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Additional Information:

- This is a book chapter.

Metadata Record: [https://dspace.lboro.ac.uk/2134/37217](https://dspace.lboro.ac.uk/2134/37217)

Version: Published

Publisher: Nordicom

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African Youth, Media and Civic Engagement

*Thomas Tufte & Norbert Wildermuth*

*Speaking Up and Talking Back? Media, Empowerment and Civic Engagement among East and Southern African Youth.* This is the title we have given to the book. The fundamental aim is to question if and how citizens in Africa engage with media and communication technologies and platforms in their pursuit to be included in the change processes of their societies. The theme echoes some of the claims made by disenchanted and frustrated youth and other citizens in the streets of the North African cities of Tunis and Cairo in 2012. Severe critiques were articulated against the governance structures of their countries; mass social mobilisations were seen, governments fell, and in the aftermath, the slow process of deep change continued, now with one tyrant less, but still with huge challenges in the social and economic development of these countries.

Youth in particular engaged massively, visibly, loudly and dramatically around claims to be involved and included in their countries’ development process. Our book taps into the less visible and dramatic, but nevertheless highly dynamic and influential process of media development and enlargement of youth-driven, deliberative spaces which sub-Saharan Africa seems currently to experience.

**Democratic governance**

Fragility and underdevelopment in Africa has partly been attributed to dysfunctional political institutions and the resultant authoritarianism, which have hindered the successful pursuit of any development strategy regardless of the ideological orientation (Van de Walle 2001). This has seen the endorsement of democratic governance as an essential condition for sustainable development on the continent (Hope 2002). The argument is that democratic governance can trigger a progressing cycle of development because political freedom empowers
people to press for policies that expand social and economic opportunities, and open debates that help communities to identify and shape their priorities. It is an argument which has encouraged demands for the enhanced democratization of, and institutionalization of democracy in African countries.

In the context of a respective call, this book seeks to identify and discuss certain key arguments about democracy and its processes, their relationship to media and to ICTs, and how these issues have been examined and debated in relation to the global project of democratisation in sub-Saharan Africa. It further examines what constitutes democratic engagement generally, and in relation to media, including ICTs.

Access to information and to the space of debate is necessary for civic engagement to take place, and is almost always associated with media, which are assigned this responsibility in most societies. Cowling and Hamilton (2010) point out that whether an actual public sphere exists or not, “the operations of modern democracies assume the existence of a viable public sphere.” And what Habermas describes as the components of the public sphere directs us to the importance of the dynamics of debate and discussion, the importance of equal access to the debate, and the historical connection of access to media and other channels for communication to deliberation.

**Media development**

It is argued that the people in democracies cannot exercise their rights without access to information, which enables them to make informed decisions as voting citizens. An independent media sector is considered crucial to provide quality and accurate information. Such normative approaches to the media also see them as being extremely significant to public deliberation on issues of social importance (see Wright Mills 2004; Habermas 1989; Fraser 1992; McQuail 1994).

Understanding the media as accountable to the public and as holding the elites and the state accountable, is a normative, liberal interpretation of the (mass) media as “watchdog of society” that not always reflects realities on the ground. Community media, particularly radio, have been endorsed as an alternative to both market-driven and state-controlled media, enabling a broadened section of the population to gain access to a mediated communicative space where they can engage in debate and deliberation. While these and other citizen-led, often youth-led, mediated publics are laying the groundwork for community empowerment, advocacy and activism, it is understood that the dissemination of information, on its own, is not sufficient to alter the marginalized position of excluded communities. Moreover, civil society-led spaces of communicative exchange and deliberation, such as community and citizen journalist media, do face a range of constraining factors in meeting the needs of their designated communities of participants-cum-recipients.
While acknowledging the differences in practical experiences of the media in many developing countries, there is evidence that “old” media do play a constructive role in helping advance democracy and demand accountability from (a receptive) government. This is seen particularly in the field of health communication. Especially the 25+ years of fighting against HIV/AIDS in Africa has been an experience with civil society driven media platforms which very much has been linked to youth as target groups. Our book taps into this experience in part three. ‘Old’ media like film, and a variety of forms of interpersonal communication are likewise dealt with in our section four on ‘culture and social change’.

However, despite highlighting and focusing in on specific media in some of the chapters, it is the co-evolution of media which characterizes the African societies, and the uses and appropriations amongst youth in society that is particularly noteworthy. The role of new and old media differs depending on the political system in which they operate, and they require different kinds of support systems and channels (and perhaps audiences) in order to play a Fourth Estate role in holding governments accountable and in articulating social change processes in Africa (Sida 2009: 24). It is our hope that our book sheds light on some of these processes and the particular role of youth in them.

Media, empowerment and democracy

Our book grows out of the Danida-funded research project ‘People Speaking Back? Media, Empowerment and Democracy in East Africa (www.mediea.ruc.dk). The project (MEDieA 2009-2013), covering Kenya and Tanzania, was launched at a seminar in December 2009 in Tanzania with the aim to explore how civil society driven media platforms and communicative empowerment initiatives provide – or not – opportunities for young marginalized citizens, young girls in particular, to engage in public debate. The MEDieA project’s six Nordic and African researchers, its international advisory board, and many local African partners from civil society, media and academia participated in the launch seminar. It was combined with an online communication for development seminar in the context of Malmö University’s MA in ComDev. This whole mobilization around the questions of mediated civic engagement in processes of development contributed to a series of both Nordic and African masters students pursuing thesis work in this field. Now, a few years down the line, the book brings together 21 researchers from Northern Europe and East- and Southern Africa contributing to reflections about media, empowerment and civic engagement amongst African youth in processes of social change and democratic transition. The book contains a good blend of junior and senior researchers coming together and reporting on their empirical work, including five of the MEDieA project researchers and a member of the advisory board.
Rethinking communication for development

The book falls in 4 parts. The first section seeks to provide an overall conceptual framing to the topics dealt with. The book is embedded in the academic discipline as well as in the practice of communication for development and social change. This is a field which is in a process of fundamentally being rethought in the context of globalization and mediatization, network society, digital media developments, and challenged especially by the processes of development that seem to exclude and marginalize huge segments of citizens, not least the youth. In this context, Thomas Tufte analyses the resurgence in practices of bottom-up communication for social change. He assesses how the plethora of agency in which voice, citizenship and collective action influences and informs the thinking and practice of institutionalized communication for development and social change. What are the underlying conceptual differences in the notions of action, participation and social change which inform the new generation of social movements, on one side, and the established field of communication for social change, on the other?

Linje Manyozo then provides an introduction to, and very critical assessment of the phases that have characterized the theory and practice of communication for development on the African continent. Manyozo distinguishes between the phases of orientalism, when missionaries and colonial authorities studied and co-opted educational indigenous practices and traditions; extension and liberation, just after independence, when broadcasters and universities were being used to take development messages to the people; and ‘NGO-ification’ (Manyozo, 2012), during which major scholarship is being generated by development organizations. These phases are not mutually exclusive.

ICT, empowerment and policies: The case of Kenya

Part two focuses explicitly on Kenya, where the situation has been particularly noteworthy in terms of political instability, youth vulnerability and ICT creativity. Hilker and Fraser (2009) advance the argument that large cohorts of unemployed and under-employed youth who lack political participation combined with urban crowding may become aggrieved, increasing their likelihood of engaging in violence. The Kenyan post-election violence was a dramatic warning of such scenarios.

In digging into this complex situation, Norbert Wildermuth opens the section by exploring the constraints and opportunities for processes of e-citizenship, e-democracy and digital empowerment to unfold, be it for the unemployed youth, but also for the Kenyan citizen in general. He draws on a rich body of civil society based experiences spanning from community-based digital inclusion initiatives to online tools/processes for civil auditing and social accountability. These analyses are interestingly complemented by Winnie Mitullah’s analysis
on the policy and institutional context of ICT and citizen participation. Mitullah argues that the prevailing policies, regulations, societal values and norms in Kenya either facilitate or slow the realization of participatory governance using ICT. The chapter uses an institutional perspective and draws on theories around ICT for development to analyse how ICT policies and regulations affect processes of especially women’s empowerment and participation in development.

In the following chapter, Wanjiru Mbure focuses explicitly on online youth engagement. She explores how digital media platforms in the form of youth group websites and online social groups advance or constrain opportunities for youth participation in the political process. Mbure further examines some of the theoretical paradigms that exist to explain political participation by youth in the digital era. Karen Luise Kisakeni Sørensen and Viktorija Petuchaite also look at how new digital media can be used to overcome a digital divide beyond the provision of access and how civil society finds ways to adapt these technologies to their context to achieve empowerment. The authors investigate these through the case of Ushahidi, a crowdsourced, open source, online platform, which was developed and first used during the Kenyan post-election crisis of 2007/2008, but has found numerous employments around the world ever since.

Grace Githaiga presents results from her ongoing PhD project in the Nairobi slum of Mathare. Importantly, she asks how young Kenyan women, and in particular those living in informal settlements are making use of ICTs and whether ICTs are shaping their communication strategies and practices either as groups or individuals. Her chapter assesses literature reviewed on how young women use ICTs, and whether or how these are shaping communication between them.

Health, communication and social change

The five chapters in part three all tap into the rich African experience with health communication targeting African youth. Within the widespread demand for more effective communication in the fight against HIV/AIDS, many conflicting paradigms have emerged over the last three decades. Eliza Govender explores four of the most conflicting paradigms, which include; the debate regarding the shift of mass media interventions to more participatory HIV communication; the question of whether HIV should be addressed from a focus on individual behaviour change or social change communication; from a faith based approach or a secular approach; and finally from a social science or a biomedical perspective for HIV prevention. Govender argues that these paradigms all need to be reviewed from a cultural studies perspective.

Drawing on an HIV/Aids prevention project in the town of Mbarara in central Uganda that involved local youth as peer educators, Mille Schütten and Line Friberg Nielsen explore the use of peer education as a potentially participatory method for turning a target group into active participants in their own change process. Schütten and Friberg Nielsen argue that participation in itself does not
create change. Rather, the potential for change depends on how participation is understood and applied, and on how participants, both implementers of a change process and members of the target group, communicate, engage and relate.

In the following chapter, Abraham Mulwo and Keyan Tomaselli examine South African university students’ interpretations of the notions of ‘abstinence’ and ‘be faithful’. Their study is based on a reception study conducted to explore students’ responses to ABC and VCT campaigns at three universities in the KwaZulu-Natal province. Using reception theories and hermeneutics, Mulwo and Tomaselli examine the structures and processes through which university students make sense of campaign messages and the impact of these campaigns on students’ sexual practices. Empirical evidence from the study suggests that the nature of cognitive influence and social action that behaviour change communication messages generate amongst the audience-publics, ultimately depends on how the meanings interpreted from the messages articulate with the situated discourses that led to the formation of those meanings.

From South Africa we move to Tanzania in the next chapter, where Datius Rweyemamu engages in a study of Tanzanian civil society organisations and their efforts to empower youth sexually. Rweyemamu presents the diverse strategies used by CSO in their work to enable youth to modify their risky sexual behaviours, make informed decisions, communicate their sexual concerns to their partners and adults, and engage in dialogue about sexual norms and ideas. Using the three dimensions of adolescent sexual empowerment set out in Spencer et al. (2008), this chapter examines the empowerment strategies used by CSOs in Tanzania to demonstrate that adolescent sexual empowerment is a process and a matter of degree which no single CSO can claim the sole capacity to achieve.

Finally, the last chapter in this part, written by Cecilia Strand, discusses a study of local Ugandan human rights defenders’ attempts to influence local print media coverage of the Ugandan Anti-Homosexuality Bill of October 2009. This bill caused an international outcry and sparked intense debate in both Ugandan and international media. Several Ugandan human rights organizations mobilized to raise awareness on the proposed Bill’s potential negative impact on human rights and health rights in particular regardless of sexual orientation. Based on the findings of the mentioned study this chapter presents four recommendations aiming at maximizing the effects of future human rights advocacy on sexual minority health rights in Uganda.

**Culture and social change**

In the fourth and final section of the book, we focus our attention on the cultural dimension of development, exploring youth lives vis-à-vis the use of culture clubs to reconcile citizens, culture sensitive approaches to solving crime, the role of community radios in promoting youth cultures and empowering youth, and finally also looking into how film can articulate social change. The common
denominator here is the emphasis on cultural practices and how they, as communication practices, often end up as bridge-builders, building trust in hostile environment, social tissue in conflict-ridden societies or some form of participation and civic engagement. All 5 cases deal with youth.

The first case study is from Burundi, where Nikita Junagade explores the peace-building efforts of an NGO, ADRA. After generations of hostility, years of internal warfare, loss of homes, livelihoods and family members, how can those people most disrupted by the conflict rebuild their fragmented society? Nikita Junagade describes how clubs open channels of communication in a community governed by suspicion and she further uncover how they enable a process of empowerment and re-codification of identities, altering how members see themselves and how they perceive others. Through concepts from communication for social change, conflict transformation, and narrative theory, Junagade draws from the Burundian experience to lay out a theoretical framework for communication for reconciliation.

Ricky Braskov takes as his point of departure that Nairobi has been suffering from high levels of crime and violence for many years. His case study looks consequently into crime prevention and the role of communication in it, namely into the Safer Nairobi and into the establishment of youth self-help groups focused on developing livelihoods for unemployed youths. Based on his fieldwork conducted in Kibera, Braskov presents findings and recommendations on how future partnerships between Nairobi City Council and the Kibera youth self-help groups could contribute to more sustainable crime prevention interventions in Nairobi.

Jessica Gustafsson also conducts a case study from Kenya. It remains focused on community media in the slums of Nairobi. Based on her recent PhD study, Gustafsson explores three community radio stations that have begun broadcasting in 2006. Based on interviews and participant observations with youth working at these community radio stations, and their listeners, Gustafsson discusses: the benefits and drawbacks of working for the community radio stations; whether the young audience feels that the stations serve their needs; and if the focus on youth prevents the stations from properly catering for the needs of the entire community.

Line Røijen and Anne Sofie Hansen-Skovmoes explore the role of film in Zanzibar. The article is divided into two parts; the first part presents a strategic and methodological approach to the use of art and cultural events in developmental strategies and work. The second part of the article is more praxis-oriented based on a case study of Zanzibar International Film Festival. In the study the use of film and film festivals as a method to generate processes of social change for the youth in Zanzibar is examined, and whether the film festival succeeds to do this is discussed. In the final chapter, Rosalind Yarde explores the core concepts of voice, empowerment and social change in relation to young people in Tanzania. Yarde’s explores how these core concepts might be promoted using a participatory media and communication framework. It is based on research carried out with former street children in Northern Tanzania who were being cared for by an organization called Mkombozi. The main objective of the chapter is to assess
whether giving a voice to these young people helps strengthen Mkombozi’s youth empowerment and community engagement agenda and thereby help bring sustainable change to the communities in which it works.

Roskilde in January 2013

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References


