



Social Media and its Influence on Democratization in Africa

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Abstract

According to Freedom House, no African country had access to free, local media in 2015. In light of this, the population turns to social media for information, express their opinion and to organize protests. No other continent is as reliant on social media as a political instrument and to exercise their democratic rights. However, many African countries are still ruled by authoritarian regimes who are suppressing the freedom of speech with unconventional methods to uphold their powers. Since the Arab Spring in 2011, more and more African rulers order outages of internet and telecommunication services to keep their population from politically rallying against the government. Whilst there have been examples of social media assisting in the democratization of countries on the continent, the suppression of services in many countries, especially during election years, hinders the process of democratization.

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Analysis

2016 is a year of elections: England voted to leave the European Union, the United States will elect a new president and multiple elections take place around the world. In Africa, in addition to local elections, 16 presidential elections are scheduled for this year. To ensure democratic elections, freedom of the press as well as free speech should be respected.

According to Freedom House, no African country had access to free, local media in 2015. Although the organization “African Media Initiative” with headquarters in Nairobi, Kenya, has advocated for a political, legal and economic framework for independent media since 2010, most countries are dominated by state run media which are often used as an organ of the government to suppress information. The state-owned South African Broadcasting Corporation (SABC), for instance, decided in May 2016 to no longer report on protests that result in violence. However, often the SABC stations are the only radio and TV stations heard by the population and thus the only source of information.

Additionally, many countries have very restrictive media laws which allow the encroachment upon freedom of press and speech governments argue “national security will be at risk,” if information is free and open. An assessment that, by nature, is made by organs of the state and could be used as a pretense.

In light of the above, the importance of social media as a means of communication, source of information as well as a political instrument in Africa is growing. Already today, no other continent uses social media as much for political discourse and mobilization. More people have access to smartphones and related internet than to uninterrupted electricity. Facebook is the most visited website. The power of social media to mobilize people and create political pressure was first seen during the Arab Spring in 2011. In October 2014, social media was used in Burkina Faso to prevent President Blaise Compaoré from changing the constitution which would have allowed him to run for another term after 27 years in office.

On a continent, whose democracies are, in the best case, fragile and oftentimes lead by authoritarian rulers, this yields political tensions and poses a threat to the power of the governments. Currently, ten incumbent African Presidents have been in office for longer than 18 years and, at times, they use unconventional methods to stay in power. For example, especially in election years, freedom of speech is often constricted and used to avoid government-critical protests.

In 2011, Egypt was the first country to be cut off from the internet and social media for political reasons.

In January 2015, telecommunications providers in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) were requested by the government to not only discontinue the internet but also SMS services. The situation lasted for several days while the population protested against President Joseph Kabila. Presidential elections are scheduled for 27th November 2016. In neighboring Congo-Brazzaville (Republic of Congo), elections were held in March this year with a 48 hours’ blackout of internet, telephone and SMS services. President Denis Sassou Nguesso was once again elected into the office which he, apart from a five-year break, has occupied since 1979.

In April 2015, protests arose in Burundi after President Pierre Nkurunziza announced that he would be running for a third term in office which was widely regarded as unconstitutional. Social media was disconnected for several days in the country. Pierre Nkurunziza successfully suppressed the protest and remains in office to-date.



Since the beginning of 2016, the population of Chad no longer has access to social media. The measure was taken by the government after rape allegations against relatives of government officials and calls for protests arose. Further, the reelection of President Deby in April was controversially debated. The Blackout continues.

Kenya, Egypt, Central African Republic and Niger also experienced temporary outages of social media during elections. The government of Uganda ordered telecommunications providers to suspend their services twice in 2016: on election day in February and in May during the inauguration of President Yoweri Museveni for his fifth Presidential term. Even the relatively exemplary democracy Ghana announced that it would disrupt social media services during the elections in November of this year.

In the beginning of July, the social media platform WhatsApp was inaccessible in Zimbabwe after criticizing the government and calls for President Mugabe's resignation became louder and led to a general strike. The last time the country experienced protests of such magnitude was nine years ago. Although the government never officially ordered the social media outage, a day later, it warned the population that messages that could pose a risk to national security would be traced back to the originator and penalized.

Last year South Africa experienced the biggest protest since the end of Apartheid in 1994 which were organized via social media. Students organized via the networks which resulted in heavy confrontations with security personnel and property damage amounting to millions of Euros. In 2015, the campaign #Zumamustfall started, which calls for the ouster of President Jacob Zuma. So far the government has not responded with a social media blackout. During the municipal elections in August, social media was successfully used by voters and political parties to enhance transparency. Meanwhile, the country voted against a resolution on the protection of freedom of expression, privacy and human rights on the internet of the UN Human Rights Council (UNHRC) – the "United Nations resolution on the promotion, protection and enjoyment of human rights on the Internet." However, the resolution was adopted by a majority of member states and condemns the shutting down of internet access and social media by governments. Kenya also voted against the resolution. Yet, the High Court in Nairobi had just ruled in April that Paragraph 29 of the Kenya Information and Communications Act (KICA), which creates the offense of misusing a telecommunications device by sending messages and internet posts known to be false was unconstitutional. The ruling was seen as a triumph in ensuring the freedom of expression in the country.

The Nigerian Parliament is discussing draft legislation which stipulates that allegations in the media against government officials or agencies as well as politicians can be penalized with up to two years in prison or a fine. At the same time, Nigeria had caused an international sensation during the last Presidential Elections in March 2015 when social media was used during campaigning and on election day to create transparency. For the first time in the country's history, an incumbent President (Goodluck Jonathan) was voted out of office and President Muhammadu Buhari was elected.

In countries in which the freedom of speech and press is limited due to the access to and lack of independent media, social networks take on the roll as a primary source of information. Even though the risk of misinformation is higher due to the lack of controls, freedom of expression and the right to criticize government are an integral part of democracies. Especially young people turn to social media to get their information and get involved in local campaigns or protests. Particularly in countries with authoritarian rulers and the risk of unconstitutional changes in politics, the population uses social media to organize themselves and rally for change in a peaceful manner. Many African countries are economically, socially and politically on the verge of a new era.



With access to worldwide information, more and more of the populace experiences how democracies work and are demanding these rights. Suppression of the population and their rights to freedom of speech and assembly will only increase discontent and the notion to protest and resort to violence. This in turn will increase the likelihood of undemocratic power changes (such as coup d'états), violent protests and hostilities, moving the countries further away from their goal of democracy.

Remarks: Opinions expressed in this contribution are those of the author.

About the Author of this Issue

Eva Nolle works at Falkensteyn GmbH, a risk management firm focusing on the Middle East and Africa, as Senior Analyst and holds a degree in risk and security management from the University of Public Administration in Bremen. For six years she has lived and worked in South Africa at a pan-African corporate intelligence company and trained employees of various companies as well as journalists for the deployment on the African continent. Further, she developed "Duty of Care" solutions for the employees during their stay by drawing on her own practical experience through project work in many of the countries.



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