New Media and Democracy in Kenya: Redefining Democracy and Politics

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Abstract.
This paper discusses the contribution of new media in Kenyan democratization process. The advent of multiparty politics in developing countries especially Kenya, marked the beginning of a journey that has witnessed a lot of obstacles towards democracy. Thanks to the New media which has brought with it enormous possibilities to the citizens and the government. The new media has collapsed the initial barriers of a one way communication and provided equal opportunities to both the rich and the poor. New media has become a new public sphere, and in this paper, different scholarly articles will be analyzed and their arguments corroborated in support of this view.
Keywords: Public sphere, Newmedia ,democracy,

1.0 Introduction

Democracy is an idea which has generated heated debate in Kenyan politics. As Thompson (1995:249) notes, democracy has become the one idea , and seemingly the only idea, which is capable of underwriting the legitimate exercise of political power in the late twentieth century. After the Second World War the two beneficiaries; USA and the USSR could not agree on how the world should be organized. The USA, advocated for a liberal approach whereas the USSR pushed for a lenist-Marxist approach(Thussu 2006). From the 1950s' to late 80's, the two countries were engaged in a cold war-the contest of ideologies as they called it.

Thompson(1995) notes that democracy is all the more remarkable for the fact that, for most of its 2,500-year history, democracy as an idea was distasteful for the administration of human affairs. I f there were challenges in the realization of true democracy, then media would not go unmentioned. The former ruling party ,Kenya National African Union(KANU) regime was reluctant to liberalize the airwaves as demanded by the new capitalist order. This saw Kenya Broadcasting Corporation (KBC) manipulate the public by setting the agenda according to 'orders from above'. As a way of blindfolding the donor communities and the USA in particular, the government of the day licensed Kenya Television Network (KTN) in the year 1990. This was not enough, the content of this channel and the numerous shortwave radio stations based in Kisumu which used to broadcast in vernacular were subject to control by the government.

Classical political philosophers like Jean-Jacques Rousseau, David Hume and John Stuart Mill believe that participation lies at the heart of democratic and political processes. They posit that ,the state is in a social contract with the people and that their participation is required for the fulfillment of this contract.

The modern world in which democratic leadership is determined through the transparent and never the secret ballot box, the participation of many people is key to legitimac , transparency, fairness and effectiveness of the electoral and the democratic process. For democracy to thrive, their should be an active participation by the citizens. Kenyan politics has been dominated by a few elites and history has captured this very well. The elites who own the means of cultural production and distribution have wielded power to manipulate the majority in the political process. They have the resources to buy media licenses and they are the 'gatekeepers' too. Therefore, the advent of the new media has collapsed all the barriers to active participation which was not possible in the conventional media.

1.1 THE NEW MEDIA

 Martin Lister et al (2003: 10), in their book New Media: a critical introduction suggest, discussions about 'new media' force us to acknowledge, on the one hand, a rapidly changing set of formal and technological experiments and, on the other, a complex set of interactions between new technological possibilities and established media forms.

Using the analogy of the human body. The internet today can be likened to our body nervous system. Without it, our bodies can't function properly. Through the internet, we are bombarded with information and ours is to decide what to 'absorb' to our bodies. Looking back at the world History, when Alexander Morse invented the telegraph in the year 1837,an era of grid lines was ushered. Britain tapped this technology to expand and consolidate its territories. This was the beginning 'networked society'.

As the world was being connected via grids of telephone lines, electricity, railways and canals; Gugliemo Marconi was experimenting on the possibility of transmitting signals without the use of cables, and he succeeded

in transmitting signals in a radius of 3km. from the word radius , radio was born. The invention of the Inter Network(internet) in the year 1969 by the American defense forces was just an extension of earlier technologies As George Landow (2003: 58) suggests, 'new media' technologies should be seen as existing on a continuum or spectrum rather than in any fundamental opposition to one another.

1.2 WHAT IS 'NEW' IN THE 'NEW MEDIA'

Moran and Hawisher (1998:80) offer an analogy in this regard, comparing new media with the sense in which we say a child is new. While obviously a distinct individual, 'the child, in some lights and moments, looks very much like her mother ;in other lights and other moments, she resembles her father, and sometimes even reminds you of a grandparent'. As Sonia Livingstone(2002:18) observes that, Whether new media are defined in terms of technology(interactivity, digitalization, convergence etc) or services(delivery of information, entertainment, political participation, education, commerce, etc),they raise questions. Livingstone argues that the following four points makes the new media 'new'

First, we are witnessing a multiplicity of personally owned media. Media, facilitated by the reduction in their prices and by the growth of the mobile media (e.g mobile phones), what's new here is basically to do with social contexts of use are themselves are themselves part of a wider reformulation of the relation between public and private (pg 20). For example, we are not only in the era of mobile phones, but mobile phones accommodating more than two SIM cards.

Secondly ,media are diversifying in form and content, resulting in local and global, general and specialized television channels, in diverse kind of computer and video games(Livingstone 2000:20). As theses new media diversify in their form and content, families and individual users are forced to upgrade their existing goods. Perhaps the main idea here being the social impacts of these new media for instance the flexibility that comes with the diversification of content.

Thirdly, convergence is the norm of the new media. Information services, media information, and telecommunication services have been interconnected together. This has contributed to convergence across hitherto   distinct   social   boundaries   for   instance Home/Work,entertainment/information,education/leisure,feminine/masculine etc. Livingstone goes on to point out that such convergence may also facilitate a general trend towards democratization.

Fourthly, the radical change from a one way communication to a more interactive communication between the user and the medium, makes the new technology new. Today ,people who were perceived as mere consumers are now content producers as well as content consumers.

2.0 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: PUBLIC OR PRIVATE SPHERE?

Nancy Fraser (1990:56-58) suggests, that those who are committed to theorizing the limits of democracy in late capitalist societies have an indispensible resource in the work of Jürgen Herbamas. Herbamas, a German philosopher observed that it is a 'sphere which mediates between a society and the state in which the society organizes itself as the bearer of public opinion, accords with the principle of public information which once had to be fought against the arcane policies of monarchies and which since that time has made possible the democratic control of state activities'(2).

The concept of the "public Sphere as" as originally articulated in his 1962 book, *The structural transformation of the public sphere*, has a theoretical and political importance. Herbamas concept, provides a way of circumventing the social confusions that have plagued progressive social theories and the political theories associated (Fraser 1990).

According to Omwoha (2010), Habermas conceptions of the public sphere activity invoke ideas of 'rational-critical debate". Whereas the idea here is about a market place of ideas,the new media has brought in the issue of private sphere. Harbamas (1999) in Omwoha (2010) argues that, among the literate bourgeois, the public sphere emerged in the salons and coffee houses of the Eighteenth century in Europe. Today, in the same salons and coffee houses people would be seriously facebooking, tweeting or generally chatting with people who are online, this leaves the question as to whether new media has brought a paradigm shift from public sphere to private sphere.

Habermas concept has not gone without critique. Omwoha (2010) notes that herbermasian public sphere has been widely ctritiqued, most notably for its exclusion of women and the less fortunate in the society, however it remains an important concept for analyzing how the new media has developed in Kenya especially in widening the democratic space.

3.0 METHODOLOGY

A research design is an overall plan that provides a framework to be followed from the beginning to the end. Orotho (2003) defines a research design as the scheme, outline or plan that is used to generate answers to research questions. Jwan & Ong'ondo (2011) add to these definitions and define research design as an overall plan that guides the study. They argue that, a plan is a picture of the link between philosophical paradigm-approach (es)-method(s)-data generation techniques-data analysis- and discussion adopted for a particular study. In the context of ths paper, content analysis was employed a methods of generating data from three purposively sampled articles on New Media. As a method of data generation in quantitative research, content analysis involves the interaction of two processes: specification of the content characteristics and the particularities of data. In this study, the three articles were purosively selected because they were on new media. These artciles were analsyesed for overaching themes they carried and these were picked up to form the basis of discussion. Abrahamson (1983, p. 286) suggests that "content analysis can be fruitfully employed to examine any type of communication".

4.0 DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS
4.1 TRANSPARENCY AND ACCOUNTABILITY
Kenya moved towards greater democracy and more transparent governance thanks to the 2010 constitutional referendum that received 70 percent "yes" votes.New media,new constitution. The new constitution aims at decentralizing political power, increase government accountability, create more robust checks and balances against corruption, and foster a move towards fairer distribution of wealth.

New media tools were also used during the constitution-making process in Kenya. A customized version of Ushahidi, a Knight grantee, was developed for use in Kenya. Called Uchaguzi, which means decision in Kiswahili, the collaborative deployment was supported by the Constitution & Reform Education Consortium (CRECO), Social Development Network (SODNET), Uraia, HIVOS and Twaweza. During the referendum, the shortcode 3018 received over 1,400 SMS messages from around the country that reported incidents of electoral irregularities, violence and peace activities.

(Talk Radio Jambo Kenya as a public Sphere for deliberative democracy,By Joyce Omwoha(2010).

This article analyses talk radio Jambo Kenya as a new participatory,deliberative, and empowered sphere that has great potential for revitalizing democracy and contributing to tangible development(Omwoha,2010:45 in Kenya studies review vol 3 number 3 December 2011)

Omwoha (2010) agrees with Mak'ochieng(2009) that the media in African country should play two significant roles inorder to actively participate in the democratic process. "First,the African media should be a political sphere or public forum accessible to all contending political players,groups and interest whose objectives is the deliberation of common public issues or affairs and framing and influencing of public policy. The African media should also seek to redress the imbalance of power in society by broadeneing access to it. Second it should be an active, in player or participant in such deliberations".

This article is important to this paper because it actually pinpoints the power of the new media. "It is therefore worthwhile to note that the development and dissemination of new technologies constitutes an important strategy for FM radio stations as actors meant to contribute to democracies in Kenya. Omwoha,2010:52" This further reiterates the power of the new media. Through new media sites such as facebook and twitter,talk radio have gone a notch higher to letting the audience identify issues which affect them and are worth addressing.

Although it is unlikely that the Kenyan media are fully objective or free from political influence (which country's media is?) Kenya is more liberalized than most African countries. Various analysts have also stated that since independence the Kenyan media has been an important check on government power.

Similarly, The Uwiano Peace Platform was established to prevent violence during the Kenyan referendum. The system took advantage of mobile technology to get up-to-date information "on tensions, hate speech, incitement, threats and violence" from citizens nationwide. The system allowed for free SMSes from the public to be sent to the Uwiano secretariat. Analysts then verified, mapped and relayed the data on to rapid response mechanisms for quick intervention. The public knew how to report incidents because the platform was advertised in the electronic media, print media and Interim independent Electoral commission.A vigilant civil society, vibrant media and new media tools have played a pivotal role in Kenya's constitution-making process.

4.2 DEMOCRACY AND GOVERNANCE
(Knowledge is power: The internet and the Kenyan public sphere by George Nyabuga)
Nyabuga posits that "the ability of the internet to decolonize or indeed democratize the sources of information has been beneficial to the bourgeoisies in Kenya and thus cannot be representative of a transformed public sphere". He further points out that the media over the past have been linked with the public sphere. Media has

always provided a framework within which the public issues of the day are discussed. Key in this article is the way the internet accessibility and interactivity means that people have   opportunities to reconnect with politics
According to him, technology specifically the "internet has changed the way people communicate and fundamentally loosened the grip that the political elite in society appear to have in the traditional media". The new media has shaped politics in Kenya through the following ways:-

- o It has eliminated the monopolistic control of the media by allowing the proletariat to have access and even own new media.
- o Building on the ideas of commentators such as Elberse, Hale and Dutton who believe that the internet eliminates economic barriers such as the prohibitive cost of advertising, Nyabuoga notes that this a has enabled candidates to reach a wider variety of audience. Members of the public can "access quality information and in the process nature greater interest in politics and political discourse"
- o The internet has increased the speed with which information flows giving people more control over the 'information diet', this has given them the information they need to make wise decisions.

The overarching argument here is that Participation is key for true democracy. Nyabuga argues, 'failure of many countries to democratize is premised upon the preclusion of the majority from the political process by an elite bent on maintaining their positions"

4.3. AMPLIFYING THE VOICE OF THE COMMON CITIZENS

(Texting ,tweeting, mobile internet: New platforms for Democratic debate in Africa,By Tom Sarrazin(2011))
This paper adopts the case study method. It presents new media platforms, starting with mobile phones, followed by the internet. Sarrazin in this work recognizes the fact that new media platforms are changing how people communicate with each other. In this era of digital evolution, there is a variation in both the kind of communication platforms people make use of, and how they use them. It is promising to note that, Africa mobile phone penetration will reach 100 per cent by 2014(Sarrazin, pg 5).

Convergence in the digital media has greatly bridged the gap between people who were considered information poor and the information rich, the commoners and the elites, the rural people and the urban dwellers. In Kenya mobile phones have become part and parcel of our identity,not long ago it was a preserve for the rich, today even the elderly possess cell phones and people who were considered to be living below the poverty line.

4.3.1 Mobile phones and the democratic space

Mobility is one of the trends in the era of the new media. There is an increase in the number of people using mobile phones to access the World Wide Web(www) as opposed to PCs and laptops. Opera mini, a popular internet browser for mobile devices, shows significant unique-user growth, thereby confirming the trend towards mobile internet access(Sarrazin,2011:18).

According to sarrazin (2010), mobile phones penetration has provided exciting new opportunities for one to one as well as one-to-many communication. Information is power in the society we are living in, individuals, groups and organizations have tapped the power of the new media to pass across information. "Newly empowered citizen journalist now report on issues and events relevant to their own communities. Political activists take to the web to gather support and organize rallies" . this clearly indicates that we no longer have passive consumers but rather active producers and consumers of mass media content. Politicians can easily create facebook, twitter, linkedin, my space among other accounts just to reach out to the electorates.

Even as Africa witnesses an increase in the number of netizens, Sarrazin notes that there is significantly more access to mobile phones than to the internet. Call costs has been cited along with handset prices as one of the deterrents to even higher mobile phone penetration in Africa. Mobile phones producers have tried to solve this problem by introducing cheap handsets which can be charged by solar. 'China phones' as it is commonly known has made it possible for Kenyans to own phones which have so many features. For instance a phone going for as low as ksh 1500,can support two sim cards, memory card, internet browser ,radio, camera, Television among other features. Sarrazin however notes that, even reasonably –priced mobile devices will not increase the level of connectivity if markets are dominated by one or two providers that keep tariffs high.

4.3.2 Transparency and accountability

The first factor that looms large is the fundamental role that a vigilant civil society plays in provoking public participation and debate, promoting state transparency and accountability, maintaining pressure and ultimately achieving change. Pambazuka a blogspot discusses the pivotal contributions organizations such as the Association of Professional Societies in East Africa, Kenya Land Alliance, Kikuyus for Change and Kenyan Asian Forum made during the Kenyan constitution-making process.

Cottrell Ghai and Pal Ghai, also discusses the likelihood that civil organizations will continue to offer invaluable assistance, particularly "at a time when the capacity within the government is limited." This is further amplified

because trade unions -- which uphold the constitution through their political and economic work -- are non-existent in Kenya.

The second factor is the role of the new media has in driving reform. Kenya is blessed with free and vibrant new media and a vigilant civil society that relentlessly shines light into all corners of government activity. This has heightened scrutiny in the use of public finances and resources by the executive and legislature.

4.3.3 Mobile activism

Sarrazin points out that creativity is key in mobile activism. It is worth noting that, even as we talk of the personal computers and laptops, mobile phones which are internet enabled as proved to be the best alternative for improving internet access. "activism will rely not so much on technology, but much more on the activist ideas for how to use mobile phones as a means of activism and on critical mass of the people participating…pg 19"

4.3.3.1 THE CASE OF USHAIDI:Ushahidi **In kenya**

In this paper *ushahidi* is presented as a mobile phone case study in Kenya. It is a platform which was created in the wake of the Kenyan post election unrest in 2008.Ushahidi is a Kiswahili word for testimony. "*Ushahidi* was set up by Kenyan bloggers to bear witness to incidence of violence and visualize them on a map using popular web mapping services Google maps..pg 24".

Ushahidi as a platform in kenya during the skirmishes allowed people from various parts of Kenya to send reports using mobile phones, computers or any other digital data connection. This provided "invaluable information both to locals as well as to external aid organizations that used the platform to determine focus area for the coordinated efforts".

5.0 CONCLUSION

The power of the new media has sent shockwaves across the African continent. Very powerful regimes have been removed from power courtesy of the new media. Sarrazin (2010:7) notes that "the significance of social media as perceived by the African governments is highlighted by measures such as banning of twitters SMS service by Cameroonian authorities". The revolutions witnessed not long ago in the Arab countries such as Egypt, Tunisia, and Libya was organized and co-ordinate via new media "…this technology is said to have played a significant role in the co-ordination of the Egyptian protest that led to the ousting of Hosni Mubarak (Sarrazin,2010:7). With emphasis on the new media-digitalization, the process by which all texts can be reduced to binary code and can share the same process of production, transmission and storage. Mc Quail (2005) posits new electronic media can be viewed initially as an addition to the existing spectrum rather than a replacement. And the technology has been regarded as celebrated electronic means of communication because of the escape it offers from what he regards as the illegitimate imposition of censorship and regulation on broadcast radio, television and print media.Media seems to be entering the libertarian age again as the content can easily reach audience minus passing via the gatekeepers.Therefore, many more channels that have been brought about by the new technology means a greater degree of specialization and electorate choice hence improved democracy and governance in developing countries.

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