one of media production by users (Benkler, 2006; Chadwick, 2012, as cited in Theocaris, 2012). The world is now characterised by a new economy, and Sub-Saharan Africa, as an entity is also in the race to catch up with the new "informational, global and networked economy" (Castells, 2000, as cited in Auskalniene, 2012:107), and therefore, advances in new digital platforms and the convergence of computer, information and communication technologies, are transforming the lives of people (particularly, the youth) in Sub-Saharan Africa (Robbin, 2011). As a result of the numerous advances, social media has influenced politics by its ability to provide tools to help people form groups to support particular candidates, share information and videos, blog about political issues, discuss issues or candidates with others and enhance a two-way interaction with politicians (Boyd & Ellison, 2007; Papacharissi, 2009; Xenos & Foot, 2009, as cited in Theocaris, 2012).

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