

Social media use in Kenya: Twitter, public political participation and state control

George Ogola

Social media platforms have increasingly become important spaces and texts, enabling and encouraging public participation in national conversations on democratic processes across Africa. In Kenya, a platform such as Twitter has been instrumentalised as a political tool to help construct new participatory forms of civic/political engagement. Conversely, however, these platforms are also undermined by limitations of technological affordances and, more recently, by the incursion into the online space by governments, both formally and informally.

The ubiquity of the mobile phone in Kenya, as is the case in many parts of the continent, and the widespread use of various social media has meant that new forms of communication practices and political engagement are emerging. These new spaces and tools are gradually assuming significant cultural and political agency. While access to the internet remains comparatively low in the continent, internet penetration in Kenya has been growing year on year, enabled in large part by the decreasing costs of smart phones. According to recent statistics from the Communications Authority of Kenya (CA 2019), 43 million Kenyans now have access to the internet, mainly through mobile phones. Indeed, as at 2019, Kenya had an estimated internet penetration rate of 89.7%. The world average is 57.3%, with Africa at 39.8% (internetworldstats, 2020).

It is also notable that Kenya has a largely youthful population, with nearly 75% aged below 35 years. That is approximately 35.7 million Kenyans according to the 2019 census by the Kenya National Statistics Bureau. A significant number of this group are active social media users (CA 2019). Although Twitter is not as widely used as WhatsApp (88.6%) and Facebook (88.5%) (SIMELab, 2018), it remains significant precisely because of its effective political instrumentalisation and therefore its ability to shape political discourse in the country. Users of Twitter in Kenya tend to be relatively well educated and urban.

Importantly, these are the segments of the population that have traditionally been the principal producers and shapers of the political narrative in the country. In addition, Kenya's political elite, who populate nearly 80 per cent of Kenya's daily news stories, have a notable presence on the platform, as are the country's journalists and media. One would argue then that the significance of Twitter does not derive from its relative enablement of mass participation in the conduct of politics in Kenya. Instead, its importance rests on its capacity to generate key news narratives. These narratives then find validation in mass communication platforms such as mainstream media, and the much more popular social media platforms such as WhatsApp and Facebook.

The political significance of Twitter in Kenya can be seen in the infra-institutional uses to which it is put politically by a self-constituting public online, and the institutional appropriation of the platform by the state for purposes of both surveillance and control. Although this discussion focuses primarily on the realm of the political, it is important to recognise that the political in Africa is not limited to the formal realm of institutional political practices. It is in fact impossible to separate the formal from the informal in the continent. To use the words of Chabal (1999: 30), politics in Africa 'is not functionally differentiated, or separated from the socio-cultural considerations which govern everyday life'. The relevance of this interpretation of the political lies in the fact that while the apparently mundane dominate conversations on Twitter and on social media more generally in Kenya, these conversations are often invariably 'political'.

'Kenyans on Twitter', commonly referred to as (KOT), a self-constituting public to whom Kenya is the primary reference in their conversations, has become a powerful player in political agenda-setting in the country. Their conversations undermine old political gatekeeping

processes, redefining mainstream media's agenda-setting structures and framing stories in a manner that is increasingly difficult to police. Mainstream media organisations now regularly monitor trending topics on KOT timelines, effectively making it a news beat.

Online hierarchies and discursive brokers

The material and structural realities that both enable and constrain the use of digital media is such that in practice, particular exclusions can occur even in the use of apparently 'open and inclusive' platforms such as Twitter. Access, digital literacies and other such economies of use structurally privilege certain voices online as they do offline. Accordingly, a number of conversations on social media and Twitter in particular are increasingly scaled up or popularised by well-known bloggers, activists, politicians, celebrities, journalists and mainstream news organisations (Ogola, 2019). This small group of actors are slowly becoming the online community's 'primary definers' and seem to have significant impact on which stories trend and therefore which are picked up, for example, by mainstream press. They also enable much broader participation in the deliberation of specific issues by tweeting, retweeting or sharing stories. This re-ordering of the online space into hierarchies does of course have implications for its claims of inclusivity. Well-resourced media organisations now have Twitter handles and create hashtags to popularise their programmes.

The state has also become a powerful player online not only in the sense of determining the policy and legal framework within which social media operates but also in using it informally as a political tool. The Kenya government has an official communications unit tasked with popularising government policy online as well as neutering dissenting voices. It has also enacted a series of problematic legislation such as criminalising hate speech but leaving its definition deliberately ambiguous for possible exploitation to control conversations online. In 2019, it also attempted to introduce an amendment of an Act of Parliament to compel bloggers and online content creators to register with the state. These actions have had a deleterious effect on the extent to which social media platforms such as Twitter can act as alternative

spaces for political participation.

Conclusion

It would be wrong of course not to acknowledge the structural and performative limitations of Twitter and other social media. Twitter demands particular levels of digital literacy for it to be effectively used. In addition, its patronage by a predominantly well educated, middle class and political elite does hinder its capacity to give space to narratives from below without discursive brokers, often in the form of influencers, well known activists, politicians, journalists and the already dominant media organisations. Lastly, the incursion into this space by the state is a worrying development. Previously limited to focusing on its regulatory role, it is now an active player eminently involved in introducing and shaping narratives. This is likely to diminish the potential of this space to be an alternative tool and platform within which the public may exercise some form of executive accountability.

References

- Chabal, P. 1999. *Africa Works: Disorder as Political Instrument*. Oxford: James Currey.
- Communication Authority of Kenya (CA) 2019. Consumer Information Material. Viewed 1 April 2020 < www.ca.gov.ke >
- Internetworldstats, 2020. Viewed 01 April 2020 <https://www.internetworldstats.com/stats.htm/>
- Ogola, G. 2019. What would Magufuli do? Africa's digital revolution and 'individuation' as a (non-)political act in *Journal of Eastern African Studies*. (1). pp. 124-139
- SIMELab, 2018. Social media consumption in Kenya: Trends and Practices, Viewed 1 April 2020 <https://www.usiu.ac.ke/assets/file/SIMELab_Social_Media_Consumption_in_Kenya_report.pdf/>

George Ogola. A Reader/ Associate Professor of Journalism at the University of Central Lancashire, UK. He holds an MA and a PhD from the University of the Witwatersrand, South Africa. Currently researching the impact of emerging technologies on political and media practices in Africa, at the intersection of journalism studies, politics and popular culture. Prior to joining academia, he worked as a journalist at the Standard (Kenya), the Sunday Times (South Africa) and News Africa (UK).