Echoes across the digital divide

Introduction

The nexus of many criticisms of digital activism in Sub-Saharan Africa is the digital divide. The region continues to hold the unenviable position of having the deepest gulf in terms of access to the internet. The numbers are not flattering. About 66.0% of Africans are not online.[i] Of the population that is online, the overwhelming majority are an educated urban elite, undermining efforts at inclusive, participatory public discourse.[1]

However, when you flip the coin, digital activists in Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) can exert an outsized influence on politics and democratic governance. A number of trends converge to enable this feat. The first is the fact that Africa is the most youthful continent on the globe with almost 60% of the population below the age of 25.[ii] Combine this with the fact that young people living in the region are more likely to be connected to the internet than not. Added to this, is growing internet penetration and falling costs of data in many countries throughout the continent.[iii] Perhaps, most crucial, is recognising that digital culture adapts to society.

Unlike other territories, smartphone ownership is not a one to one ratio with mobile internet access. Sharing phones and/or mobile internet access is common in the global south. Digital activities echo offline actions through this network of cultural intermediaries and digital ambassadors.[iv] And the final piece of the puzzle for digital activists, is goodwill. Internet users in Africa are more likely to consider social media as a positive influence on national politics.[v] Although fake news, misinformation and lack of robust privacy laws are recognised as emerging problems, by and large social media enjoys a much more positive positioning compared to Western countries.[vi]

For Citizens' Voice (CV), the advantages of working in the digital space in SSA outstrip the drawbacks. A growing network of young, connected people need an alternative civic space to discuss the thorny issues of development. CV does not just provide a forum and information, but its inspirational approach encourages constructive conversation among citizens. By enabling the

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[1] According to the 2018 Ibrahim Index of African Governance (IIAG), the continental average score for all digital and ICT-related measures has increased between 2008 and 2017, with the largest improvements in the indicators Household with Internet Access and Mobile Phone Subscribers. But the report does not tell us the distribution of the two indicators. Meanwhile, a GSM Association report says mobile internet penetration in 2017, stood at 21%. Patchy and fragmented data like this makes assessments on the state of internet access in Africa fuzzy.

socio-political expression of its 18-30 target group, CV is a crucial contributor to keeping countries on a positive development trajectory. This paper provides a narrative on how digital activists like CV, still achieve impact despite the digital divide.

The paper is organised as follows; first, we look at the state of digital penetration in the region with a critical appreciation of the trends observed. Then, we make a case for online activism in Africa, showing evidence that despite constraints, it has greatly contributed to recent citizen-driven, socio-political changes. We then delve deeper into how this is possible with a focus on how online actions are intertwined and mutually echoed across offline fora through the help of digital ambassadors. The paper concludes with recommendations on how online activists can capitalize on the amplification effects of these digital echoes.

Digital Divide

> Digital divide (*definition)*: economic and social inequality with regards to access, use and impact of information and communication technologies. [vii]

The 2018 Ibrahim Index of African Governance (IIAG), the World Bank's Digital Dividends report and Pew Research Center, all point to the fact that in an average country in Sub-Saharan Africa, less than half of the population have access to the internet.[viii] However, the digital divide is not evenly distributed across countries in the region. For instance; according to the 2019 *Internet Users Statistics for Africa* compiled by Internet World Stats, internet penetration in Kenya is 83% with over 43 million internet users (growing an impressive 21,564% from 2000 to 2019). This figure is on par with the European average. Further north in Niger, internet penetration is abysmal. It currently stands at 4.1% with under 1 million internet users. Between these extremes lies a range of varying levels of internet usage. [ix]

Within countries also, there are different realities that belie the averages. In most countries, researchers have observed a rural-urban divide. This finding is unsurprising, given that the digital divide is largely an economic story. The correlation is positive, meaning the richer the region, country or community, the higher the access.[x]

With this caution in place, we can look at some of the general trends. The growth in internet penetration on the continent has been phenomenal. According to internetworldstats.com, in the last two decades, internet penetration in Africa has grown over 10,000% compared to about 90% for the rest of the world. Furthermore, a 2019 study by Pew Research Center revealed that

smartphone ownership is rising in developing countries. For instance, in Senegal from 2013 to 2017, smartphone ownership more than doubled from 13% to 34%.[xi] Meanwhile, according to the 2019 Mo Ibrahim Forum, around 80% of young Africans now own a mobile phone, and 77.0% use it daily. However, not all of these phones are connected to the internet. Nonetheless, young people are 23.5% more likely to access the internet through their mobile phones compared with respondents aged 36 or older. The study further showed that 71.8% of everyday internet users are under the age of 36.

Smartphones are a key accelerator for internet penetration on the continent. The GSMA Mobile Economy global report of 2018 predicts that smartphone ownership in Africa will jump from 34% in 2017 to 68% in 2025. This increased ownership is expected to drive mobile internet penetration to 40% by 2025. With these figures it is easy to predict that the future of internet penetration on the continent lies in the hands of young people clutching smartphones.

To conclude, although the digital divide is a harsh reality for social movement organisations working in Africa, the story is nuanced. The gap is narrowing at a breath-taking pace especially for young people living on the continent. Cheap Chinese smartphones like those produced by the Tecno[xii] brand make it easier for young Africans to jump on the digital bandwagon. Many of these phones come with social networking sites like Facebook and Whatsapp pre-installed. In fact, through its internet.org project, Facebook has made internet connectivity virtually free for many first-time users.[xiii] Activists, especially those with strong brands, can also benefit from commercial exposure. In Burundi for instance, a data package offered by Econet included discounted access to the Yaga blogging platform. Given the growing socio-economic opportunities, the divide is gradually narrowing and thousands of Africans, each day, get online in new ways.

Digital activism in Africa

A 2019 study on internet shutdowns in the past four years in Africa gives empirical evidence that authoritarian governments perceive the internet as a threat.[xiv] The common denominator of all the countries that disrupted internet access was a low ranking on the 2018 EIU Democratic Index. Considering that the countries also had some of the lowest rates of internet penetration and highest costs of data, the finding was counter-intuitive. With these 'natural' barriers in place why would leaders try to further curb connectivity? The researchers offer a hypothesis:

> *"...it appears that African governments with democracy deficits, regardless of the numbers of their citizens that use the internet, recognise - and fear - the power of the internet in strengthening citizen organising and empowering ordinary people to speak truth to power."*

> *(Despots and Disruptions, 2019)*

This fear is not unfounded. Despite the lack of large-scale studies looking at the relationship between internet usage and changing governance structures, there is plethora of smaller studies that look at specific cases of online activism and their effects. For instance, the #jammehmustgo campaign launched in the aftermath of The Gambia's 2016 general election, contributed to the successful removal of ex-President Yahya Jammeh who proved recalcitrant after losing at the polls.[xv]

Sudan's Omar Al-Bashir was deposed in 2019[xvi] following widespread protests which were organised, legitimised and documented on social media platforms like Facebook and Twitter.[xvii] These examples of political upheavals have led excited observers to predict a widespread push for political change in authoritarian countries. However, the domino effect seen during the 2011 Arab spring is unlikely to be replicated in Sub-Saharan Africa. Rather, increasingly, social media tools are being used to forment slow changes in governance structures, enabling transparency, accountability and participation. These narratives are more difficult to tease out, nonetheless, the signs are there.

During elections, many Africans use their phones to document election fraud and intimidation at the polls.[xviii]

When Kenya erupted into post-election violence in 2007, a group of Nairobi coders created Ushahidi (meaning testimony in Swahili), a data-mapping platform to collate and locate reports of unrest sent in by the public via text message, email and social media.[xix] As the complexity of the social problem increases, so does the sophistication with which African users exploit the mobile phone and its capabilities. In Tanzania for example, activists use Twitter as a sort of virtual buddy system. They share their locations, activities and tweet to their networks if they are arrested to ensure they do not disappear into the security system[xx]. In Ethiopia, a collaborative of bloggers

dubbed Zone9 used twitter to initiate conversations with those in power, engaging in unprecedented debates with Foreign Minister Tedros Adhanom.

The fear of authoritarian governments and the resilience of online communities was typified in the fallout of the Democratic Republic of Congo's (DRC) December 2018 elections. For 20 days, the people of DRC experienced one of the most tightly controlled internet shutdowns. Virtual private networks, the mainstay of dissenters living through disruptions, proved useless, since foreign IP addresses were also blocked. RNW Media's blogging platform, Habari RDC, had to be creative to keep content production going, although thier primary audience was unlikely to read their posts. Working from neighbouring Congo and Rwanda was one way to keep information flowing. Another was leveraging a team based in the Netherlands to maintain the publication schedule. The bloggers describe it as a period of "cyber-brutality"[xxi]. Nonetheless, Habari RDC continues to create opinion pieces that prove popular with thier 270,000 fans on Facebook, and almost 10,000 followers on Twitter.

Social media platforms like WhatsApp, Facebook, Twitter and YouTube can function as powerful tools in promoting democracy and participatory politics. As demonstrated in the examples above, they help create awareness about politics, educate the public on civic rights, serve as platforms for political campaigns and provide an alternative space for dissent in repressive states.

Digital ambassadors and offline echoes

> *'Whatever the technology, its use is shaped by 'external' social conditions. It does not derive from an 'internal' logic commanded by the way the technology has been designed. In other words, the general conditions in which people are living do not change suddenly with the introduction of the internet. (Myths of digital technology in Africa, Gado Alzouma)[xxii].*

As Smith and Kollock put it, the internet is above all a community of interest.[xxiii] How these communities come together, shape and perpetuate themselves is highly context dependent. And so it is too in the realm of digital activism. Wasserman argues that online social movements do not only transmit political information needed for rational deliberation in the public sphere, but also cross cultural and social borders to refashion identities, create informal economies and establish new communicative networks.[xxiv] He emphasizes the need to resist the temptation of technological determinism when ascribing the role of digital tools to fostering social change. He reminds us that technologies are used by "*people* in a varied, heterogenous African context that in many ways is dissimilar from contexts in the developed world". The impact of online activism is best appreciated

on the path between technological and social determinism. This positioning reveals a story of online activism in Africa that is rich, textured, and varied.

As referred to earlier, Western assumptions on ownership and use of internet enabled mobile devices, do not always hold true in the African context. Sharing goods and services is rooted in an ancient tradition of communal living that persists today, especially in rural communities where the narrative of the digital divide is most entrenched. In a 2010 study into the sharing economy of communications tools, Jeffery James made a distinction between commercial and non-commercial sharing. Commercial sharing includes micro-credit schemes to buy phones and/or data, community phone shops, community internet cafes and vendors that sell temporary access for a nominal sum (e.g. checking WhatsApp messages/browsing for 10 minutes).

The second form of sharing usually takes place between households, friends and neighbours, and involves no payment. In Namibia and Botswana for instance, James found that people share their phones with family first, friends second and neighbours third. In Ethiopia there are up to five additional users for each phone owned.[xxv] This form of sharing can also occur with community influencers or leaders who serve as a gateway to the digital landscape. In many areas of rural Africa with low literacy (both traditional and technological), professionals such as teachers, nurses, and postal workers also act as cultural intermediaries between the online and offline world. Given the largely informal nature of these transactions, they are hard to track, commercially and scientifically. For James, the lack of data on both types of sharing implies that conventional understanding on the digital divide is overstated. He concludes his paper saying;

"Using the available survey evidence and a simple arithmetic framework, when sharing is taken into account, the divide entirely ceases to exist or is greatly reduced (though there are one or two exceptions to this general pattern)."[xxvi]

For practitioners, this unseen digital population can be targeted to influence strategy and approach. For example, a digital ambassadors project in South Africa leveraged the informal sharing economy to actively bring more people, especially those living in the slums of Johannesburg, online. The Jozi Digital Ambassadors (JDA)[xxvii] were first time internet users trained to access the city's free Wi-Fi and use online services. The ambassadors were also taught how to bring other members of thier communities online. JDAs then act as cultural intermediaries for other first-time internet users and gain an alternative source of livelihood through providing this service. [xxviii]

The Way Forward

The counter narrative presented in this paper argues that the story of the digital divide in Sub-Saharan Africa needs revisiting. Internet penetration figures highlight a single perspective that can undermine the work of activists. To borrow from Emory Roe, the narrative of the digital divide has now become a plausible assertion.[xxix] (ie, this development narrative is justified as applicable due to historical experience and observation). Such an assertion is a cautionary tale on the perils of misidentifying a persistent problem as a static situation.

Globally, Sub-Saharan Africa still has the lowest levels of access to technology and digital literacy. However, businesses and academics predict that the internet penetration gap will continue to narrow at a breath-taking pace, making the region the last frontier for digital transformation. Meanwhile, online users in SSA have proven ability in using web 2.0 technologies to effect socio-political change. At the same time, an informal sharing economy indicates that the depth of the divide could be overstated.

Working in the digital space in Sub-Saharan Africa is undoubtedly challenging. However, for mavericks in this space, it can also be highly rewarding. The combination of democratic and digital dividends makes the region one of the most fertile grounds for online media. As other parts of the world get saturated and jaded with web 2.0 technologies, a youthful population in Africa means there is room for growth and, perhaps, a chance to reshape the way technology is used. Realising this future, depends on finding ways to bring the diverse people of the continent online. Although business and governments have a huge role to play in enabling wider access to the internet, offline communities can be included into the online world and vice-versa.

Ways to Bridge the divide

Drawing on lessons from some examples mentioned earlier, we present some ways in which digital activists can optimize interventions targeted at populations living in Sub-Saharan Africa. These examples are not 'one-size-fits-all'; depending on the needs of the organisation's focus, action and context, the strategies can be adopted and adapted accordingly.

Example	Why do this?
Organise events that feed into a wider online narrative, either streamed live or used to produce content. For example, Habari RDC's Faces aux Jeunes programme.	Allows activists to have face-to-face, direct contact with their potential and current audience. Using online channels can motivate attendees to engage more deeply with the event during and after it takes place. This can contribute to developing stronger inbound online connections. Allows activists to share the experience of the live event with the larger community that is unable to be physically present.
Partner with community-based organisations (CBOs) and community radio stations	Good strategy to improve inclusive participation in both online and offline communities CBOs bring a network and intimate knowledge of their communities that larger organisations may lack Radio still commands a big audience, especially in rural communities. Community based radio stations also have the advantage of speaking the local dialect which is an important value-addition when working with semi-literate or illiterate audiences. Allows for localization and ownership to improve sustainability of actions
Deploy **digital ambassadors**	Activists can gain local community-based advocates who also double as educators for online first-timers. (e.g. digital ambassadors can organise community viewings of streamed events)
Deploy **citizen journalists**	Allows new voices to penetrate the media landscape. Especially useful to get information from hard to reach areas or closed communities. Provides a new perspective on events, separate from state and commercial media
Integrate old technology like SMS with social media, as Ushahidi did in Kenya	Compatibility between old and new tech allows activists to reach two audiences (traditionally separated) at once. As smartphone ownership picks up, your audience migrates onto social media with you. Lowers the barriers to entry which can contribute to higher online participation
Using more **natural user interfaces** like voice and video to encourage inclusive participation	Semi-literate and illiterate populations with smartphone access can readily participate (e.g. Users can send WhatsApp voice notes asking questions about voting for instance, instead of typing the questions) Provides a new facility to collect and build evidence for advocacy work

Conclusion

Creating an alternative civic space online is a necessary step in future-proofing democratic gains in Sub Saharan Africa. To ensure that young people get their voices heard, one must meet them where they congregate, which is online. Governments are also moving functions online, embracing the efficiency of digital solutions. An example of such forward thinking was demonstrated when the world's first blockchain-based elections were held in Sierra Leone in 2018. Effecting socio-political change in today's world is nigh impossible without venturing online.

Six reasons for digital activism

1. Online activism forms a key part of civic education for a new generation of citizens who are not plugged into traditional media
2. For nascent activists, platforms like those provided by Citizens' Voice provide a community, validation and social proof.
3. **Social proof**[2] has been shown to increase civic participation and commitment of activists offline as well
4. Online actions can influence traditional media, duty-bearers and stakeholders to act, given that these decision-brokers often move in the same virtual spaces as activists
5. Online activism can put the spotlight on grassroot concerns and amplify the drive for change in local settings
6. It allows people to pool resources to effect change for instance through petitions, crowdfunding and efficient organisation

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As social media continues to shape the new virtual commons, activists must seize the opportunity to create constructive conversations that ignite positive change. That is what RNW Media does. Through its Citizens' Voice (CV) programme, it builds safe online civic spaces for young people living in countries with no or limited media freedoms. Whether for digital natives or first-time users, CV continuously modifies its approach to involve young people on its platforms. For instance, Benbere in Mali adopted a weekly local language video review of their blogs, published on Facebook. This format helps bridge a digital literacy divide. Meanwhile, Yaga in Burundi is building a strong community on WhatsApp, where their links are widely shared and forwarded. WhatsApp in Burundi has very low data costs. The CV programme embraces the specific digital contexts of the target countries to focus interventions for change. From this perspective - and through recognising the myths and realities of the digital divide - the value of CV's digital-first approach is truly appreciated.

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[2] **Social proof** is the phenomenon where something is perceived to be desirable or valid because a friend has suggested that it is. The concept is from Cialdini's six principles of persuasion: reciprocity, consistency, social proof (Social Validation), authority, scarcity and liking.

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