The potential of social media to influence socio-political change on the African Continent

Narnia Bohler-Muller and Charl van der Merwe

The 2010/2011 revolutions in Tunisia and Egypt were largely organised, supported and driven through the use of social media-based tools. Facebook, Twitter and mobile phone technology *inter alia* allowed for extensive political expression against government corruption both on- and offline. Calls for socio-political transformation heard on the streets of Tunis and Cairo were echoed around the globe, gaining much sympathetic support internationally. The recent events in North Africa may be a sign of things to come for the rest of the continent as technology continues to reach more Africans. This policy brief argues that the use of social media tools has high potential for purposes of bringing about political and social change throughout the continent as use thereof enhances opportunities for political participation and opens new spaces for active citizenship.

Introduction

'The Day of the Revolution against Torture, Poverty, Corruption and Unemployment' was the name given to an online event scheduled for 25 January 2011 created on the social networking site Facebook. The event was created to express solidarity with the emerging socio-political protests in the Arab Republic of Egypt.[1] The uprising against Hosni Mubarak, the Egyptian ruler of 30 years' standing, and his government manifested in large-scale public demonstrations in Egypt's two largest cities, Cairo and Alexandria, that actively lasted for eighteen days. As result of these prolonged but largely peaceful public demonstrations, Hosni Mubarak officially resigned as president of Egypt on 11 February 2011.

What was remarkable about this protest – following the trends established in Tunisia's 'Jasmine Revolution' - was that it was organised and supported to a large extent by the use of social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter as communication tools. The Facebook 'event' in support of the Egyptian revolution was joined by more than 80 000 people online. Another example of social-media-based action that contributed to public awareness in Egypt about dissatisfaction with the Mubarak regime was a Facebook page, titled 'We Are All Khaled Said'. The page was dedicated to the memory of Said who was beaten to death

Narnia Bohler-Muller is Director of Research: Social Sciences Programmes
and Charl van der Merwe is a Research Assistant at the Africa Institute of South Africa, Tshwane, South Africa

by police in the city of Alexandria for wanting to expose government corruption. Posters were also created online to advertise the planned protests of Friday 28 January 2011, using dramatic photographs of unrest in the city.[2]

Another interesting dimension of the North African socio-political activism is the role played by mobile phone and internet usage via mobile phones. On the African continent, mobile phone usage is expanding rapidly. One of the key drivers of this growth is precisely the fact that it is a mobile form of communication and, therefore, easily used by people living in remote areas where infrastructure for telephone lines is poorly developed or non-existent. This also means that mobile phones in Africa have become a much more important tool for business than traditional telephone lines.

The growing penetration of mobile phones and mobile internet usage on the African continent increases the potential for instigating change as people literally have the power in their hands, with the touch of a button, to use social media for the purpose of bringing about democratic transformation. This brief will therefore argue that online social media have high potential for purposes of bringing about political and social change, with a focus on Africa.
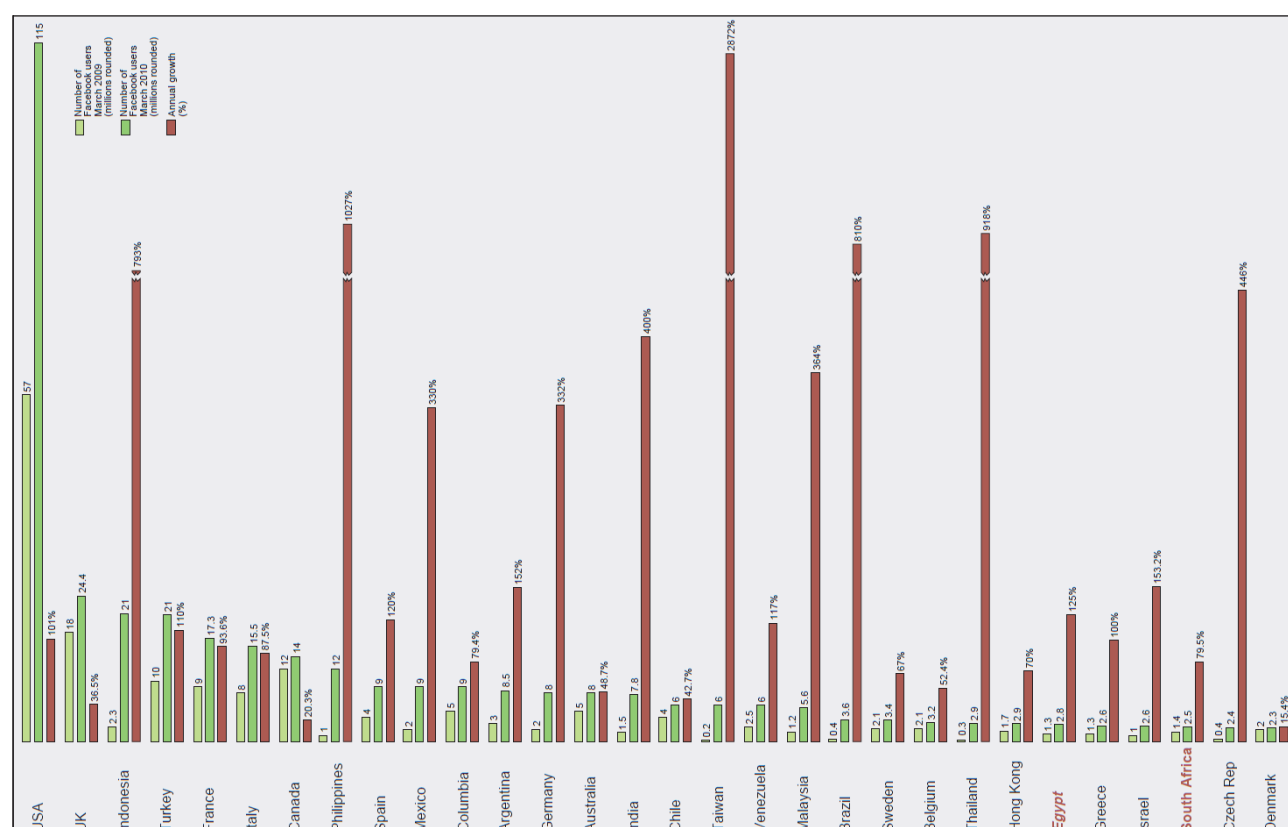
Social media explained

The term social media refers to web-based tools and services that allow users to create, share, rate and search for content and information without having to log in to any specific portal site or portal destination.[3] These tools become 'social' in the sense that they are created in ways that enable users to share and communicate with one another. The social network Facebook, which was one of the first social media tools of its kind, was launched in 2004 and today has over 600 million users worldwide.
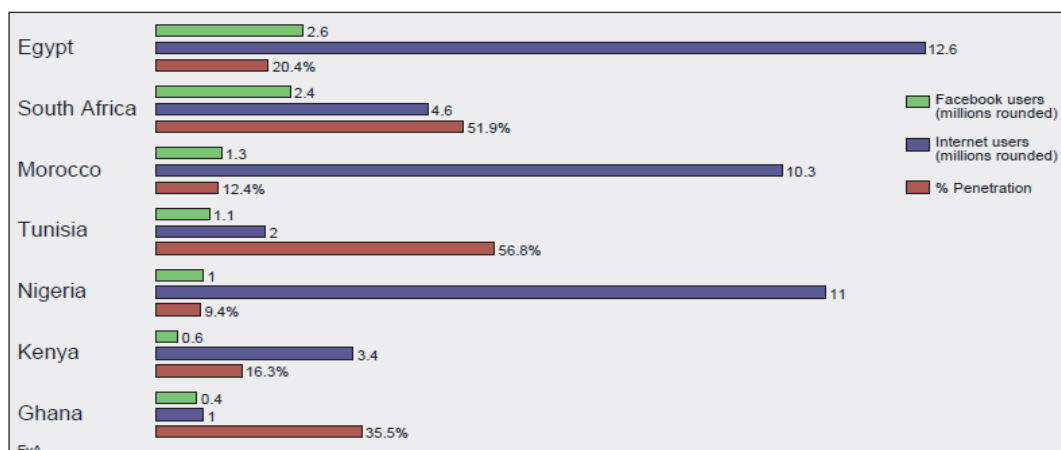
Table 1 below indicates the 30 countries with the highest number of Facebook users. Two African countries form part of this list – Egypt at number 25 and South Africa at number 28. Table 2 indicates the African countries where Facebook is used the most and the percentage of total internet users in a specific country that uses Facebook. From these two tables it becomes apparent that the citizens of Egypt and the rest of North Africa are very well connected, and this also clearly indicates why the use of social media was able to mobilise masses of people very quickly.

Figure 1 is a map visually indicating the world's most popular social networks based on internet traffic data; it reflects the popularity and prevalence of Facebook in North Africa.
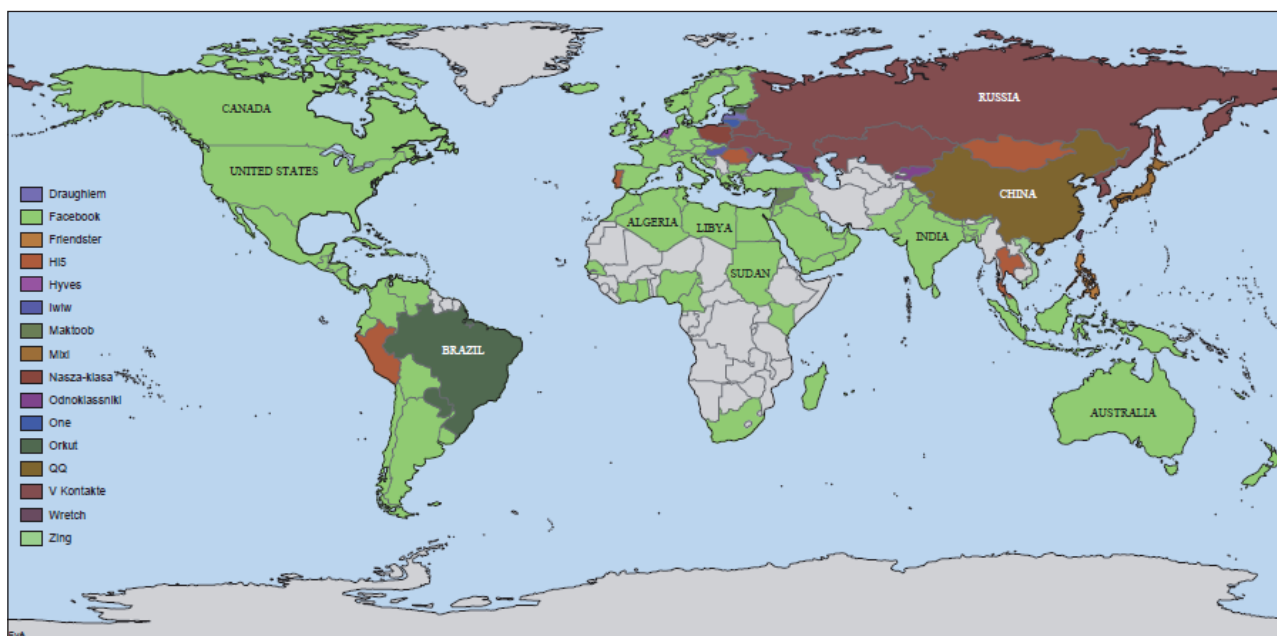
Table 1 Top 30 countries with highest number of Facebook users (31 March 2010; data from Facebook)[4]

Table 2: African countries with largest number of Facebook users[5]

Bar chart showing Facebook users (millions rounded), Internet users (millions rounded), and % Penetration for:
- Egypt: 2.6 Facebook users, 12.6 Internet users, 20.4% Penetration
- South Africa: 2.4 Facebook users, 4.6 Internet users, 51.9% Penetration
- Morocco: 1.3 Facebook users, 10.3 Internet users, 12.4% Penetration
- Tunisia: 1.1 Facebook users, 2 Internet users, 56.8% Penetration
- Nigeria: 1 Facebook users, 11 Internet users, 9.4% Penetration
- Kenya: 0.6 Facebook users, 3.4 Internet users, 16.3% Penetration
- Ghana: 0.4 Facebook users, 1 Internet users, 35.5% Penetration

Figure 1: World Map of Social Networks[6]

New technological developments led to the creation of web-based social media services that provide what is commonly referred to as 'lifestreaming'. This phenomenon refers to the ongoing and uninterrupted broadcasting of information and events through a set of digital media.[7] The service Twitter is one such tool that enables people to stream their lives directly, in real time, via short messages called 'tweets'.

The abovementioned social media-based tools and services provided an effective platform for organising the revolutions in Tunisia and, to an even greater extent, Egypt. In response to the protests and the ways in which people were mobilised, many websites were blocked by the respective governments at some point during the sociopolitical protests. In response to this, however,

Google devised a way in which people could still voice their opinions without being connected to the internet. This new communication tool was dubbed 'Speak to Tweet' and it allowed anyone with a voice connection to dial one of three international numbers and have their voice messages sent out as tweets with the word #egypt added as a 'hashtag' (user-generated coding for searchable terms and keywords) to the links. People could thus call these numbers and voice their solidarity, concerns and opinions about the protests by having their phone voice messages converted into tweets.[8]

Mobile phones and mobile internet usage in Africa

The demand for mobile phones is increasing rapidly on the African continent. According to the United Nations' *Africa Renewal* magazine, Africa today has more than 400 million mobile phone subscribers.[9] Figure 2 indicates these numbers as well as projected numbers for 2011 and 2012.

Figure 2: Mobile subscribers and penetration in Africa [10]
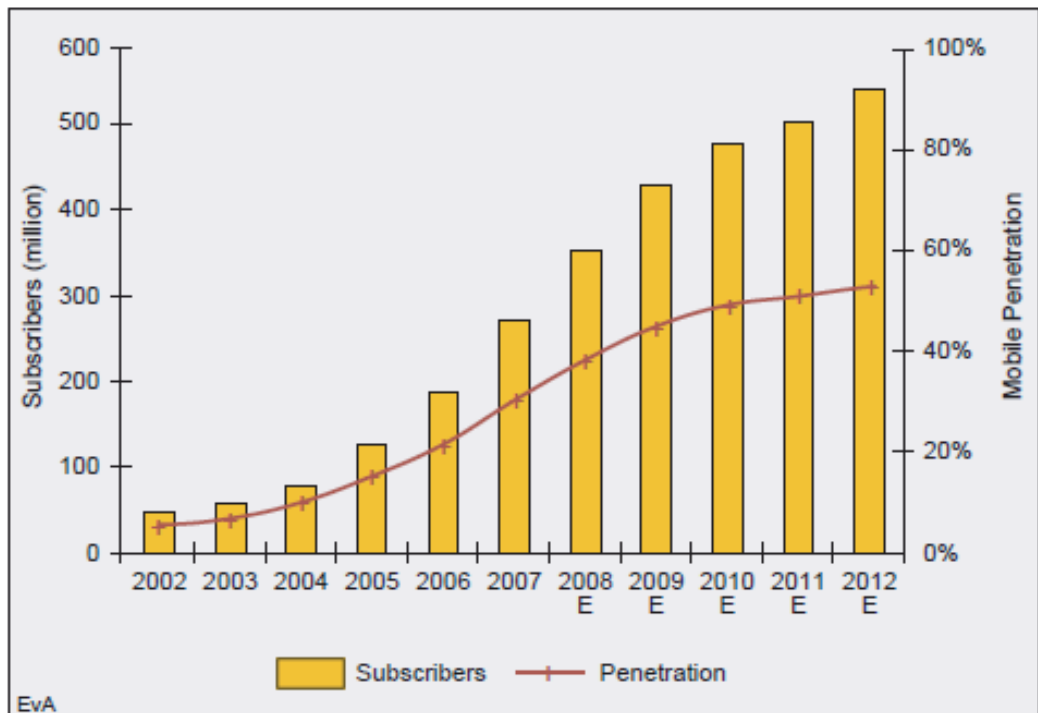
According to Essoungou there is a massive interest in the use of mobile phones and social media in Africa.[11] Facebook is currently the most visited website by internet users on the African continent, and currently 17 million people on the continent use Facebook. This may appear to be a small percentage, considering that the population of Africa stands at just over 1 billion, but it depicts an increase of 7 million from 2009.[12]

There are, however, still many constraints and challenges in Africa regarding access to mobile phone technology and internet connectivity. Africa remains the continent with the lowest internet penetration rate with about 100 million users, or one out of every ten persons, on the continent being connected to and using the internet.[13] Reasons for this include the lack of infrastructure for internet services (i.e. lack of technology to host fast and reliable broadband networks), and the fact that such networks or connections are still scarce and also financially prohibitive in some cases. There is also a limited number of personal computers in use in Africa, which reduces internet penetration on the continent.[14] Mobile internet, or internet services that can be accessed from mobile phones, therefore remains the most effective way for people in Africa to access the internet. The main contributor to this is the widespread availability of mobile phones on the continent and the cost-effectiveness of accessing the internet through a mobile phone rather than through a wired connection from a personal computer. Erik Hersman, who is a prominent social media blogger in Africa and an entrepreneur who has helped to drive the development of an internet platform called *Ushahidi,* notes that:

> with mobile phone penetration already high across the continent, and as we get to critical mass with Internet usage in some of Africa's leading countries (Kenya, South Africa, Ghana, Nigeria, Egypt) … a seismic shift will happen with services, products and information.[15]

The struggle begins in Tunisia: The 'Jasmine Revolution'

The first revolution of this century began in Tunisia, North Africa. Alex Howard, a technology reporter, writes about the reflections of Rim Nour, a young Tunisian online activist (or 'hacktivist') who personally participated in the 'Jasmine Revolution' that began in earnest when a fruit vendor, Mohamed Bouazizi, set himself ablaze in response to police cruelty.16

In Nour's account, the 2010 Tunisian revolution was not a Wikileaks or Facebook or Twitter revolution but an uprising fundamentally powered by people and the socio-political and economic conditions of their lives. The people of Tunisia chose to protest against government corruption and unemployment. Their communication tools were mostly web based or mobile phone related. Consequently the online and offline worlds interacted with one another in unprecedented ways (many expert observers have commented on the decline of the distinctions between 'cyberspace' and the material world).[17] The online world played an active role in fuelling the struggle, and camera phones and other mobile devices kept communication open and accessible. As Bryce Roberts has observed, 'mobile devices are the Gutenberg presses of our generation'.[18]

Besides the internet and mobile revolutions, Nour also emphasises the role of *Al Jazeera*, which has played a galvanising role in most of the Arab protests. The livestream AlJazeera.net creates awareness and allows a global audience to experience to some extent what is happening far from the comfort of their own homes.

Nour highlights four roles that social media played in the Tunisian revolution, namely grassroots mobilisation, the role of organising the rise of civil society and active citizenship, the role of being a counter-rumour of propaganda tool and the role of helping people to analyse statements released by government.[19] In her speech, Nour concludes that the Tunisian revolution would have happened without social media intervention, but 'it wouldn't have happened as fast'.

The Tahrir Square protests: A marriage of technology and social behaviour

Much the same has been written about events in Cairo that were instigated by the Tunisian uprising. Once again, it was access to social media and mobile technology, as well as the coverage and interventions of *Al Jazeera*, that assisted in fuelling public protests against Mubarak and his government.

In an interview, journalism Professor Claudette Artwick, who conducts ongoing research on the impact of social media, discusses the recent events in Egypt. According to Artwick it was the marriage of technology and social behaviour that played a big role in the revolution. She has named this phenomenon 'technosociality'. This relationship could be seen at many levels, including people organising protests, media coverage of the story, and government reacting to the uprising with attempts at controlling traditional and social media.[20]

Google executive Wael Ghonim has been credited for initiating the Egyptian revolution on Facebook. He started a page in June 2010 mourning Khaled Said's death. Said was reportedly pulled out of an Internet café by plainclothes police and beaten to death because he had obtained evidence of police corruption. People were outraged, and Ghonim's Facebook page as well as several others provided a community space or platform where people could call attention to government abuses. It is noteworthy that the day Mubarak resigned, Ghonim tweeted, 'Please don't make me the face of this revolution. It's not true as every Egyptian was the face of this revolution.' The role of Wikileaks has also been speculated upon, as the protests in Tunisia began shortly after the release of the 'Palestine Papers' by *Al Jazeera*.

Analysing the use of social media in the Egyptian revolution, Artwick emphasises many of the same points as Nour on Tunisia.

First, journalists used Twitter to report on the ground in Egypt by posting their direct observations in real time. They also uploaded links to their stories, photos, videos, or blogs. Nicholas D. Kristof, a reporter for the *New York Times*, has a very popular Facebook page, and is currently posting and tweeting from Libya. Second, *Al Jazeera* played a leading role by tweeting and posting links to photos and video that was then also used by other mainstream news sources. Third, the Egyptian people themselves contributed to the news. Their tweets were picked up by journalists and bloggers and re-tweeted by them. This appears to have marked the emergence of a new form of reporting, referred to on CNN as I-Reports, which is seen as a form of public or popular journalism. This allows people to contribute to the news with pictures, videos and commentary from any breaking news stories around the globe.

When Mubarak tried to control the open flow of online and mobile information by blocking

Twitter and Facebook, people managed to access the services through their mobile phones and turned to third-party applications like Hootsuite and TweetDeck to tweet. When the government seized video cameras, reporters and protesters used applications (apps) on their mobile phones to record audio and post it to Twitter. The *New York Times* transmitted video through satellite devices and Google created the 'Speak to Tweet' service.[21] It was apparent that it was near impossible to stall the flow of information both in Egypt and beyond, although Mubarak did use national television as a propaganda tool. But the socio-political movement had gained too much momentum.

As the social, political and technological environment has developed, some have already begun to explore new opportunities for digital activism. Part of this activism is a trend of protecting freedoms on the internet by, for instance, the group 'ANONYMOUS' that have referred to their interventions as 'new activism' in the sense that revolutions can now be broadcast and as such the protests will spread to other countries where government oppression and corruption has taken its toll. Some have argued that this type of new activism will spread across the African continent, mentioning Mugabe's reign of thirty years and the volatile service protests in South Africa as examples.

The scenarios sketched above are not based on a naive attitude of cyber-utopianism, where the internet equals democracy, but are examples used to illustrate the developing potential of technology to influence the socio-political climate across the continent.

'The political power of social media'

In an article with the above title that appeared in *Foreign Affairs,* Clay Shirky makes reference to a number of countries and world regions where social mass media have been used in the past ten years to trigger and initiate changes in the governments and societies of those countries. These are all examples of the positive impact of social media on such events. From an analysis of the events in North Africa over the past two months, it is clear that social media here also had an important role to play.

However, Shirky also raises two arguments against the idea that social media can make a difference in the national politics of a state and it is important also to consider this side of the debate about the potential of social media to influence or bring about socio-political change on the African continent. The first is the fact that the tools themselves are actually ineffective, and second, that these tools can produce as much harm to any process of democratisation as they can produce good. This critique that social media can be ineffective has been mostly used by Malcolm Gladwell in *The New Yorker* and stems from the fact that casual participants to activities and actions such as large-scale social protests seek social change through low-cost activities such as joining a particular Facebook group such as the "Save Darfur" group that was created on Facebook. Gladwell is of the opinion that such actions cannot bring about any useful action. Shirky however says that even though this critique is correct it is not central to the question of the power of social media in the sense that the fact that actors who are barely committed and who just joins Facebook groups and makes comments online does not mean that actors who are very committed cannot use social media affectively to influence socio-political change.

The second critique that social media tools can be used to influence or bring about socio-political change and political improvement has to do with the fact that the state is gaining increasingly sophisticated and more technologically advanced means of monitoring and interdicting social media tools. Authoritarian states are increasingly shutting down communications networks and grids in their countries to deny dissidents the opportunity and resources to coordinate and broadcast documentation of any event in real time.

It is thus necessary to point out that social media tools can and will be used as tools of state oppression. However, the success of social networking in providing momentum and support to the popular uprisings in Tunisia and Egypt cannot be denied. In this context, Africa as a continent is experiencing a period of enormous change, and there is no doubt that social media will play a role in ensuring active continental political participation.

Conclusion: The future of social media on the African continent

Historically, revolutionary movements began with people gathering together in the marketplace or town hall to discuss their common grievances. Social media at the moment partly play the role of this public space, facilitating social interaction, information sharing, and fast and easy communication. There have been spaces such as these in almost every society throughout history with the atmosphere at the market being politically effective, as in eighteenth century Paris.

The organisers of protests demanding democratisation and socio-economic change in the modern context play a similar role to those of French, Russian and Chinese activists who met publicly and in secret to organise protests against state oppression and corruption. It is significant that both Tunisia and Egypt have been referred to as 'leaderless' revolutions. The success of the revolutions in Tunisia and Egypt teaches us that the youth are globally connected and see democracy as part of their identity as people deserving a say in government. This is significant as it raises the potential for developing a more 'direct' form of participative democracy, with many more voices joining in 'real world' and online socio-political activism.

The African Union (AU) has declared 2011 the year of 'Shared Values'. This is a discussion that needs to filter down to member states. Governments must engage their people on issues of good governance and democracy, or other African leaders may face the same fate as their compatriots in North Africa. The tide of popular expression is rising and resonating across the continent

Policy Recommendations

In South Africa, recent attempts at creating a government framework in the form of a tribunal to regulate the press and to ensure 'ethical reporting' do not take into account the fact that a new form of journalism has emerged. Based on lessons we are learning as we write, the suppression of information, communication, knowledge sharing and experience sharing is becoming more difficult. In fact, reactions against regulation and censorship have become quite radical in nature. Every conventional newspaper and news broadcaster could be controlled or censored or shut down totally, and the internet could be interfered with, but online and mobile communications will continue to spread. Social media activists, bloggers, tweeters and speak-to-tweeters keep the world updated even if the television cameras have been switched off. Through the use of internet technology, organisations such as ANONYMOUS will continue to protect the freedom of those who speak out against oppression and corruption.

In essence, the over-regulation of the right to freedom of expression and association cannot achieve its ends in the context of connected societies where ordinary citizens – most of them young – cannot easily be manipulated or controlled. Unlike in the apartheid era, it will be far more

difficult, if not impossible, for governments to commit atrocities that remain hidden and silent.

It is recommended that African governments reconcile their laws and policies with this broader democratic contribution by the users of social media-based tools. In a sense this can be understood as a form of 'direct' democracy where many voices can and want to be heard. Mechanisms should thus be put into place which assist governments in monitoring and evaluating political, social and economic developments and trends that would then enable them to respond to their people in a more productive and positive manner. The various social media-based tools discussed above are now enabling grassroots political action, and, as has been proven in Tunisia and Egypt, an unresponsive and out-of-touch government can be ousted by the withdrawal of political consent. The citizen as 'watchdog' has begun a new era in which technology can contribute to socio-political change. As the world's population has expanded, global boundaries are blurring, heralding a new age of secular democracy and active vigilance against the abuse of state power.

This digital capacity for political communication by the private citizen indicates, now more than ever, a need for open, transparent and accountable leadership that is itself openly communicative, and where multitudes of voices and views, continued debate and dialogue are permitted to flow unfettered.

A final and related comment on political intervention in media affairs in South Africa

In an analysis of attacks on the press across Africa, Mohamed Keita points out that governments across the continent are criminalising investigative journalism. As the North of the continent enters an era of 'new challenges to state power', citizens and the press are questioning the use of public funds more than at any time since many African states gained independence. Ayesha Kajee, executive director of the Freedom of Expression Institute (FXI) has stated that the public is seeing 'huge gaps between the majority and the [ruling] elite', leaving governments feeling exposed and threatened, which then leads to attempts at censoring the mass media. Recent developments in South Africa have seen government proposing the creation of a state media tribunal to monitor and sanction the press in particular. Such perceived anti-media rhetoric may tarnish the nation's image as Africa's press freedom

leader. In addition, the introduction to Parliament of the Protection of Information Bill (2008) has led to a global outcry as it proposes twenty-five years of imprisonment for disclosing classified information, thereby criminalising investigative journalism. This also sheds a negative light on South Africa's commitment to the constitutionally entrenched right to freedom of expression as provided for in section 16 of the Bill of Rights of the 1996 Constitution. Section 16 of the South African Constitution is modelled on the provisions of Article 19 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political rights that include, in sub-Article 2, the freedom to seek, receive and impart information and ideas of all kinds, regardless of frontiers. South Africa has ratified, and is a signatory to, this treaty.

Regarding the significance of the North African revolutions for Sub-Saharan Africa, Jacob Zuma has pointed out that, unlike states in the Arab world, South Africa is a constitutional democracy. However, the ballot box is not the only aspect that constitutes democracy, and, according to Tom Wheeler, too many public officials do not recognise that there is a connection between a vote for them and responding to the needs of the electorate that voted them into office. President Zuma was silent when the recent riots broke out in Wesselton, Ermelo, which created an increased awareness that all is not well at local government level. If the South African people feel that they cannot hold their leaders accountable through the ballot box, the possibility exists that they will do so in the streets, on the internet and with their mobile phones. In a rapidly changing world, it is strongly recommended that governments keep up with trends and develop policies for the constructive use of technological platforms, informed by the needs of their citizens and the prescripts and universal values entrenched in international law. ignited from the West through sponsored rebel movements to destabilise the regional peace and stability.

Notes and References

1   Cable News Network. 2011. 'The faces of Egypt's "Revolution 2.0"'. http://edition.cnn.com/2011/TECH/innovation/02/21/egypt.internet.revolution/html [accessed 15 March 2011].

2   Cable News Network. 2011. 'Social media @ the front line in Egypt'. http://edition.cnn.com/2011/WORLD/africa/01/27/egypt.protests.social.media/index.html?eref=rss_world [accessed 15 March 2011].

3   Mernit, S. 2011. 'Using social media for social change'. http://wemedia.s3.amazonaws.com/BEB93FE3-484D-49DE-B95BA99EAA0CA3DB/FinalDownload/DownloadIdA7754D10A5DF0682A081F5D79A982803/BEB93FE3-484D-49DE-B95B-A99EAA0CA3DB/papers/tp/ifocos_wm_socialmedia.pdf [accessed 1 March 2011].

4   Facebook Usage Statistics, 2010. http://www.nickburcher.com/2010/03/facebook-usage-statistics-march-2010.html [accessed 28 February 2011].

5   Sinotechblog, 2010. http://www.sinotechblog.com.cn/index.php/component/content/article/56-opinion/598-the-worldwide-status-of-social-networks-notes-and-statistics-on-the-internationalisation-of-social-media [accessed 28 February 2011].

6   World Map of Social Networks, 2011. http://www.dreamgrow.com/world-map-of-social-networks [accessed 15 March 2011].

7   Mernit, 2011.

8   Cnet News. 2011. 'Google, Twitter build Speak to Tweet for Egyptians'. http://news.cnet.com/8301-30684_3-20030144-265.html [accessed 1 March 2011].

9   Essoungou, A.M. 2010. 'A social media boom begins in Africa' in Africa Renewal (online edition), December 2010. http://www.un.org/ecosocdev/geninfo/afrec/vol24no4/social-media-boom.html [accessed 15 March 2011].

10 Accounting Diary. 2010. 'Insider Clue on Cellphone Success in Africa'. http://www.softwareaccountingadvice.com/2010/04/insider-clue-on-cellphone-success-in.html [accessed 28 February 2011].

11 Ibid.

12 Ibid.

13 Ibid.

14 Ibid.

15 Ibid.

16 Howard, A. 2011. 'A Tunisian on the role of social media in the revolution in Tunisia'. Available at: http://gov20.govfresh.com/a-tunisian-on-the-role-of-social-media-in-the-revolution-in-tunisia/ [accessed 10 March 2011].

17 Ibid.

18 Ibid.

19 Ibid.

20 Ibid.

21   Ibid.

22 Al Jazeera. 2011. 'Opinion: ANONYMOUS and the global correction'. http://english.aljazeera.net/indepth/opinion/2011/02/201121321487750509.html [accessed 15 March 2011].

23 Shirky, C. 2011.'The Political Power of Social Media: Technology, the Public Sphere and Political Change' in Foreign Affairs, Volume 90 (1), pp. 28 – 41.

24 Ibid.

25 Ibid.

26 Keita, M., 2011. 'Attacks on the press 2010: Africa analysis'. http://cpj.org/2011/02/attacks-on-the-press-2010-africa-analysis.php [accessed 15 March 2011].

27 Wheeler, T. 2011. 'Lessons for the ANC in street protests'. Published on NGO Pulse. http://www.ngopulse.org/article/lessons-anc-street-protests [accessed 15 March 2011].
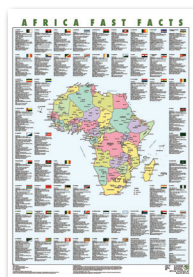
Africa Fast Facts
Compiled by GIS and
Cartography (AISA)
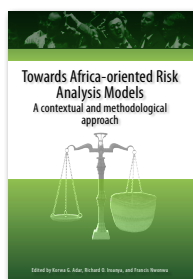
ISBN 978-0-620-426-25-1
Price R 100,00

Africa In Focus
Compiled by GIS and
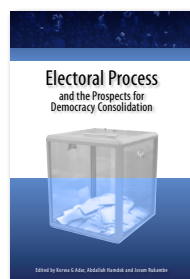Cartography (AISA)

ISBN 978-0-620-426-24-4
Price R 100,00

Towards Africa-oriented Risk Analysis Models
A Contextual and Methodological Approach

Edited by Korwa G. Adar,
Richard O. Iroanya, and
Francis Nwonwu
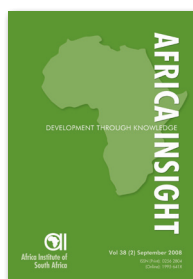
ISBN 978-0-7983-0213-5
Price R 120,00

Electoral Process and the Prospects for Democracy Consolidation

Edited by Korwa G. Adar,
Abdalla Hamdok and
Joram Rukambe

ISBN 978-0-7983-0210-4
Price R 120,00
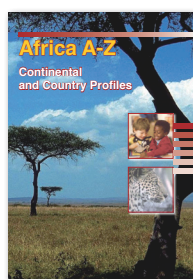
Africa Insight

ISSN 977-025-628-000-6
Price R 35,00
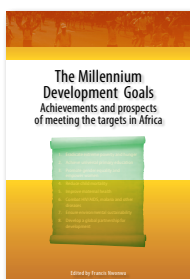
The Millennium Development Goals
Achievements and Prospects of Meeting the Targets in Africa

Edited by Francis Nwonwu

ISBN 978-0-7983-0121-8
Price R 120,00

A-Z: Continental and country profiles, Second edition

Edited by Pieter Esterhysen

ISBN 798-0-7983-0199-2
Price R 250,00

Greening the Great Red Island
Madagascar in Nature and Culture

Edited by Jeffrey C. Kaufman
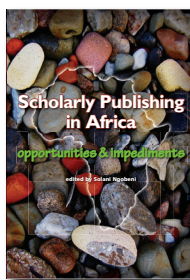
ISBN 978-0-7983-0181-7
Price R 120,00

African Political Elites
The Search for Democracy and Good Governance

Edited by Francis Nwonwu
and Dirk Kotze

ISBN 978-0-7983-0184-8
Price R 120,00

Scholarly Publishing in Africa
Opportunities & Impediments

Edited by Solani Ngobeni

ISBN 978-0-7983-0227-2
Price R 120,00

Africa Institute
of South Africa
Development Through Knowledge

AISA is a statutory research body focusing on contemporary African affairs in its research, publications, library and documentation. **AISA** is dedicated to knowledge production, education, training and the promotion of awareness on Africa, for Africans and the international community. This is achieved through independent policy analysis, and the collection, processing and interpretation, and dissemination of information.