

Impact of Social Media on Political Mobilization in East and West Africa

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Introduction

The role of media continues to be useful in mobilizing and drawing citizens to focus on issues that are perceived as important and in priming public opinion among many Africans to get engaged in the political process of governance and democratization (Kalyango, 2011; Montero, 2009). The massive boom in the online and wireless digital media augmented traditional media, namely radio, newspapers, television, and magazines (Montero, 2009). This study examines whether the online and wireless digital media have aided political mobilization in Africa more than the traditional media in the past five years. The digital media, such as cellular phones, have penetrated remote areas in many African states that are inaccessible to traditional media.

The International Telecommunication Union reported that Africa's wireless digital media market grew by more than 50 million subscribers in 2010, reaching 435 million mobile subscribers as at summer 2010 (ISSP, 2010). That represented a 20% increase in the size of the market and almost more than half of Africa's adult population (ISSP, 2010). Drawing from Gastil (2008) and Montero (2009), the study also seeks public opinion as to whether its use of wireless digital media as a tool of political mobilization and a conduit of communication to compliment the traditional media in East and West Africa is perceived as important for the current revolutionary phase of democratization. The rationale for this study is based on previous studies (Mwesige, 2009; Onyebadi & Kalyango, 2011), which suggested that many Africans use their cell phones to call in live radio and television current affairs talk shows to discuss politics and to draw attention to socioeconomic issues of national concern.

The four countries of interest here are Ghana, Ivory Coast, Uganda, and Kenya. The online and wireless digital media are conceptualized here to include Internet information from the social online networks, which are used to tweet, chat, instant-message, video Skype, and blog. Plus text messages and beeps, which communicate, shared meanings and nonverbal cues. This study also explores whether and to what extent these social media platforms are perceived by their users to be usurping the role of the traditional media in mobilizing them to participate in the public sphere of engaging in issues of national significance. Previous research opines that “the media and for that matter digital media are playing a critical role in election consolidation in some countries [like Ghana] on the continent [Africa]” (Temin & Smith, 2000, p.586). The Internet and other personal wireless electronic digital devices also have reduced the time that information seekers and ‘netizens’ used to spend to receive or deliver the news and other information.

One of the assumptions probed here is that mobile phones provide citizens with a powerful tool in Africa to capture and distribute content that exposes politicians and civil bureaucrats who seemingly engage in shady deals. The study is based on online in-depth interviews collected between December 2011 and February 2012, targeting Africans in Ghana, Ivory Coast, Kenya and Uganda who are 18 years and older. Their attitudes towards the use of social media as a means or engaging in the political process and their perceptions of the impact of social media on political mobilization in East and West Africa are discussed. Also discussed are the obstacles that face researchers who collect online and mobile phone in-depth interview data in Africa.

Internet Use in Africa

The Internet is regarded as one of the most useful inventions in mass communication, as an agent of human and social development or as an important transmitter of globalization (Bonjawo, 2002; Castells et al., 2007; Gyamfi, 2005). However, the Internet Usage and Population Statistics shows that by the end of 2010, Africa still shared only five percent of Internet traffic. But there is constant growth in accessibility and application of Internet knowledge to many aspects of social life in Africa (Kiyindou 2004; Mbarika, Jensen & Messo, 2002). The same Internet report of

2011 indicated an increase in the number of Africans using the Internet from 2000 to 2010 to about a 1000 percent, while globally it was pegged at 260 percent.

However, Internet use in Africa is not much different from other parts of the world such as Europe, the Middle East, and the Americas. For instance, there are businesses that depend on Internet use to reach both old and new clients who have developed a sophisticated test for technology and new media in general. The youths in Ghana, South Africa, Nigeria and other parts of Africa increasingly use the Internet as a way of crafting and testing out lifestyles, such as making new friends and online dating across the globe (Fair et al., 2009). It is common now to hear African teenagers talk about *Facebook* and their goal of befriending people around the world to build social capital. The major challenge with the Internet in Africa, however, is the slow speed due to bandwidth and overcapacity. Audio-visuals also contribute to the limitations of Internet usage in most parts of Africa.

In the early 2000s, Baker (2001) drew attention to how the Internet was used by individuals, institutions, and nations alike to represent their culture and to promote national identity. He claimed that at that time, the scramble to produce online content to promote national identities sometimes led to cyber warfare, which he conceptualized as the use of the Internet to attack the views and opinions of opposing groups and ethnicities. Later in the decade, Moyo (2009) opined that some governments were uneasy about the potential of new media and its effectiveness in shaping the mindsets and attitudes of citizens concerning dictatorial regimes in Africa. They feared the dawn of a new socialized media environment where citizens mobilized themselves to overthrow governments.

Moyo (2009) and Kalyango (2011) argued that the attempt by these dictatorial regimes to control the media space with legal and extralegal measures was successful at that time because they controlled the traditional media such as radio, television and newspaper. However, citizens reinvented and developed the social media phenomena, first by employing their mobile phones to call in to live radio talk shows and other current affairs on television to discuss and engage in political discourse. They accessed and began to use the Internet as a force for political mobilization, social and political advocacy, and citizen participation. According to international press reports on the BBC and Reuters, new media gadgets such as mobile phones and pagers were used to

record secret plots to rig election results in Ivory Coast in 2010 and in Zimbabwe in 2008. Lately, however, the social media outlets such as *Facebook*, *Twitter*, and *Myspace* as well as mobile phones were used to mobilize citizens to engage in the political discourse on behalf of various opposition political parties in countries like Nigeria, Ivory Coast, Tunisia, Zambia, Kenya, and lately in Egypt.

Country Backgrounds

Ivory Coast and Ghana

Both Ivory Coast and Ghana are located in the Western region of Africa. Ivory Coast (or Cote D'Ivoire) turned into one of the hot flash points on the continent as it experienced a decade of confrontations between government forces and rebels. The decade-long civil conflict resulted in the economic decline of a nation, which was once touted as a symbol of economic progress on the continent.

The political degeneration and instability in Ivory Coast begun after the death of Félix Houphouët-Boigny, a statesman during the struggle for independence of many West African nations and beyond (MFWA, 2010,). Houphouët-Boigny's sound policies as the first post-colonial president of Ivory Coast brought about relative peace and steady economic growth until his death in 1993. The country made its mark through massive development of the infrastructure and agriculture and became the world's leading producer of cocoa.

Leadership is argued by some scholars to be the major cause of political instability, war, under development, and poverty in many Sub-Saharan African countries. For example, in November, 2010, officials from the Front Populaire Ivoirien (FPI) of former president, Laurent Gbagbo, prevented the electoral commission from calling the election in favor of the opposition candidate, Alassane Ouattara, and his party called the Rassemblement des Républicains (RDR), after polling 54% of the total votes (*Economist* Newspaper, 2011). The aftermath of this incident is synonymous with the many civil wars that have been experienced in other parts of the continent.

The state of the media in Ivory Coast is daunting, because news organizations lack specialized and well trained journalists who can engage in meaningful debates and ethical reportage (MFWA, 2010, p.15). In other words, the stories and news discourse presented by most journalists in Ivory Coast were as late as the mid-2000s regarded as

superficial (Nyamnjoh, 2005). Ivory Coast has two national television stations managed by the Ivorian Broadcasting Service (RTI). RTI performs a public service duty and has a sole monopoly both in the broadcasting of programs and in the treatment of current affairs (BBC, 2011). There is also pay per view television channels, which broadcast Canal+ Horizon multi package to those who can afford them. Most of the pay per view channels have a lot of foreign content.

In spite of having more than one hundred radio stations in Ivory Coast, the current affairs news were still not permitted by 2010, while advertising premium was rationed for the local radio stations based on a broadcasting law (MFWA, 2010, p.15). The print media in Ivory Coast have a more balanced news flavor with pro-government and antigovernment coverage than the broadcast outlets (Reporters without Borders, 2004). Twenty of the daily newspapers carry general government information, which in most cases illustrates their obsession with the dissemination of news on politics. Also, the presentation of political information does not make room for diversity of ideas in the columns of most of the daily newspapers.

Ivory Coast has, however, instituted media regulatory bodies that are mandated with specific tasks to oversee the professional operations of various media entities in the country. In June 2008, the National Media Council for instance was tasked to clean up the newspaper market. The task was aimed at banning the publication of newspapers that were operating without license or permission and in due process of the national media law. Consequently, only 81 newspapers were allowed to operate out of a total of 130 (MFWA, 2010, p.16). In lieu of many challenges of the media system in Ivory Coast, some form of press freedom was relatively visible without instances of physical attacks on journalists. But there were few instances where newspaper offices were raided by unidentified persons (MFWA, 2010, p.17).

The international community heralds Ghana as a one of the symbols of procedural democracy in Africa. Ghana's positive record since 1992 is appraised from conducting successive general elections, which have brought into power three different governments.

The overthrow of Kwame Nkrumah, the first President of the West African nation in 1966, set the nation on a patchy road of successive coup d'états, followed by economic decline, under development, and poverty (Commander, 2007).

The return to multi-party democracy after the longest serving head of state, President Jerry John Rawlings, opened up the country for massive growth across the length and breadth of the nation in media freedom due to the liberalization of the industry. However, the quantity in the mushrooming of media outlets did not correspond with quality (Fair, 2008).

The election of the current President, John Evans Atta Mills, in 2008 has a lot of significance for this young and emerging democracy. This is the second time in Ghana's history that political state power has successfully been transferred from an incumbent to an opposition party (Gyimah-Boadi, 2009). The success of this emerging young democracy is also attributed to the media, as major contributors to the civic enlightenment of the country (Bonnah-Koomson, 1995). The media's keen watchdog role and mass mobilization are believed to have contributed to somewhat fair, transparent, and competitive elections and the subsequent alternation of power.

In 2008, the national communications authority of Ghana authorized over 104 television stations to operate, with five of them being free-to-air independent commercial TV stations. Also, the Ghana Broadcasting Corporation (GBC) was under consideration for transformation into a public service broadcaster. Despite these positive developments, the media sector continued to suffer from lack of infrastructural investment in the new media technology in the early 2000s (Fair et al, 2009). Other challenges for the media sector in Ghana are that the necessary media institutions such as the National Communications Authority (NCA), The National Media Commissions (NMC), lacked the legal powers to perform their constitutional obligations to prevent state and external encroachment into the autonomy of the news media (Gyimah-Boadi, 2009).

The Ghana Journalists Association (GJA) together with other media associations such the Institute of Public Relations Ghana (IPR), Private Newspaper Publishers Association of Ghana (PRINPAG) all teamed up to check excesses and to promote professionalism. Nevertheless, still there were many other challenges in terms of content and how several radio stations, and newspapers continued to operate and broadcast news content with political leanings (Fair, 2008). The Centre for Democratic Development (CDD) also states that in spite of the relative freedom the media enjoy in Ghana, there are instances of threats and attacks on journalists and other media

personnel when some individuals perceive some news reports to be negative and dishonorably exposing bad governance (CDD, 2009).

Kenya and Uganda

The post election violence that took place in Kenya after the 2007 general elections between the supporters of incumbent president, Mwai Kibaki, and his Party of National Unity (PNU) and the then opposition leader, Raila Odinga, of the Orange Democratic Movement (ODM). The violence ultimately led to the restructuring of leadership to make room for a prime minister slot, who then became the head of government business through the power sharing accord that was reached in 2008 (Kramon & Posner, 2011; Muhoma, 2012).

Kenya's media system is relatively open and vibrant but the political will and the lack of national infrastructure in terms of support for the major media institutions keeps them from operating autonomously (Eckler & Kalyango 2010). This situation casts doubt on the independence of the Kenyan traditional media and questions their capability to perform their normative duty (Ogala 2011). In instances where the government owns or controls the major media institutions, journalists and media personnel who are pro-government get the top media positions in order to strategically serve state interests (Graham & Davies 1997; Tunstall & Palmer 1991). It is however not surprising how the state media in Kenya continue to operate as its roots could easily be traced to the colonial times and the era right after independence where official censorship did not exist but then the government had controlled all various functions of the press (Ng'weno, 1969). Also worth noting is the fact that the media in Kenya have adopted a more local content especially with the radio and television networks where information is presented in the various local dialect (Ogala 2011).

One major change that is sweeping across Kenya in recent times is the alternative development in communication technology, which has presented citizens with a much-needed deviation from the state-controlled sources of information (Onyebadi & Kalyango, 2010). The implication here is a shift from the state-inspired self-censorship to information sharing and easy access to official government records via state websites and other vital online data about Kenya from outside the country. Since the late 2000s, citizens can freely tweet, blog, and discuss issues of national importance to them and their community without hindrance or direct state control.

In Uganda, the media with its postcolonial mentality is still governed in a way that gives autocratic power to the government to control press freedom (Ng'weno, 1969). Uganda, unlike its East African neighbor, Kenya, is much stricter with the press (Eckler and Kalyango 2010). President Yoweri Museveni's semi-autocratic government has censored the media with respect to ownership and content since the early 1990s (Tripp, 2004). Onyebadi & Kalyango (2010) argued that the introduction of the controversial Communications Bill by the Ugandan government was reminiscent of the conditions under which the media in the East African country operate. The bill, according to Onyebadi & Kalyango (2010), would give the Ugandan government enormous powers to monitor telephone (mobile phone) conversations and text messages in the name of national security.

Political Mobilization

As with all other measurable theoretical constructs, there are multiple ways of defining and conceptualizing mobilization. The definition of mobilization from a media or political communication perspective depends on the subfield and framework of the study. Some scholars define it as "the process by which a passive collection of individuals in a society is transformed into an active group in the pursuit of common goals or coerced into political participation by an authoritarian government" (Cox et al, 1998). In economic terms, the concept of mobilization is used to describe the process of employing creative efforts that promote the use of local assets to gain support for an organization, to generate circulation, and to realize more assets or capital (World Bank, 2007; Walgrave & Verhulst, 2009).

Goldstein and Ridout (2002) identified three main elements of mobilization in their work, which affects voter turnout among the citizens. These elements are aggregate rate of mobilization, effective mobilization contact, and change in targeting of mobilization.

They determined that mobilization carries with it the power to promote individual participation and the more intense it is the more effective and convincing it is, the more it gets people to participate in a process or vote. In other words, a decline reduces its net effect. Kernell and Jacobson (2000 p.358) had earlier found that the major reasons

for the decline (in turn-out) were institutional: “a decline in mobilization by parties, candidates, and groups such as labor unions.”

Another important distinction that Goldstein & Ridout (2002) made in terms of how mobilization operates in industrialized nations like the United States is that, it had become more sophisticated, as voter contact operations were often purchased off-the-shelf from consultants and phone banks that specialized in identifying and contacting voters for candidates and parties. A more scholarly argument for this phenomenon, according to Putnam (2000, p.39), is a shift from the use of social capital that is grassroots citizen network to financial capital where money becomes the driving force behind mass marketing of candidates and parties. In Africa today, the massive acquisition of social media tools and the establishment of new media technologies has set the platform for self mobilization towards other networking groups for political as well as social mobilization (Fair et al, 2009). For example, the Committee for Joint Action (CJA) in Ghana was able to mobilize thousands of sympathizers to organize a demonstration to press for the reduction of fuel prices in 2008.

Berman (1997), Feltey & Susel (1998), Walters and colleagues (2000) argued that citizen involvement in government decision-making improves government performance, decision legitimacy, citizen responsiveness, and trust in direct democracy. At the same time, with effective mass mobilization, citizens become contributors to governance and shareholders in government due to their mediated involvement in the decisions of the state (Roberts, 2004, p 192). Citizen participation, according to Langton (1978), includes four types: citizen action such as lobbying and protest, citizen involvement such as public hearings and citizen surveys, electoral participation such as voting and campaigning for political candidates, and obligatory participation such as paying taxes and performing jury duty. Langton (1978, p.21) defined citizen involvement through mass mobilization as “initiated and controlled by government to improve and or to gain support for decisions, programs, or services.” Citizen involvement activities relate to techniques or mechanisms such as public hearings, citizen advisory councils, citizen panels, neighborhood meetings, and citizen surveys (King et al., 1998; Wang, 2001, p194).

Throughout the 1960s, 70s, and 80s, some of the major organizers and mass mobilizers of communities for political engagements included churches, artists,

universities and other tertiary institutions, professional social engineers, other advocacy groups. During those early revolutionary days, outlined some of the mobilization tactics, which included reinforcement and recruitment of foot soldiers to knock on doors and to distribute informational materials (Martz & Baloyra, 1976, p. 18). There are specific situations where political mobilizers employed strategies of inducement with material elements and promised recruiters and citizens to participate in a process. Yet, according to Martz and Baloyra (1976), material inducements were simply not enough in some cases. With reinforcement, mobilizers on certain occasions exerted maximum effort in turning out party or group faithful without necessarily inducing them with material elements. In retrospect on how people were mobilized in the 1970s, 80s, and mid 1990s, today's globalized arena of online media discussion groups, free virtual social media forums and other virtual participatory electronic devices like texting on cell phones have become the new tools for national or global mobilization.

Gone are the days when the primary efforts of mass mobilization for any political activity were through party structures and the traditional civil society community organization. The role the solid grass-root support for civic engagement has changed overtime due to the new era information socially engineered online communication technologies, which have generated new virtual *netizen* armies that cheaply engage in mass political and electoral mobilization. These virtual social and political mobilizers include diverse groups of ordinary citizens with varying political, socioeconomic, practical interests and backgrounds.

Political Engagements in Africa

By the end of the 1980s, only nine of Africa's 52 states had constitutions that require multiparty politics (Thompson, 1989). By 1999 the number of regimes with constituted multiparty politics had increased to 45 out of 53 countries (Thomson, 2000, 2002: 215). Uhlener (2001) asserted that political participation sought to influence government policy outcomes but the form of outcome and influence was always not clear. Uhlener argued that citizens choose either direct or indirect forms of political participation or both to influence policy outcomes.

What is understood as political participation in everyday usage constitutes an indirect form of mobilization in which citizens get out to cast their votes and

elect political representatives with mandates to make and execute public policies (Huntington & Nelson, 1976; Verba et al., 1993, 1995). Elections were also used in the past to mobilize citizens in order to legitimize the actions of political representatives in both the legislative and executive branches of government (Stone, 2002).

In the Western industrialized world, the influence on policy outcome is increasingly coming from mass mobilization through social networks. For instance in the United States, social media engage citizens in local and national political activities, including voluntary and involuntary engagement in partisan activities such as rallies, protests, demonstrations, virtual or physical meetings, and donation of money to candidates or political causes. Citizens from Western nations write or verbally communicate with political leaders to draw attention to their sociopolitical concerns, and they also partake in some form of political or policy discussions. Yet in the four African countries, the supposedly unequal representation of people's needs is reflected in what some Western scholars (Conway, 2000; Lijphart, 1998; Rosenstone & Hansen, 1993; Verba et al., 1995; Wagle, 2000) determined to be, the lack of interest or lack of awareness on policymaking decisions, which would motivate Africans to participate in political activities.

Research Question

How do netizens in Ghana, Ivory Coast, Kenya and Uganda perceive the role of social media platforms such as *Facebook*, *Twitter*, *Myspace*, and *YouTube* in mobilizing them to participate in the political discourse, which engages in issues of national significance?

Online In-Depth Interviews

The study employs semi-structured online in-depth interviews with 16 Ghanaian citizens, 14 Ivorian citizens, 14 Ugandans and 16 Kenyans who are very active social media users. These very active social media users are forthwith conceptualized as *netizens*. In this study, a *netizen* is conceptually described as an Internet resident who engages in at least two of the following habits: one who habitually uses it for personal gratification as well as for social change, but not necessarily an addict; one who uses it as a communication medium for consuming public and commercial content, generating

either fictional, satirical, or nonfictional content; and one who uses it to disseminate primary and secondary content with close friends and to the general public.

On average, the majority of participants in this study responded that they spend three hours a day—four days a week—on the Internet. This is considered a huge investment of time and money, since the majority of Africans interviewed here pay about USD 1.00 (one U.S. dollar) per hour to access the Internet at Web Cafés. A total of 60 netizens from the four countries interviewed while they were online on the following social media sites: 12 netizens on *Friendster*, 18 on *Facebook*, 16 on *MySpace*, and 14 via audio or video *Skyping*. Participants selected for the interviews were 12 women netizens and 18 men. All participants in this study are of African descent and reside in the four countries. Some of the participants had either previously participated in a national political activity in the past year or commented on national politics via either their personal blogs or social media pages.

The selection of who participated in this study was equally important and the recruitment was based on purposive strategy, which intentionally selected research participants who were active on social media sites and were willing to offer perspectives on political issues without fear of retaliation in their home countries. This approach is supported by Esterberg (2002) who argued that a carefully chosen subject pool allows researchers to explore different experiences among various individuals or groups.

All the semi-structured online in-depth interviews were conducted between December 1, 2011 and February 20, 2012. Each interview lasted for about 90 minutes, with both the researcher and the subject (respondent) online at the same time. In-depth interviewing provides a flexible platform for the researcher to tap into the knowledge and opinions of the human subject or source on a particular topic of interest. It is a holistic way of understanding an informant's point of view or situation and serves as an exploratory method of tapping public attitudes in news research areas for further development (Berry, 1999). Webber and Byrd (2010, p.1) for instance contend that this approach of collecting qualitative data “allows interviewee responses to guide the interaction” and shape the discourse for robust scholarly results. The research design here follows the conventional qualitative in-depth interview data collection that most researchers opt to use by not setting out with pre-formulated hypotheses. This research followed Townsend's (2010) viewpoint of conducting semi-structured in-depth interviews

by embedding the interpretivist approach whereby data were critically examined and presented with context.

This approach permits the ambivalences to surface as the human subjects interviewed here narrated their account. The ten structured questions were pretested in January 2011 on three users on *Friendster*, three on *MySpace*, and five *Facebook* users to check the utility of those questions for eliciting the in-depth information sought (Webber and Byrd, 2010). As a result of this pretesting, three questions were appropriately refined. This also increased familiarity with possible interview process and outcomes which encouraged a more online conversational tone and better data outcome.

The researchers started the online interview sessions with both general and specific questions such as age, level of education, social status questions, work, online media usage, other soft questions related to the subjects' interest in politics (see Berg, 2009; Esterberg, 2002); then gradually embarked on specific questions pertaining to what ways they used social media to engage in political activities. After agreeing (consent) to the research exercise, the first six open-ended questions were asked to draw out responses and to elicit follow-up discussion from the netizens. Two of those are the main research questions and the other four questions elicited discourse pertaining to the netizens' use of their online platform as a tool for political mobilization; and whether they perceive social media in their respective countries to be a conduit of communication that compliment traditional media.

The participants were asked questions that elicited their attitudes towards government once they learn about their respective government via social media, and whether their opinions are primarily shaped by what they learn via the internet (a list of other options other than a social medium are spelled out as alternatives). These questions explored the potential impacts of these social media outlets on these particular netizens. All these issues are relevant to gaining the most holistic understanding of the role of this increasingly popular interactive medium.

The purpose of utilizing *Friendster*, *MySpace*, *Facebook*, as well as *Skyping* in certain instances, to collect data, was to ensure direct access to social network users in Africa who are 'computed literate, educated,' and most likely are traditionally

marginalized groups of young people, including women, gay and lesbian, political activists, and unemployed workers (see Webber & Byrd, 2010).

Though in-depth interviews can be used for different kinds of research purposes, one of the key elements of this research approach as used by is its ability to elicit responses from the emotional experiences of informants. Another justification for interviewing subjects online that are active in social media is the online ability to capture attitudes not adequately and typically collected in traditional face-to-face interviews or survey research (Hochschild, 1989; Berg, 2009; Esterberg, 2002). Researchers did not stick strictly with the structured questions but followed them up with more questions depending on the direction of the online responses from the social media users. It should be noted that the researchers steered the interview back on the conceptual purpose whenever there was an obvious digression. The researchers avoided follow-up questions that would give clues to the respondent of what the study aimed to achieve from the data. Also avoided were any online social interaction traps of engaging in confrontations with sources that could possibly taint the data.

Results and Discussion

Social media networks are increasingly becoming a critical component of civic engagement and an ideal mode of communication, as they generate virtual discourse among friends, acquaintances, groups with similar aspirations, and with whoever shares one's common interests. We learn from these data that social media networks, specifically, *Friendster*, *MySpace*, *Facebook* have helped African netizens to perform the crucial function of keeping in touch with people from around the world. They also connect with distant others including leaders and policy makers who are otherwise not easily reachable by any other means. Responds overwhelming state that social media platforms provide an enabling environment for low cadres to network with middle class and very wealthy netizens through mutual social networks to collectively discuss familiar communal obstacles, shared opportunities, mutual social events, and shared ideological politics.

“I learned a lot about elections in my country through the *Tweeter* and the *Facebook*. Now, I protested the elections because of what I read about our corrupt former president on the Internet site here. I even mobilized

these buddies here and the Europeans blog to reject our president and his bad elections and the vote rigging we had in last year's elections," (Ivorian netizen).

"Did you see all that? I was part of our revolution and it started here with us who were on the website and my Facebook friends. We learnt a lesson from Egypt through the news of the website and that would also never have happened with this Facebook and Twitter," (Ivorian netizen).

Most importantly, *Facebook* and *Twitter* receive record number hits in African nations during major sporting and political events such as the World Cup, Africa Cup of Nations, and one week before and after the general presidential elections.

The majority of Ghanaian and Ugandan netizens said they used social networks to keep in touch with close friends, to make new friends, and to learn about other sociopolitical developments and distant cultures. Also, they said that they were more comfortable with joining the international online community in order to post political statements about their governments.

"If these statements I posted the last six months to bring down President Museveni and his other cronies like his military men were to be published in the newspapers and television here, the reporters would be prosecuted for treason and for tarnishing the president," (Ugandan netizen).

This exploratory study supports previous research, which have claimed that people use social networks to build social capital, social contacts, and self-esteem (Ellison et al., 2007; Kwon & Wen, 2011). Netizens indicated that they experience unlimited freedom and autonomy from state intimidation, and as such they build self-esteem through communicating with others and building local and international contacts with whom they share common interests and opportunities. The majority of netizens said that spending more time on virtual social network sites such as *Myspace* or *Friendster* than at what some called physical "drinking-joints" or "socialite-bars," increases their awareness of "universal basic rights and the meaning of true democracy," and it fulfills their dreams of making a change in the national discourse without the help of their local traditional media: newspapers, radio, or television stations.

Some netizens from Kenya and Ghana said that they have learned from the social network sites how they can get involved in political activism to make the government respond to their needs the way ordinary Egyptians and Tunisians effected political change. Kwon and Yen (2010) found social networking sites to be an innovative relationship-building system, while Ellison and others (2007) determined that social media were a tool for social bridging.

“We have become a wireless country, finally. My mobile phone can sms and beep [texting] anyone in the world. Check this out... I can even send my photos using this phone. Before the Internet, I did not have access to reporting for the newspapers and the TVs here, now I can send my videos to the world without asking the journalism to record me,” (Kenyan netizen).

I can report that I don't like how over leaders have neglected the hospitals and our primary and secondary schools have no books and the soldiers and police will not try to arrest me. The next thing I will do is to address my issues to our president on the YouTube website channel. I will do it this year to fulfill my dream [2012]. And that will be so cool,” (Ghanaian netizen).

Building political and social capital is considered by some scholars to be the primary use of social networking sites such as *Facebook* and *Myspace* (DiMicco et al., 2008; Zywica & Danowski, 2008). This study supports those previous findings as far as Africa's netizens are concerned. Some netizens said that the African youths and university students were the foremost users of social networks, essentially to maintain social contacts, build a network of international virtual friends and seek political awareness about their own governments and global politics.

Even in other developing nations like India or Turkey, having and maintaining social capital among working professionals in one's country and beyond is one of the central factors that mobilizes citizens around the world to use social networks (DiMicco et al., 2008) So, an important trend of netizens in the four African countries is moving online to build social capital for socioeconomic and political reasons. People also tend to increase their use of social networks when they realize that old friends who were no

longer in touch can be brought back into this interactive virtual discourse through social network sites (Kwon and Wen, 2011). That is a signal for effective political mobilization. According to our findings, Africans who like to project themselves into the spotlight, are somewhat educated, and can afford or have access to the Internet, do find social networks to be useful. They are considered important mobilizing factors for Africans who wish to engage in national political discourse.

The implications from this exploratory study here are that using social media as mobilizing tools for social change in the national political discourse is an important facet of pride and fulfillment. Netizens said that many of the peers still enjoy using their mobile phones to directly phone in to political talk shows on either radio or television. Forty-five out of sixty netizens mentioned fulfillment, political change, and enjoyment as one of the major reasons that motivate them to call and complain about government neglect. Enjoyment and fulfillment are some of the underlying concepts of mobilization that drive Africans to socialize on the Internet.

Enjoyment from social networks in the Western industrialized nations is derived directly, through activities like puzzle games, apps like game videos, and indirectly, through the use of social networks as tools to connect and converse with friends and family. Yet this study reveals that for African netizens in the four countries, political mobilization for social change is part of that enjoyment. Although Africa still lags at the bottom of the Internet usage in the world, there is growing optimism among netizens in Uganda that what social media did for the Egyptians, the Tunisians in North Africa will also soon happen in East Africa. The countries are now witnessing voting citizens demand better treatment and better economic opportunities from their government and public schools are demanding governments to provide students with access to computers with the Internet for easy access to free online libraries. There is a paradigm shift in narratives and every good indication that Africa is slowly heading in the right direction as far as freedom of expression via the Internet is concerned.

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Short Bio

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