

Chapter 19

The Impact of Social Media on the Social, Political and Economic Environments in Africa

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this chapter is to evaluate the effect and potentials of social media as a tool for social, political, and economic change in Africa. This chapter argues that social media has become so entrenched in various facets of society that it has become a mechanism impacting social, political, and economic life in Africa. This chapter looks at the 2011 Nigerian elections and the worldwide Kony Movement against Kony the Ugandan warlord, as tools/examples of analysis. These are some of the developments that have driven the debate about the ability of social media in bringing about social, economic, and political change and participation in the African continent. The research method adopted in this chapter involves an analysis of a growing scholarship addressing the various arguments proffered on this topic. The chapter concludes by establishing the impact of social media on social, economic, and political life in Africa as well as identifying challenges posed by this development and making recommendations for the regulatory framework required to effectively harness these potentials in Africa.

INTRODUCTION

The main focus and significance of this chapter is to evaluate the potentials of social media used as a tool for social, political, and economic change in the continent. This chapter considers the arguments for and against the ability of the use of social media to have an impact in these key

areas of life in Africa. The aim here is to argue that social media has become so entrenched in various facets of society that it has become a mechanism vitally impacting social, political, and economic life in Africa. This chapter specifically focuses on the 2011 elections in Nigeria and the Kony Movement set up against Kony the Ugandan warlord. Social media played an important role

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in the monitoring and transparency of the 2011 Nigerian elections. The movement to bring the Ugandan warlord Kony to justice is well known not only for the issue of focus of the cause, but also for the role played by social media that helped the message spread to millions globally in a matter of days¹. These are some of the developments that have driven the debate about the potentials or possibility of the social media in bringing about social, economic, and political change and participation in the African continent (Bohler-Muller & van der Merwe, 2011).² The research method that is adopted in this chapter involves an analysis of a growing of scholarship addressing the various arguments in this area, while looking at the social, economic, and political climate in Africa in driving this position. This also involves an analysis of surveys conducted and reported in the body of these scholarships. In addition, this analysis will provide a better understanding of the impact of social media on the different aspects of our societies. This chapter also briefly makes recommendations for the regulatory framework needed to achieve the previously mentioned potentialities in Africa.

AN ANALYSIS OF THE IMPACT OF SOCIAL MEDIA ON SOCIETY

There is an undeniable connection between recent occurrences in the world and the social media. Since these have happened, people have become more aware of how social media can and has become a tool with which they can humanize, obscure, and abstract phenomena. This allows their voices to be heard on the global stage. Asur and Huberman (2010) postulated that the ease of use, speed and reach of social media has led to a change in the manner of societal discourse in society and has become a trend setter for topics ranging “from the environment and politics to technology and the entertainment industry.”³ Social media by nature involves the use of tools, services, and applications for social interaction.

This has become a medium where people gather and express their opinions in a simplified manner and in real time. This characteristic of social media allows people to expand their ideas and influence in many areas.

There have been critiques on the use of social media and the Internet, and concerns that that they are potentially damaging to our thinking, our culture, and our society in general. For example, Nicholas Carr (2010) in his book *The Shallows* argued that since the advent of the Internet, we are becoming ever more adept at scanning and skimming, but what we are losing is our capacity for concentration, contemplation, and reflection⁴. This position, even if it is true, does not take away from the fact that social media has changed the way in which ideas change hands and how fast those ideas spread. It has also become a valuable repository of information—statistical and otherwise—which in itself can be seen as a form of currency in its own right and a tool for change in the society.

Social media has created an avenue for the transfer, in seconds, of news and any information that would usually take days or weeks. This transfer of information in real time has never been so available to people around the world as it is now and it is still an evolving form of communication. Historically, governments have been able to control information and the spreading of ideas but since the advent of social media, there has been to some extent a shift of control from these governments to the public. This is largely due to the fact that technology is more available and affordable to people than it used to be and anyone can become a point of contact for the communication of information.

Social media has also changed the way we as a society view and use information. “The sites open up different portals through which we get information and create more diverse news outlets. Rather than reading the newspaper or hearing the news on TV, we rely on our friends on the sites to give us updates on the world around us.”⁵ This medium provides quick access to information and

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