

Chapter 41

New Media and the Changing Public Sphere in Uganda: Towards Deliberative Democracy?

Kennedy Javuru

Journalist & Independent Scholar, UK

ABSTRACT

This chapter gives an exploratory overview of the emergence and growth of new media in Uganda and how the alternative nature of new media is scaffolding the notion of citizenship and deliberative democracy. The chapter also suggests that despite the new found vigour, it is too early to say whether the Ugandan new media landscape have so far become a true alternative or complementary participatory space or a genuine platform for the distribution of uncensored information. It concludes that Ugandans use new media more for social interaction and dissemination of information (in a limited way) than as an alternative political public sphere. However, there are signs that online media is emerging and the anecdotes presented in this chapter indicate the potential of this media to be a place of participation and deliberation and reducing the authoritarian control of the communicative space.

INTRODUCTION

This chapter assesses the changing media landscape in Uganda and how new media is playing an active role in pushing the agenda for recognition of the notion of citizenship and deliberative democracy. Central to the discussions are the concepts of access and participation and how the dominance of mainstream media as the sole provider of information and discursive space is being challenged. Various aspects of new media such as blogging, SMS, social media and radio

talk shows are discussed to analyse the extent to which new media has opened up the deliberative space in Uganda. I assess the potential impact of new media on public debate and suggest ways in which new media fail to meet an idealized model for the public sphere in Uganda.

The advent of new media technology in Africa in the late 1990s was received with hysterical optimism. It was believed that Africa's impediments to development would be automatically overcome by 'leapfrogging' some of the stages of development (Banda, Okoth, & Tettey, 2009).

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-4666-6114-1.ch041

Historically, the introduction of new technology generated widespread optimism about how the technology would affect the way humans communicated. As Kandell (1998) observes:

Each significant technological development fundamentally changes the way the world works. Just as the invention of the electric light enabled a multitude of nocturnal activities to occur and the VCR created an entire industry of video retailers, the development of the internet and the World Wide Web have spawned a revolution in communication, commerce and interpersonal behaviour (p. 110).

The excitement new media generates is based to a large extent on the disillusionment and disappointments of traditional media being overly commercialised and not inclusive. New media brings in the promise of inclusiveness and blurring the line of professionalism that old media is predicated upon. Yet almost a decade after new media technology graced the African continent, the old questions about access, inequality, inclusiveness, power and the quality of information abound (Fourie, 2001). Banda, Okoth, and Tettey (2009) note that discussions about new media technology in Africa often disregard the unusual African terrain, which defies many of the technological innovations said to be reconfiguring the structures and processes of communication globally. This includes poor telecommunication networks in most parts of Africa, resulting in low levels of Internet usage. Nevertheless, online communities are emerging across Africa and although they are mostly among the elite, they show Africans taking advantage of new technology to advance their own identities and agendas.

UGANDA'S COMMUNICATIVE SPACE

The history of the media in Uganda is closely connected to the country's political history. Since independence in 1962, subsequent governments

have sought to control the economic, social, political, and cultural spheres including the mass media. The media in Uganda were harnessed for the causes of nationalism and nation-building. However, the global democratic movements of the 1990s, coupled with growing discontent over limited political participation, human rights violations, the shambolic economy, and limited communication platforms implied Uganda could not remain an 'island' in the face of sweeping changes.

The media environment in Uganda has changed dramatically in the last two decades. The liberalization of the economy in the 1990s which coincided with the global democratization movement ushered in a new period of democratization in Africa. It was also a period that witnessed many African countries adopting the multi-party political system. The spread of the 'third wave' of democratization to Africa in the early 1990s represented the most significant political change in the continent since the independence period three decades before. Throughout the continent, significant political liberalization resulted in the emergence of a free press, opposition parties, independent unions and a multitude of civic organizations autonomous from the state. In 29 African countries, the first multi-party elections in over a generation were convened between 1990 and 1994 (Bratton & Walle, 1997). In a smaller set of countries, elections were fully free and fair and resulted in the defeat and exit from power of the erstwhile authoritarian head of state. By the end of the decade, only a small minority of states were not officially multi-party electoral democracies, even if the practice of democratic politics was often far from being exemplary.

BROADCASTING

During the clamour for democracy in Africa, independent media emerged at the forefront of the campaign for democratic governments. After the liberalization of the airwaves in 1992, which

20 more pages are available in the full version of this document, which may be purchased using the "Add to Cart" button on the publisher's webpage:

www.igi-global.com/chapter/new-media-and-the-changing-public-sphere-in-uganda/115050

Related Content

Like, Share, Recommend: Smartphones as a Self-Broadcast and Self-Promotion Medium of College Students

Franklin N. A. Yartey and Louisa Ha (2014). *Digital Arts and Entertainment: Concepts, Methodologies, Tools, and Applications* (pp. 126-148).

www.irma-international.org/chapter/like-share-recommend/115013

Networked Compositional Ecologies: Infrastructure as a Model for Multimodal Writing

Reuben J. Ellis (2014). *Exploring Multimodal Composition and Digital Writing* (pp. 84-95).

www.irma-international.org/chapter/networked-compositional-ecologies/78591

Public Engagement and Policy Entrepreneurship on Social Media in the Time of Anti-Vaccination Movements

Melodie Yun-Ju Song and Julia Abelson (2017). *Handbook of Research on Citizen Engagement and Public Participation in the Era of New Media* (pp. 38-56).

www.irma-international.org/chapter/public-engagement-and-policy-entrepreneurship-on-social-media-in-the-time-of-anti-vaccination-movements/172223

Preparing Young Writers for Invoking and Addressing Today's Interactive Digital Audiences

Ewa McGrail and J. Patrick McGrail (2014). *Exploring Technology for Writing and Writing Instruction* (pp. 54-76).

www.irma-international.org/chapter/preparing-young-writers-invoking-addressing/78569

Decoding What is Good in Code: Toward a Metaphysical Ethics of Unicode

Jennifer Helene Maher (2014). *Digital Rhetoric and Global Literacies: Communication Modes and Digital Practices in the Networked World* (pp. 80-96).

www.irma-international.org/chapter/decoding-what-is-good-in-code/103386