

Centre for Research in the Arts, Social Sciences and Humanities
and Centre of Governance and Human Rights



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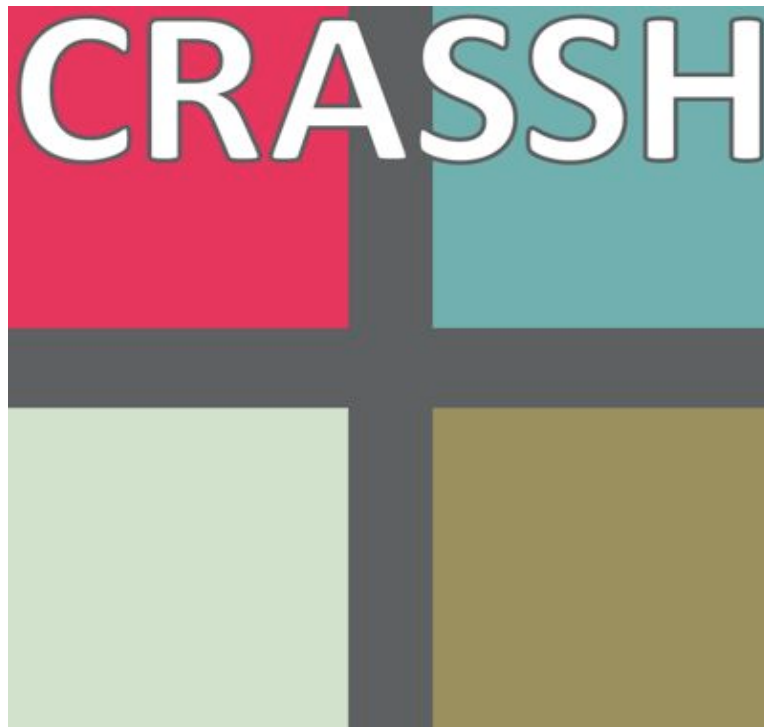
New Media/ Alternative Politics

*Communication technologies and political
change in the Middle East and Africa*

17:00, 14 October - 15:00, 16 October, 2010
CRASSH, 17 Mill Lane, Cambridge



Online registration and conference information:
www.crassh.cam.ac.uk/events/1323



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Programme

Thursday 14 October

17.00-19.00 **Session 1: *Deliberating new media: creating alternative politics in the Middle East and Africa?***

Activists and researchers debate the interaction between technology and communication for political change.

Amy Saunderson-Meyer (Freedom Fone), **Herman Wasserman** (Rhodes University), **Firoze Manji** (Pambazuka News)

Chairs: **Sharath Srinivasan** and **Anne Alexander**

19.00-20.00 Drinks reception at CRASSH

Friday 15 October

09.00-09.30 Registration

09.30-11.00 **Session 2: *Mediating conflict and dissent***

Herman Wasserman (Rhodes University)

Of glasses half full: exploratory notes towards the role of new media technologies in democratic politics in South Africa

Nduka Otiono (University of Alberta)

From Urban Sphere to Cyber Space: New Media, Citizen Journalism and the Role of 'Sahara Reporters' in Nigeria's Political Struggle

Adi Kuntsman (University of Manchester) and **Rebecca Stein** (Duke University)

Another War Zone: Digital Media and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict

Chair: **Devon Curtis** (University of Cambridge)

11.00-11.30 Coffee Break

11.30-13.00 **Session 3: *Engaging new audiences, contesting old power***

Amy Saunderson-Meyer (Freedom Fone)

Resisting the repression of media freedom in Zimbabwe

Harri Englund (University of Cambridge)

Rethinking audience engagement: lessons from old media

Dombo Sylvester (University of Zimbabwe)

Alternative or subversive? 'Pirate' Radio Stations and the Opening of Spaces of Freedom and alternative politics in Zimbabwe, 2000-2010

Chair: **Mirca Madianou** (University of Cambridge)

13.00-14.00 Lunch

14.00-15.30

Session 4: *New media and global designs on local politics*

Firoze Manji (Pambazuka News)

All that glistens is not always gold: experiences of new media technologies in Africa

Michael Keating (University of Massachusetts Boston)

Wiring the 2011 Liberian Presidential Elections: New Opportunities for International Collaboration in Media Practice

Peter Brett (School of Oriental and African Studies)

Media (new and old) and the transnational governance of African public spheres

Chair: **Helen Yanacopoulos** (Open University)

15.30-16.00

Tea Break

16.00-17.30

Session 5: *Political agency and networked publics*

Okoth Fred Mudhai (University of Coventry)

African Civil Society Challenge of Ruling Elite via New Media

Alexandra Dunn (University of Oslo)

Public as Politician? Improvised hierarchies of participatory influence in the April 6th Youth Movement Facebook Group

Chair: **Anne Alexander** (University of Cambridge)

19.30

Conference dinner in the Beves Room, King's College for guests and delegates who have pre-booked.

Saturday 16 October

10.00-11.30

Session 6: *Researching New Media*

Paolo d'Urbano (School of Oriental and African Studies)

Ikhwanweb as a Digital Archive

Fanar Haddad (Independent Researcher)

'An Undiscovered Archive? Online Video Sharing, Alternative Narratives and the Documentation of History.'

Chair: **Glen Rangwala** (University of Cambridge)

11.30-11.45

Coffee Break

11.45-13.15

Session 7: *New media and citizen-led governance*

Sharath Srinivasan and **Anne Alexander** (University of Cambridge)

Lunch and close of conference

Speakers' Abstracts

Peter Brett (School of Oriental and African Studies)

Media (new and old) and the transnational governance of African public spheres

ICTs in sub-saharan Africa, as elsewhere, are affecting the nature of political practice. Of particular importance, in the context of wider democratisation trends, may be their potential for invigorating journalistic output with locally relevant content. Such developments, however, have attracted scant attention from international donor organisations, despite their claims to support such technologies in the name of 'democracy' and the 'public sphere'. Funding has been largely devoted to a narrower set of objectives. These have included, most notably, more transparent and accessible modes of governance and service delivery, the monitoring of elections and tracking of human rights abuses, and the building of transnational advocacy networks in support of donor agendas. Since 2007-8, moreover, when text messaging was used to organise political violence after the Kenyan elections, national governments and donors have even begun evaluating the possibility in East Africa of establishing permanent oversight over these new forms of communication. Whilst such steps may ultimately be judged impractical or undesirable, they point, nonetheless, towards ICTs' potential to disrupt wider media governance agendas.

This paper will situate these issues in the context of re-emerging tensions between traditionally European 'public interest' and American 'liberal' approaches to media pluralism, providing evidence from the policy dialogue of agencies of two of the largest government donors to the ICT sector: Britain and the U.S.A. Whilst such tensions have been most acute in discussions of media 'partisanship' in post-conflict states, they have informed a range of more 'light-touch' policy measures across the continent since the end of the Cold War. Parallels can be drawn between these debates and those within British and French colonial administrations over the radical nationalist press in the 'first wave' of African democratisation (1945-65). Whilst Britain, it will be suggested, was more tolerant than France of provocation and dissent in the pre-independence period, its (substantively similar) attitudes appear somewhat paternalist today in comparison with its American counterpart.

Such differences, however, may merely reflect disagreements over the appropriate means, rather than ends, of governing African public spheres. Both 'old' and 'new' media, it will be concluded, have been promoted in the service of procedural, rather than deliberative democratic forms. Claims that current communication policies are more participatory than those of the post-war period should be treated with particular caution; public statements considered as threatening to traditional modernising goals continue to be classified as risks. For donors, therefore, the tremendous difficulties associated with regulating ICTs in weak states are both sources of hope - allowing the building of coalitions within states obstructive of international objectives - and of potential disruption - threatening a proliferation of ungovernable 'counterpublics'. Too strong a concern with the latter may, however, detract from ICTs potential to facilitate the creative domestication of Western democratic norms.

Alexandra Dunn (University of Oslo)

Public as Politician? Improvised hierarchies of participatory influence in the April 6th Youth Movement Facebook Group

With the rise of social networking technologies, isolated actors with common aims increasingly use online tools to connect, share, discuss, and organize. The present study seeks to better understand the mechanisms of influence and participatory structures of a single, open, political Facebook group that has successfully organized offline action without relying on a defined hierarchical structure. The April 6th Youth Movement Facebook group has over 80,000 members and no leader, yet is still capable of acting in concert with the intent of reforming the repressive offline political sphere in Egypt. Exploring quantitative data collected in 2009 and 2010, the analysis found a small group of highly active users that directed discussion on the Facebook Wall – the central hub of organizational activity. The volume of participation increased significantly on sample days of heightened offline political activity and, when the top participants were prevented from contributing to the wall on these days (because of demonstration, detention, or arrest), another small subset of users filled the leadership vacuum. These findings indicate

that there is potential for Facebook and other SNSs to act not only as complementary spaces of political discussion or campaigning, but as platforms for organizational structures that exist independently of any party and act to successfully secure collectively defined goals.

Paolo d'Urbano (SOAS)

Ikhwanweb as a Digital Archive

Ikhwanweb, the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood (MB) English website, is part of a wide range of online initiatives recently developed by the organisation. The website was launched in 2005 and is mainly intended to introduce the movement to the international community of experts, analysts and commentators. Drawing on primary and secondary sources, this paper aims to analyse Ikhwanweb and its political significance using the concept of archive.

Crucial to any articulation of power and knowledge, this concept was first theorised in two seminal works by Foucault and Derrida, and subsequently taken up by scholars in the fields of postcolonial studies and media studies. I use the notion of archive through the lens of media materialism and specifically Friedrich Kittler's approach, as I intend to focus more on media as storage devices rather than just means of communication. Following from this premise, Ikhwanweb may therefore be conceived as a digital archive enabling the MB to store statements along with documents.

From this perspective, digital media provides the MB with the technical and material infrastructure to build its own archive. Furthermore, Ikhwanweb appears as a site construed in different ways by power relations. On one level, the server - the website material infrastructure - is the target of repressive actions by the state. On another level, the site is shaped through the complex and multilayered discursive positions that the movement articulates through it, such as the place of the MB in the spectrum of political opposition groups, its views on gender relations, religious minorities, democracy and human rights. Also, being conceived for a foreign audience, this digital archive accounts for the international dimension that the movement aims to acquire. In conclusion, thanks to Ikhwanweb the MB is able to build a system of statements allowing the movement to gain a degree of control over its own representation.

Michael Keating (University of Massachusetts Boston)

Wiring the 2011 Liberian Presidential Elections: New Opportunities for International Collaboration in Media Practice

In 2011 the citizens of Liberia will go to the polls in the first fully contested mandate on the leadership of the administration of Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf. As in most elections in democratic societies the independent media is expected to play a key role in covering the campaigns, framing the issues, uncovering irregularities and reporting results. While Liberians living in the capital Monrovia can expect a fairly reliable stream of reportage and commentary, Liberians outside of Monrovia will have a much more difficult time getting themselves informed and prepared to vote. This is particularly the case with groups that have not traditionally been part of the political dialog in Liberia: youth and women.

Despite the presence of many media outlets in Monrovia there are still structural problems even with the 'urban media'. These problems will be familiar to any researcher who has studied similar markets. The primary problem is a lack of cash and investment capital, followed in no particular order by problems ranging from media proliferation, to lack of training and equipment, to ethical lapses to inappropriate ties between particular candidates, private business interests and media houses.

In order to deal with the weaknesses of the urban media and to also expand professional media coverage outside of the capital a collaborative project is being formed between four universities in the United States (U. Mass Boston, Syracuse U., University of North Carolina and the New School University) and several key media groups in Liberia including the Liberia Media Center, The Liberian Media Initiative, the Department of Mass Communication at both the University of Liberia and Cuttington University as well as several leading media houses including Star Radio, Radio Veritas, the New Democrat Newspaper, Front Page Africa Newspaper, as well as the network of independent rural radio stations represented by the organization Alicor. We also expect additional collaboration with Northern media groups such as Ushahidi (<http://www.ushahidi.org/>), Deutsche Welle as well as with the Liberian National Elections

Commission and the Liberian Ministry of Information which both fully endorse the view that the non-Monrovia based citizenry of Liberia are ill-served by the mainstream media.

There are several key objectives to the project:

- To substantially upgrade election related coverage nation-wide
- To assist the Monrovia based media in expanding their presence outside the capital
- To provide quality programming to the rural radio stations with a special emphasis on reaching out to young voters
- To allow rural citizens an opportunity to express themselves on national media
- To make all coverage produced by the project available to the world through a dedicated website

While the project will make every effort to target major population groups throughout the country, obviously this will be difficult. The research opportunity is to understand how voting patterns and voter preferences are affected in areas served by the project versus areas outside the scope of the project. The project will also look at candidate responsiveness to issues raised by the project and whether the 'new look' media has positive impacts on candidate behavior. Given the importance of the international Liberian community and its ability to affect elections through financial contributions, the project will also poll them on their usage of the dedicated website and whether it affects their perceptions of the elections or perhaps how new-media offers chances to non-traditional candidates or exceedingly controversial issues, i.e. the right of expatriated Liberians to vote in national elections. Lastly the project will look at the overall impact that such an international intervention has on the practices and attitudes of the Liberian independent media moving forward.

The project expects to be on the ground in June of 2011. The two major 'tools' of the project will be the aforementioned dedicated website as well as a fully equipped multimedia van that will travel the country in the weeks and months leading up to election both creating stories as well as dispensing them to the rural population and to rural radio stations as well as to the website.

Fanar Haddad (Independent Researcher)

'An Undiscovered Archive? Online Video Sharing, Alternative Narratives and the Documentation of History.'

Soon after Iraq's descent into chaos in April 2003, the value to the western researcher of video sharing sites such as Youtube, LiveLeak and The Jihad Archive became obvious: it offered us counter-narratives and glimpses of otherwise unseen aspects of daily life in Iraq; from the gruesome to the hilarious, from the political to the farcical. The sheer volume of mobile phone footage, raw footage and insurgent videos make video sharing websites and chatrooms an essential primary source for social historians looking at modern conflicts such as Iraq. Through such sources we are offered localised snapshots of on-the-ground realities be it through the banter between fighters in mid-battle; the aftermath of mass casualty attacks; militant 'home videos' or propaganda videos; atrocities and spontaneous everyday events in conflict-stricken areas.

Insurgent groups relied heavily on the internet to disseminate their messages to an international audience: insurgent propaganda carried images of successful operations, engagement with local communities, the crimes of their enemies and songs and laments glorifying their victories and mourning their chosen traumas. Less formally we have the 'home videos' and mobile phone footage that have been instrumental in undermining some narratives and bolstering others. More importantly, the mobile phone camera has supplied us with a distinctly 'from below' perspective of events in a most unprecedented way.

The opportunities presented by such sources should not obscure the profound challenges they pose to the researcher. How does one go about contextualising and authenticating the data? How representative are the sentiments expressed in raw footage – indeed it is fair to ask just how 'raw' raw footage is? Furthermore, if we rely on video sharing sites do we not risk becoming hostages to those sites' content?

Finally how can we moderate the powerful influence that such audio-visual clips exert on our understanding of events?

Harri Englund, (University of Cambridge)

Rethinking Audience Engagement: Lessons from the Old Media

What assumptions inform the emancipatory expectations associated with the new media in Africa? In particular, how are subjects expected to voice their claims in order to be considered progressive or democratic by human rights activists and media critics? This paper explores these general questions by focusing on the continuing importance of the so-called old media in Africa. While the emancipatory objectives of some commercial and community radio stations have attracted considerable publicity during the past two decades, less is known about changes within public broadcasting houses in Africa. The continuing bias of many public broadcasters in Africa towards the ruling parties has been taken by human rights activists and media critics as evidence of stagnant institutional cultures and self-censorship. Their nationwide and even international reach warrants, however, a closer look at the ways in which programming may have responded to new demands for listener participation and engagement.

This paper explores the case of Nkhani za m'maboma (News from Districts) on the Malawi Broadcasting Corporation (MBC). This popular programme broadcasts every evening news obtained from the public, and its irreverent stories about the effects of poverty, injustice and illegitimate power are at variance with the contents of the MBC's official news bulletin. The paper reports on ethnographic research since 2003 on the production and reception of the programme and raises questions that are relevant to the study of politics and the new media. It describes the form and content of stories received from the public to argue that the assertive claims promoted by human rights activists may not be as effective in holding authorities to account as stories that deploy a wider range of discursive registers, including humour, idiomatic expressions, and proverbs.

Adi Kuntsman (University of Manchester, UK)

Another War Zone: Digital Media and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict

Since the mid 2000s, the Israeli state has demonstrated an increasing investment in digital media. For its part, anti-state activism, at both the national and international scales, has also fine-tuned its usage of new media tools. And while the assessment of their success or failure of this respective engagement may vary, it is clear that digital communication technologies have already changed the nature of both the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and the Israeli military occupation, altering means of both state control over Palestinian populations, both on and off the battlefield, and the means by which local populations – in Israel, Palestine, and globally – can interface with, support, contest, and/or agitate against state policies.

In this paper, we focus on several ways in which the Israeli state, activists and ordinary citizens utilised various tools of digital media – websites, video broadcasting, cell phones, and social networking sites – since the mid 2000s. Focusing on Operation Cast Lead and the recent attack on the Freedom Flotilla, we will argue that digital media is becoming a new war zone, in which the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is rearticulated, reframed, reinforced and resisted. The emerging forms of digital warfare – hackers' battle over websites content and Internet infrastructure; passionate arguments in talkbacks and on Facebook; or the visual battlefield of videos and photographs – can be seen as mirroring or even intensifying warfare on the ground, fuelling hatred and reaffirming state power. But they can also be understood and employed as a powerful alternative to repressive military violence.

Firoze Manji (Editor in Chief, Pambazuka News)

All that glitters is not always gold: experiences of new media technologies in Africa

Drawing on some 13 years experience in Africa, this presentation will discuss the varied successes and failures of Fahamu initiatives in seeking to use new media technologies for supporting the struggle for human rights and social justice in Africa. These experiences include the development and running of distance learning course for human rights organisations; the building of what has become the oldest and largest citizen journalism sites on social justice in Africa - Pambazuka News; the use of online, email and mobile-phone technologies for campaigning on women's rights in Africa; and the expansion of interactivity and online organising created by Web 2.0 technologies. While the new technologies have

created extraordinary opportunities for activists and scholars alike, the fact remains that social transformation can only occur through the building of mass movement. But with less than 7% of Africa's population having access to the internet, are the potentials of new media technologies over-stated? While much of the publishing industry clambers over each other to move from print to online, there may well be a case for seeking to go in the opposite direction. Technologies have an inherent tendency – especially in class society – to amplify and exaggerate social differentiation unless this tendency is actively counteracted. Technologies – even new media technologies – are not socially neutral: they are an expression of existing social relations and the distribution of power in society. There is a need for greater reflection on the political economy of the new technologies if we are to understand how they might effectively be used in social transformation.

Okoth Fred Mudhai (Coventry University)

African Civil Society Challenge of Ruling Elite via New Media

The central argument in this study is that urban-based political Civil Society Organisations (CSOs), particularly Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) and news media, in selected African countries, perceive Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) as presenting them with significant opportunities for achieving the goals of their struggle for greater democracy. Representatives of these non-state actors view the Internet, e-mail and the cell phone in particular as tools that have not only enhanced their operational efficiency but also helped them overcome obstacles that the ruling elites often erect – using human, material and ideological state machinery – to stifle any form of challenge to their incumbency. Increasingly, the new media enable the non-state actors to engage in cross-border communicational activities as a way of effecting changes within states – facilitating what David Held has described as webs of relations and networks that stretch across national borders. However, unlike some cosmopolitan approaches to democratic theory and practice, this study privileges local conditions and off-line factors concomitant with the use of rapidly diffusing new media technology.

By providing an insight into perceptions on new media by a category of sub-Saharan Africa's political actors who have been not only considered early ICT adopters and topmost users, but also largely accredited for recent waves of democratisation, this study eschews overly deterministic approaches that typically favour technological and conjectural slants to new media in the developing world. It is based on empirical enquiries on developments in Kenya and Zambia over the past ten years as well as recent engagement in a collaborative project ahead of the 2011 Nigerian presidential election. These are linked to observation of trends in other African countries, especially Zimbabwe and South Africa. Although methodologically the main focus is on the voting or election epoch, a time when CSO actors in these territories reach the height of their political hyperactivity, this pragmatic approach provides avenues for analysing ways in which ICTs could, and do, aid governance in general outside of such periods.

Nduka Otiono (University of Alberta)

From Urban Sphere to Cyber Space: New Media, Citizen Journalism and the Role of Sahara Reporters in Nigeria's Political Struggle

In modern-day Nigerian culture, cyber sphere has become a fertile space for planting and nurturing 'street stories' aimed at discrediting the political elite in ways that traditional media—the newspapers and the electronic media—have increasingly failed to do. A most representative model for the Nigerian experience is the online newspaper called Sahara Reporters. Famous or infamous—depending on which side of the political divide one belongs to—for its citizen reporting practice, the online newspaper lends its weight to the struggle to establish a corrupt-free, stable political culture in a country that had been ravaged by military dictatorships. Using sophisticated online communications technology, Sahara Reporters and other emerging online news sites are filling the lacunae which socio-politically compromised traditional media have created. Citizen reporters report events in real time in ways that sometimes mock the principle of fair representation or balance of all sides of the 'story.' In many instances, floating street stories are reported as inviolable truths. So that street stories have continued to play significant roles in the formation as well as articulation of contemporary reality in what one might refer to as a 'transitory octopus' space, that is, societies whose tentacles stretch between an entirely oral past and a literary or neo-oral—technologically-inclined—future. Street narrative culture can be seen as a site of agency in the social and political dynamics of the postcolonial state in Africa, and also as a site

of creative agency, a performative space where the fantabulist or myth-maker is as much king as the finest literary writer is in their domain.

This paper seeks to explore how these street stories are circulated in such new media avenues as Sahara Reporters online, how they are legitimized in the public sphere, and how they function as tools for political resistance in contemporary Nigeria. In attempting this political contextualization of Sahara Reporters and exploring its relation to street stories and street narrative culture, I would be paying attention to the important angle of the Diaspora -- as part of the external polity -- and would be discussing its wider importance and ability/limitations on same to effect or influence change.

Amy Saunderson-Meyer (Freedom Fone, a project of Kubatana)

Resisting the repression of media freedom in Zimbabwe

New media technologies provide channels through which activists can express themselves and organise their activities. But the fundamental challenges of any movement for social change, particularly one resisting a dictatorship, remain. This presentation will draw on the authors' experience with Kubatana, and in particular, Freedom Fone, an open source software package currently being developed by our organisation.

Kubatana (winner of the 2010 Breaking Borders Award, presented by Google, Reuters and Global Voices, in honour of our use of ICT's in advocacy and freedom of expression) is an online community of activists that uses a variety of new media tactics to share independent information in Zimbabwe.

Freedom Fone enables information activists to create short segment audio magazines that their members, or the general public, can phone into for information. In Zimbabwe, many other ICT's are self-limiting, and the authorities do not view them as threatening. But Zimbabwe's mobile subscriber base is rapidly increasing, and a phone based audio service leverages the ubiquity of the mobile phone – thus presenting a challenge to a regime committed to the control of information.

Kubatana has used Freedom Fone in a variety of ways in Zimbabwe, from sharing news headlines to providing a question and answer service on Zimbabwe's Constitution making process. The authorities however, are currently trying to shut down our activities because they are threatened by the potential of broad, uncontrolled communications.

Kubatana is resisting this attempt to censor us. In so doing we are resisting the repression of media freedom on behalf of all Zimbabweans.

Dombo Sylvester (University of Zimbabwe)

Alternative or subversive? 'Pirate' Radio Stations and the Opening of Spaces of Freedom and alternative politics in Zimbabwe, 2000-2010.

This study explores the role played by digital technologies in the opening of spaces of political emancipation in Zimbabwe between 2000 and 2010. Making reference to Studio 7 of the Voice of America, Short Wave Radio Africa and the Voice of the People, the paper focuses on the role of 'pirate' radio stations and how this 'new' form of media has empowered the opposition leading to a rise in alternative politics in the quest for political change. It brings to the fore the conflict between the political parties in Zimbabwe over the impact of the foreign-based 'pirate' radio stations on the Zimbabwean political landscape. Mugabe and Zanu-PF view these 'pirate' radio stations as instruments to effect 'regime change' whilst for the MDC and many pro-democracy groups, these stations offer an alternative voice in a country whose information has largely been privatized by the state. The Zimbabwean information sector has been dominated by the state run Zimbabwe Broadcasting Corporation which deprives, denies or distorts information. The refusal by the state to open the media space has seen a rise in 'pirate' radio stations in an attempt to diversify the information industry. Since 2000 Zanu-PF's hegemony has been dwindling under the challenge of the MDC, which received the backing of these radio stations. This paper investigates how 'new' media has greatly opened up political spaces for dissent, activism and emancipation. Furthermore, the paper looks at the role played by external actors in supporting these radio stations and how this has shaped the agenda for politics and political parties in Zimbabwe. Though these pirate radios uses predominantly the traditional ways of broadcasting to reach

the rural people, this paper attests that they have incorporated the 'new media' in broadcasting such as the Internet, mobile phone text messages and to some extent the digital satellite television in the case of Studio 7. Whilst the 'pirate' radio stations exist in both digital and the monologue system, they have had greater impact on those people who are not connected to the Internet.

Herman Wasserman (Rhodes University, South Africa)

Of glasses half full: exploratory notes towards the role of new media technologies in democratic politics in South Africa

The dominant view of the role that new media technologies could play in African democracies is an optimistic one: they are mostly seen as providing a platform for deliberation to deepen democratic gains; as vehicles for the construction of an alternative public sphere outside the restrictions of state-owned or commercialized media; or as tools for the mobilization of new social movements that challenge the legitimacy of African governments.

Although this optimism might sometimes be exaggerated, many examples have been found to support claims that the Internet, especially as it is accessed via mobile phones, holds much promise for the advancement of democratic culture in African societies.

The Internet in general has also been noted to espouse an 'open' media ethics by creating dialogue between news publics and journalists/editors around ethical issues. The heightened level of interactivity has been seen to allow website users to interrogate and contribute to the construction of media ethical norms. But what if those users do not share the commitment to democratic media ethics that journalists and editors subscribe to? How might pre-existing racial, ethnic or class tensions in African societies be exacerbated through online communication?

While the use of traditional media like radio in solidifying or amplifying tensions in African societies have come under the spotlight in contexts such as Rwanda (the now iconic example of Radio Mille Collines), little attention (with perhaps the exception of the role of SMS in post-election violence in Kenya) has been paid to the other side of the coin – the way that new media technologies can also amplify pre-existing polarisations and tensions in African democracies and/or transitional societies. This question especially needs to be asked in a country such as South Africa, one of the most unequal societies in the world with a long history of racial conflict, where material inequality remains to be mirrored in Internet access rates. The potential exists for this inequality to skew online debates and news agendas towards those who already possess economic and social capital. The anonymity provided by the Internet may also be used as a subterfuge for members of the news audience who risk ostracisation if they should display racial attitudes in other, less protected public spheres where the democratic culture has led to at least a nominal political correctness.

This paper will explore the ethical norms applied by editors of online news sites when deciding whether audience comments on news stories should be posted. It will investigate how principles of freedom of speech – entrenched in the country's democratic constitution – are weighed up against values such as social responsibility, human dignity and non-racialism. The paper will draw on interviews with editors and journalists as well as an exploratory case study of a news website to assess the ways in which the interactivity provided by online news media relate to the ideals of democratic debate in post-apartheid South Africa.

Poster and visual presentations

Abdulmajeed S. Albuluwi (Blogger and digital activist from Saudi Arabia)

New technology and change in Saudi Arabia

Noha Atef (University of Birmingham)

Arab Cyber Republics: People create online what they wish to have offline!



Wanja Kimani (Visual Artist)

Interactive presentation – on display during the conference breaks

Wanja Kimani is a visual artist and writer exploring the third space between art and politics. Her interests lie in the concept of democracy, the media and youth as agents of social change, particularly in Kenya.

The celebration of the new Constitution of Kenya 2010, marked a historic leap into a new democracy, the so-called 'Second Republic of Kenya'. The celebrations were justifiably charged with hope and anticipation of a new nation, but also served to mask an inescapable sense of foreboding engendered by the reality of Kenya's fractious past. The Constitution emerged from the concept that, if a society enjoys equality and liberty on the basis of democratically elected majority rule, then democratic institutions should enable society to make informed judgments by equipping them with full and accurate information. The freedom to seek, receive and impart opinions and ideas is integral to decision-making.

Born into an age of new media and social networking, the Constitution carries a great deal of promise, but the implementation process among other intervening variables will dictate the effectiveness of the Constitution in facilitating equality and liberty.

The presentation recognises the capability of new media and mobile-communication to expand public participation and foster economic development. However, delegates are invited to participate in a brief exercise that will highlight the limitations of new media in regards to impartiality, authorship and the reflection of interests within the trajectory of 'citizen journalism'.

Podcast presentation

Johanne Kuebler

Overcoming the digital divide: Building bridges between old and new media to mobilise change

The emergence of the Internet deeply influenced the way we live today. While emailing and information gathering online has become common to the majority of Westerners, the Internet equally entered politics. Particularly in the Middle East, the most frequent narrative is that the mere availability of alternative sources of information will empower political actors that are marginalized in the traditional media controlled by authoritarian regimes. Indeed, several protest movements in authoritarian countries interact creatively with this new medium to get their message across in an environment marked by censorship and repression. In order to avoid the danger of conventional wisdom, this paper will address the political potential of the Internet in two Arab countries, Egypt and Tunisia, in a systematic examination of evidence for the political impact of political activists' use of the Internet in a most similar case study design. The two selected cases are both considered as 'enemies of the Internet' by Reporters without Borders, albeit for different reasons: Tunisia heavily censors the Internet and has sentenced to jail numerous "cyberactivists," while Egypt solely resorts to the latter form of repression. Most importantly, although both countries are often presented as model students of political liberalisation, Egypt and Tunisia both feature rigid political regimes in a context of relative resource poverty and rising unemployment rates among the educated youth.

This study is based on semi-directive interviews with Egyptian and Tunisian bloggers and Facebook activists living in their respective countries or in Europe. It focuses mainly on the Kefaya movement, the solidarity strike of 6 April 2008 in Egypt and a recent demonstration in Tunisia (22 May 2010) for online freedom of expression "une manifestation réelle pour une liberté virtuelle" (real protest for virtual freedom). My main thesis is that the mere availability of freely accessible Internet is not a sufficient condition insofar as mobilisations in Egypt took place when a relative small portion of the population had Internet access and, on the other hand, mobilisation witnessed a decline between 2005 and 2008 although the number of Internet users rose during the same period. As there is no direct correlation between increased Internet use and political action organised through this medium, we have to assume a more complex relationship. A successful social movement seems to need more than a virtual space of debate to be successful, although such a space can be an important complementary factor in opening windows and expanding the realm of what can be said in public. Certainly, websites like Facebook have provided an unprecedented opportunity for activists to reach a wider audience than that is usually reached by blogs. On the other hand, the solidarity strike of 6 April 2008 and a recent demonstration in Tunisia for freedom of expression online point to characteristics peculiar to protests organised using Facebook. Mainly, commitment to online activism often is low and certain forms of protest are more easily carried out in an authoritarian context than others (the general strike in Egypt proved to be relatively effortless and riskless because people were only asked to stay at home, while the aborted rally in Tunisia makes the low commitment of Facebook users evident).

Carola Richter's application of Dieter Rucht's linkage of theories of the public sphere with social movement theory to the case of Egypt[1] has induced me to compare the Egyptian case with Tunisia, since although Tunisia is better connected to the Internet than Egypt (by official numbers), Egypt has witnessed an increased prominence of bloggers beyond the blogosphere and the first anti-Mubarak demonstrations ever. This apparent paradox can be linked to the space the respective governments have allotted alternative voices in the general public sphere. Rucht points out that the reflection of a struggle of a social movement in the media is crucial its success. Authoritarian regimes depend on traditional media such as newspapers to confer them a minimum of public legitimacy, albeit to a lesser degree than democracies. Even though most traditional media are tightly controlled in authoritarian regimes and therefore often lack credibility in the population, their reaction to confrontations between a regime and a social movement can be seen as an indicator. While the Internet can be a first communication strategy to reach usually inaccessible audiences because of restrictions to the freedom of assembly in many authoritarian countries, resonance in the traditional media outlets is necessary to reach a larger portion of the society, since Internet use remains

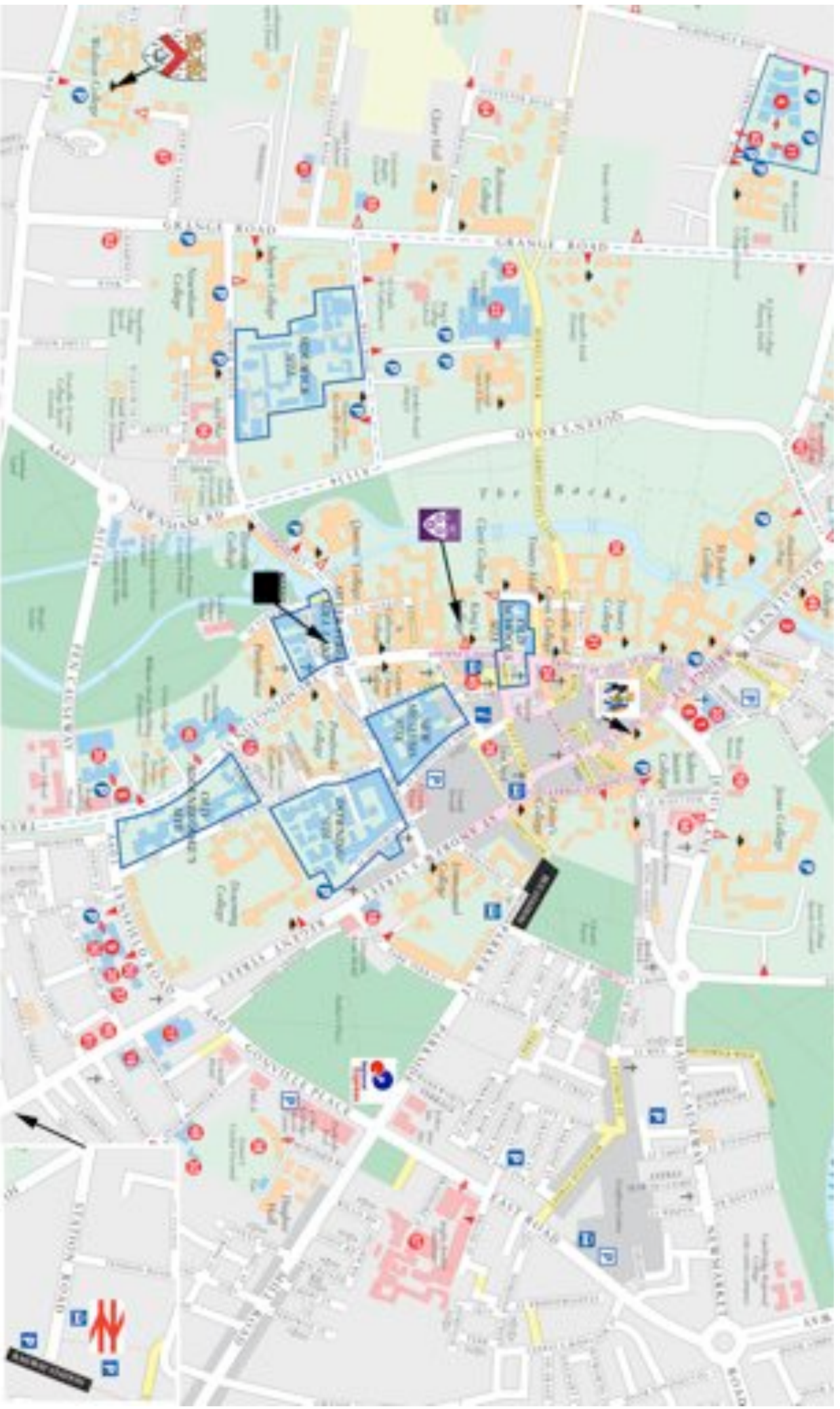
While Egypt has permitted limited liberalisation these last years, which has led to a certain freedom of expression, the Tunisian regime continues to tighten its grip on its society. The Egyptian case illustrates the importance of the linkage of the new media to traditional media seems. Here, we witness an important interaction between print and online media, between the representatives of a relative elitist medium and the traditional, more accessible print media, since there has been a significant overlap of journalists and bloggers. Some journalists use blogs to write about issues they cannot easily write about in the papers or personal issues, and therefore are themselves an integral part of the blogosphere. Contrary to their Tunisian counterparts, Egyptian initiatives like Kefaya and the 6 April movement have received a considerable media echo in the country. Although these movements suffered from internal dissent and clear-cut frames, the phenomenon of cyberactivism has acquired a certain notoriety in the independent press, as long as events such as the general strike in support of workers produced an “eerie emptiness of the normally teeming streets of Cairo” that was newsworthy. While Internet activists in Egypt can count on betimes sensationalist national non-governmental media to report their activities, blogging in Tunisia lacks the bridge from an elitist medium to the general public sphere and their impact remains limited. The Internet is highly censored, the traditional media is brought in line with the government and established journalists adopt the cyberspace as a place of refuge (for example Sihem Bensidrine). Given this contraction of the public space, it is questionable whether the Tunisian campaign can reach beyond Internet users to attain a critical mass sufficient to encourage more citizens to join their cause without a reflection of their struggle in the traditional media.


[1] Carola RICHTER. Virtual Mobilisation: The Internet and Political Activism in Egypt. *Orient*, 2010, vol. 51, no. 1.

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