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DIGITAL PUBLIC SPHERE

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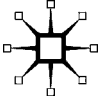
Edited by Okoth Fred Mudhai, Wisdom J. Tettey, and Fackson Banda

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PREFACE

This book examines, from theoretical and empirical perspectives, the claims that new information and communication technologies (ICTs) are catalysts of democratic change in Africa. Contributors do so from optimist, pragmatist-realist, and pessimist stances through analyses of various forms of evidences—including words and deeds of various political actors and organizations or institutions, from government units to political parties and party leaders to civil society organizations and minority or marginalized groups. The main focus is, therefore, on the interrelated concepts of e-participation and e-democracy. The UN defines e-participation as “participatory, inclusive, deliberative process of decision-making,” that is the use of ICTs to disseminate information (e-information), to seek views and encourage discussions (e-consultation) and to take these ideas into account when making decisions that affect citizens (e-decision-making) (Misuraca 2007, ch.1 sec.1.3).¹ While Misuraca (2007, ch.1 sec.1.3) notes “there are as many interpretations of what constitutes e-democracy as there are interpretations of democracy,” prolific e-democracy writer Stephen Clift perceives the concept as representing “the use of ICTs and strategies by democratic actors within political and governance processes. . . Democratic actors/sectors include governments, elected officials, the media, political organizations, and citizen/voters” (Misuraca 2007, ch.1 sec.1.3). It is these actors that authors of this book turn their lenses on, chapter by chapter.

The book is—to our knowledge, by the time of production—the first such academic publication contributed to by various African and Africanist scholars, based in Africa and around the world, whose research and/or practice activities focus on the relationship between new digital media, converged or otherwise, and democracy on the continent. It is a contextual examination of theoretical perspectives and empirical evidences on the potential and real impact of new media

¹ See reference in chapter 2. Citation before the last paragraph of the chapter, “The Potential of ICTs for Good Governance: Basic Concepts and Definitions”, page 5 of 16 in G. Misuraca (2007). http://www.idrc.ca/en/ev-115660-201-1-DO_TOPIC.html (accessed December 20, 2008). For more on Clift, see: www.publicus.net

on democracy in Africa. Contributors use various approaches to democratic theory in examining—endorsing or challenging—the notion that ICTs provide opportunities for greater democracy in Africa. They examine deeply the notion that new media instigate, even if more exogenously than endogenously, changes that influence, amplify, or magnify the conduct of politics in important but often unanticipated ways. Authors explore how much of Africa’s moves toward democratization could be attributed to new media—taking into account other equally, and possibly more, influential historical and contemporary socioeconomic and political factors, such as violence, that impact on politics.

The idea of convergence is vital in the conception of new media, which in this book refers to recent digital computer-based ICTs, especially the World Wide Web (the Web), e-mail, and cell phones, and their employment as adjuncts or boosters of more conventional or mainstream news and communication media such as the press, radio, and TV. Interactivity and flexibility (with less limitations on target/scope) are key ingredients of new media that are more difficult, but of course not impossible, to censor. The focus is not so much on (McLuhannisque) emphasizing technology of the medium, but on the use to which political institutions or organizations and actors put new media within specific socioeconomic and political contexts.

Some of the chapters were presented as papers at a panel of the Media, Communication, and Cultural Studies Association conference at Coventry University’s Technology Centre in January 2007. Others were presented at an academic seminar organized by the SAB LTD—UNESCO Chair of Media and Democracy, Prof. Fackson Banda, held on September 9, 2006, at Rhodes University, Grahamstown, South Africa. Indeed, some—if not all—of the questions Banda posed ahead of the Rhodes seminar are of central significance for this book:

Given Africa’s positioning in relation to new technologies, can we legitimately begin to talk about the emergence of a “digital public sphere”? If the Habermasian conceptualization of the “public sphere” is largely in terms of “rationality” and “scale,” who then is participating in this digital public sphere, and from whence does it get its “legitimacy”? Is there any empirical evidence to suggest that Africa is moving towards any such sphere? What forms of mediation can best advance a truly democratic digital public sphere? What models of democracy can best promote the attainment of such a sphere? Indeed, what type of digital public sphere can best advance democratic ideals? (Email message call to potential seminar presenters and participants, January 19, 2006).

In addressing these and related questions, chapter authors link digital democracy to the public sphere concept.² The multidisciplinary nature of contributors (including sociologists, journalists, and other media people) not only injects richness in the material but also shows the varied interests this book will attract among learners, tutors, and researchers at various levels of college and university education—especially in the areas of politics, development, and area (African) studies—as well as among democracy practitioners, donors, and observers.

OKOTH FRED MUDHAI

² The wide literature on public sphere is most recently summarized and critiqued in Chapter 1 of Matthew Hindman's *The Myth of Digital Democracy* (2008, Princeton University Press). See also Angela M. Crack's *Global Communication and Transnational Public Spheres* (2008, Palgrave Macmillan). I attempt to give an overview of African approaches in: 'Researching the impact of ICTs as change catalysts in Africa' (*Ecquid Novi: AJS* Vol. 25 No.2, 313–335, 2004).

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