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Emerging Political Narratives on Malawian Digital Spaces

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ABSTRACT

Social media platforms are being considered new podiums for political transformation as political dictatorships supposedly convert to overnight democracies as more and more people are not only able to gain access to information, but also gather and disseminate news from a perspective of their own. When looking at the situation in several sub-Saharan African countries, it becomes clear there are several challenges standing in the way of social media and its palpable yet considerably constrained ability to influence political and social changes. Access to the internet, or lack thereof, is a recognised social stratification causing a “digital divide” thanks to existing inequalities within African and several other societies throughout the world. This article reports on a study that analysed a popular Facebook page in Malawi using a discursive online ethnographic examination of interactions between social media participants seeking to determine the level of activism and democratic participation taking shape on the Malawian digital space. The study also examined potential bottlenecks restraining effective digital participation in Malawi. The article argues that while social media’s potential to transform societies is palpable, keeping up with the pace of transformation is no easy task for both digital and non-digital citizens. The study demonstrated social media’s potential but more significantly highlighted the problems online activists in Malawi face, including chief among them digital illiteracy. The digital sphere is therefore not a political podium for everyone in Malawi because as evidenced by the analysis of digital narratives emerging from the country’s online environment, which opens its doors to only a tiny fraction of the population.

Keywords: citizen journalism; technologies; press; journalism; propaganda

INTRODUCTION

In defining digital activism, Sivitanides and Shah (2011) consider the importance of several factors including speed, reliability, scale, and cost of the internet, which they argue predetermine the existence of digital activism. For the purposes of this study, we have considered digital activism as a form of online participation that allows citizens of all shapes and sizes to comment and critique messages with the aim of improving their social, political or economic standing. This is based on Kirkpatrick's (2008) social constructivism approach to technology, which allows users to construct and define the meaning of technology, choosing how and for what purpose it should be used. Still, with digital networked technologies facilitating the convergence of communication channels, the perceptive impact of social media in directing ways through which people gather and share information has been a subject of intense scholarly debate. Online content users have become "producers" taking a combined role of producing and consuming information (Bruns 2008). Social media is having an increasing impact in the way people live, interact and even think taking a leading role in shaping disaster response (Cohen 2013; Sarcevic et al. 2012); crisis communications (Agnes 2012); digital protests (Earl and Kimport 2011; Neumayer and Raffl 2008; Shirky 2008); and political mobilisation (Mneisy 2011; Nisbet and Scheufele 2004) among several other roles. While scholars such as Van Laer and Van Aelst (2010) believe social media has simplified the coordination and organisation of events possibly propelling political activism and online civic engagement around the world, some like Gladwell (2010), in a longstanding critique of cyber-Utopianism, have concluded that revolutions took place long before social media was born, driving a sustained debate on the real role of digital platforms in aiding political activism. Morozov (2012) has gone a step further by suggesting the internet empowers digital activists in the same way as it does for authoritarian regimes. This research attempts to identify problems associated with digital activism in Africa zooming in on real issues and speculating on how digital divide and digital illiteracy stand in the way of enhanced digital participation.

We used Malawi as a central case study chiefly because the southern African nation is one country that hardly dominates headlines to the effect that very few people could comprehend the dynamics of online activism currently taking shape in the country. History is on the side of technologies, which have always influenced communication patterns for several years as shown by Carton's (2009) claim that "throughout much of human history, we have developed technologies that make it easier for us to communicate with each other".

Social media is defined as an exchange of “user-generated content” (Kaplan and Haenlein 2010, 60), “conversational media” (Safko and Brake 2009, 2) or “online word-of-mouth forums” (Mangold and Faulds 2009, 1) and an online resource that Drury (2008) suggests helps people share content: video, photos, images, text, ideas, insight, humour, opinion, gossip, news.

Several scholars have already studied the impact of networked communication (Castells 2009; Dahlgren 2000; Downey and Fenton 2003; Hara 2008). Within Africa, plenty of scholarship examining the role of digital communication in advancing political activism is gaining ground (Klopp and Orina 2002; Mano 2010; Mare 2013; Moyo 2009; 2011; Mudhai 2013; Mutsvairo and Sirks 2015; Smyth and Best 2013). Previous research has demonstrated a growing influence of digital activism in Malawi (Gaynor 2011; Mutsvairo and Harris 2016). Allegations of political repression have been raised by opposition groups in the country forcing the protest discourse to enormously take a political slant. In many instances, it has also become a symbol of social resistance as some are going both online and offline to protest against harsh anti-LGBT laws (Mwakasungula 2013). Environmental activism is also being championed in Malawi (Luhtakallio and Tavory 2015) and in all instances, the digital media is playing a pivotal role towards coordination and dissemination of information.

The availability of new media technologies has indeed helped ease out plenty of communication deficiencies as people can rapidly share and respond to messages both openly and privately. However, there are plenty of problems associated with the digital age. Misinformation in the first instance can be found both in conventional and new media forms. While, for example, Lindsay (2011)’s study of Twitter use in the aftermath of the March 2011 Tohoku earthquake in Japan concluded that basic information including the number of victims had been incorrectly disseminated, Khamis et al. (2012) are adamant that in a democratic society, citizen journalists can challenge falsehoods and misinformation peddled by the traditional media outlets. Moreover, possibilities for face-to-face communication are stalled whenever people choose to go digital. While digital communication is associated with several other challenges including the perceived lack of emotional connection facilitated by online conversations, none is as essential as the digital divide given the reality that it ensures that certain members of the society have little or no access to digital technologies. This article reports on a study that examined the barriers to digital political engagement with the view of demonstrating potential pitfalls facing Malawian digital activists. In this regard, the study sought to answer the following research questions:

1. What social and political narratives are emerging from the Malawian digital space?

2. How does the digital divide affect aspiring digital activists in Malawi?

In the context of the aforementioned problems, the study sought to zero in on the digital divide and indeed other net-oriented plagues to determine what is holding back or facilitating prospects for digital activism in Malawi. The article will first provide an updated account of digital dynamics in Malawi before delving into the methodology, which is firmly grounded in digital ethnography of six months (April to September 2016) focussing on news outlet Malawi24's Facebook page. According to Social Breakers (2016), the site is the third most popular social media page in Malawi behind religious zealot Shepherd Bushiri's in first place with 1 055 021 likes on Facebook, followed by former president Joyce Banda with 597 858 followers on the same platform. Malawi24, the established media organisation, has 363 195 followers. We are cognisant of the fact that Malawi has other popular digital platforms including the *Nyasa Times*, which was not examined in the study. The discussion will define and review the digital divide concept from both a global, African and local (Malawian) perspective further analysing literature and introducing theoretical discussions that seek to verify the current dynamics of digital participation in Malawi. We have therefore examined online citizen engagements on Malawi24's Facebook page to determine the strength and level of digital activism in the country, seeking to analyse the importance of these exchanges in establishing digital dissent and capturing the government response to that.

INTERNET DYNAMICS IN MALAWI AND EMERGING PROTEST CULTURES IN AFRICA

The politicisation of the internet is not unique to Malawi as political uprisings facilitated by online participation have emerged across Africa including most recently in the Democratic Republic of Congo, Uganda, Chad and lately in Zimbabwe and South Africa, which since October 2015 has exploded with university students demanding free education. Research in Africa (Chuma 2006; Ndlela 2009; Wasserman 2011) has tended to be sceptical when it comes to the digital prospects for political change possibly exhibited by mobile media and new ICTs. Longtime Ugandan President Yoweri Museveni's government bitterly crushed social media coordinated political protests in April and October 2011, using a draconian law to ban protests and targeting organizers in a mass citizen arrest. In Zimbabwe, the government battled citizen protests in 2016 with social and political movement groups *#ThisFlag* and *#Tajamuka* mobilising online dissidents particularly on Facebook and Whatsapp to voice their concerns against Robert Mugabe's 36-year rule. Evidently, social

media is becoming a beacon of hope for some, who have endured years of political repression. Yet there is lack of scientific evidence proving the digital platforms' potential to eradicate dictatorships across the continent.

There are plenty of similarities and differences that can be drawn between Malawi's digital experiences and those of other countries in Africa. As in several countries in sub-Saharan Africa, Malawian citizens seeking to access the internet face a myriad of problems with high accessibility costs frequently topping that list. Making matters worse principally for Malawi, the government has imposed exorbitant value-added taxes on both internet and mobile phone services. The decision by the Parliament in May 2015 to introduce a 10 per cent excise duty on mobile phone text messages left the majority of the country's 17 million citizens without access to the internet as many citizens seeking to go online could not afford to fork out the skyrocketing fees. The internet cafes, most of which opened in major cities including Lilongwe and Blantyre, are fast becoming a thing of the past as many citizens move to use mobile internet. The introduction of the value-added tax therefore blocked many from potentially seeking access to the internet as only those who could afford were able to do so. After taking office in 2014, President Peter Mutharika reversed a repressive approach against digital activists favoured by previous governments, including the one led by his late brother, Bingu. Mutharika has according to Freedom House (2015) pursued an internet-friendly regime with social media platforms freely available in the country. In a commissioned report, the US-based think-tank Freedom House (2015) concludes, "The launch of the Malawi Internet Government Forum in July 2014 connected various stakeholders in the development of Malawi's internet policies and infrastructure." But Malawi has plenty of digital challenges. As one of the world's least developed nations, lack of adequate infrastructure is hampering the country's potential to introduce wireless broadband, which is currently restricted to major cities. Only 35 per cent of the country's population has access to mobile phones while just 8 per cent has access to the internet with citizens spending USD12 a month on mobile phones, an amount more than half of what Malawians generally earn monthly (Windsor 2015).

Political repression and a weakening economy forced activists onto the streets in a mass digitally coordinated nationwide protest in July 2011. Faced with a deteriorating situation, the Malawi Communications Regulatory Authority (MACRA) decided to temporarily shut down private broadcasters also blocking several anti-government websites, but in what is becoming a norm across Africa, as a counter-measure, information was easily shared on Facebook and WhatsApp. However, just over a million people have access to the

internet in Malawi, which is one of the lowest in the region (Internet World Stats 2016). Slow internet penetration rate or lack thereof was cited as a major difficulty facing digital development in Bichler's (2008) study of Malawian digital space. In spite of the noted problems, there is increasing evidence from several studies showing that more and more Malawians are using the internet (Chaputula 2012; Chaputula and Majawa 2013; Mutula 2008).

METHODOLOGY

There is also growing body of research examining studies focused on the internet (see Domínguez et al. 2007; Fielding, Lee and Blank 2008; Hampton and Wellman 1999; Hine 2000; Kozinets 2005; Maczewski et al. 2004; Miller and Slater 2000; Pink and Morgan 2013). This study took a participatory route. We first identified a news site that we felt was representative of the country in terms of audience participation. Malawi24 suited this call because of its dominating presence on Facebook. Our role as participants was to carefully observe the social situation on the site by observing virtual reactions to stories published on the social media site. We chose not to take part in any online debates because we wanted to restrict ourselves just to observing. Even though Malawi24's Facebook page is freely available for anyone to comment on, we still sought permission from the paper's editor Pius Nyondo, to use it as a point of departure for our research.

We also posted a message on the media outlet's Facebook page detailing our mission. Armed with our hypothesis stemming from the notion that digital divide hinders full participation in online activism given the high internet costs and other related problems including digital literacy, we sought to profile the main participants, identifying how frequent they comment on stories with the view of qualitatively assessing the generalisable problems potentially hindering enhanced participation in online debates.

Our research focusing on reader's comments it directly tied to several studies, most of which have gained ground especially in the Western hemisphere thanks to the advent of the internet (see Kenney et al. 2000; Quinn and Trench 2000; Rosenberry 2005; Schultz 2000), Audience research on social media has also been conducted by several scholars including Baresch (2011), Deller (2011) and Hampton (2014) with scholars divided on the democratising ability of these online spheres. Qualitative digital ethnography is a preferred method of studying online communities as various cultures exist in the cyberspace (Woolgar 1996). It in fact matches traditional ethnography in the sense that the digital environment is considered a natural setting (Boellstorff et al. 2012). Online communities are also cohesive in

nature (Baker and Woods 2004). In the conventional sense, ethnography has always involved travelling to the field to construct and appraise a community based on one's symmetrical understanding and observation of people living in such an environment. But internet-based ethnography is "an experiential rather than a physical displacement" (Jeffrey et al. 2010, 2). Specifically in Africa, recent studies have shown a rising interest in studies investigating the political prospects of social media engagement, for example: Zimbabwe (Mpofu 2016; Mutsvairo and Sirks 2015); Malawi (Mutsvairo and Harris 2016); Chad (De Bruijn 2015); South Africa, Malawi and Mozambique (Mare 2014). Another new offering by Mutsvairo (2016) scrutinises the impact of social media activism in seven African countries. Some research has primarily focused on the increasingly changing online journalism climate in Africa (Mabweazara et al. 2013).

Online ethnography has attracted plenty of critique especially in connection with the decisive issue of informed consent of human subjects. Several scholars have tackled this issue as well as research ethics generally in internet-based research. (Anderson and Kanuka 2009; Carusi 2008; Mann and Stewart 2000; Whiteman 2012). Online communities should be treated as private spaces (Roberts, Smith and Pollock 2008). Taking a cue from Markham's (2007, 17) "reflexive ethics" that is, "intensive and critical dissection of the everyday means by which the researcher makes sense of his or her world, whether directly or tangentially related to the research project", we first intended to identify and define our context before examining citizen contributions, detailing their location as well as outlining their frequency in participating. We were cognisant of the fact some of the ethical rules and guidelines championed in the West are simply not universal, especially based on several years of conducting research in Africa. Some of the reasons why research ethics introduced in the West cannot work in Africa are comprehensively laid out in (Mutsvairo 2017, forthcoming).

For example, while seeking to interview citizen journalists in Zimbabwe in 2013, we were told that permission from the country's research council, which is notoriously bureaucratic and suspicious to foreign researchers, needed to be granted. This did not take into consideration the fact that most of the participants were actually neither in or from Zimbabwe and would only be available via Skype interviews. To make matters worse, it also would take six months before the council would come up with a decision. While we ended up abandoning this research, it is common practice for many researchers to conduct their studies in several African countries without a work permit, which basically means that they break the law in pursuance of research ethics.

The crucial justification for our decision to pursue online ethnography is summarised by Markham (2007, 15): “Online or off, an ethical researcher is one who is prepared, reflexive, flexible, adaptive, and honest.” Informed consent is hugely important but what we considered even more important was our determination to provide an accurate account of what is happening online, who is participating, what issues they are citizens discussing and what challenges they face. Besides, we are not the first to set aside the relevance of informed consent when conducting research online. Others that have noted the importance but still proceeded to do research without seeking informed consent including (Hewson et al. 2003), who argued that if data is voluntarily made available in the online public domain, then the need to seek permission is waived. Brotsky and Giles (2007) have also conducted covert research. But we chose to protect the participants’ anonymity chiefly against Bryman’s (2012) <word missing> because we were not sure how republishing their names would place them in problems. Research has shown the extent to which desperate regimes can employ secret social media police to identify the origins of dissents.

Besides, how do you request and possibly get permission to use data from over 300 000 people? Even though we were following the activities of 20 participants seeking permission from this target group alone would have defeated the purpose given they are not the only ones contributing on the Facebook page. Moreover, Malawi under the government of Mutharika’s late brother, Bingu, rounded off digital and human rights activists and citizen journalists, who were deemed too critical of the regime. During the famed 2011 protests against Bingu wa Mutharika’s rule, also coordinated via social media, 18 people died as the civic society fought for political and economic reforms. The late president, unlike his successor, was highly sceptical of the internet, which he also sought to control. We were aware of the fact that circumstances such as these make it very difficult for people to warm up to strangers some of whom could easily pose as researchers when in real sense they are members of the secret police seeking to investigate who is engaging “foreign enemies.”

FINDINGS

Digital discussions on social media platforms almost certainly take a political or social slant as citizens discuss issues affecting them. But digital activism on the Malawi24 Facebook page is nearly non-existent even though intense discussions on several issues are easy to spot. A new manifestation sees online readers emerging with an active role as they respond to stories published on Malawi24 (<https://malawi24.com/>), but as shown later, these discussions fall short of constituting activism defined as an organized public effort, making collective

claim(s) on a target authority(s), in which civic initiators or supporters use digital media” (Edwards et al. 2013, 4). Issues dominating the Malawi24 digital space are not limited to political and social issues and participants discuss a wide range of issues including football, religion and music. One interesting fact, which we argue is a clear sign of a visible digital divide, is the dominating use of English language in online discussions. The emerging themes are discussed below.

Passion for football

While Malawi is not a known football powerhouse, there is an overarching interest in football stories, which on average attract 100 likes per story. The Malawi Super league football table posted on 25 September and 1 August had a combined 212 likes and seven shares over 150 revellers discussing prospects of their team, one of the 26 football related stories published during the period of this study. Similarly, on 17 July, an article about Nyasa Big Bullets FC’s Presidential Cup win had 452 likes. Again, a story showing an image of two Nigerian football players due to undergo trials at local club, Be Forward Wanderers, published on 27 September, also ignites plenty of debate as participants discuss the poor allowances paid to players, which they believe is stopping Malawi from attracting top football players. Another story looking at the football derby involving Nyasa Big Bullets and Be Forward Wanderers has 101 likes as supporters wish the best for their respective teams. Reports about the national football team also have a large following with a story about Malawi’s match against Angola, published on 12 June, earning more than 100 likes.

Interest for regional not local politics

Malawians follow political news emerging from their neighbouring countries with more passion than their own country. A story claiming President Edgar Lungu of Zambia had been elected in a disputed vote, published on August 15, had 71 likes and was hotly debated by readers. In contrast, a story published on August 30, about government minister George Chaponda, who was reluctantly chased away by local villagers attracted very little attention. Again a story about the death of Kenya’s former first lady received a lot of attention. Lack of interest in local politics could be attributable to the country’s less volatile political environment especially in comparison to neighbours Zimbabwe and Swaziland, whose leaders have been in power for over 60 years, combined. Calls by the opposition on May 21, for the president to step down was another story that did not attract a lot of interest, which is

quite interesting because in several other nations such a call would have led to plenty of discussion.

Dominating religious and social discourses

Human interest and religious related stories are always associated with passionate discussions across board. A story on 16 June about a man who received life imprisonment for killing an albino had 722 likes, 42 shares and 251 comments. Another story praising a judge for passing a hefty sentence of the albino murderer, published on June 16 was also followed with immense interest. Messages of condolence dominate a story published 24 May about local comedian John Nyanga attracted 257 comments and 149 likes. Another story about the same man, published two days earlier had received 489 likes, 42 shares and 786 comments. Malawi in comparison with other countries in the region is home to a strong Muslim population, which is why a story wishing Muslims a good ending to a fasting period received over 100 likes too.

Nearly all communication Anglicised

Nearly all stories are published in English and those commenting also do so in English, which is the official language in Malawi but is considered first language by less than 5 per cent of the country. The majority of the Malawians consider languages such as Chichewa, Chiyao, Chinyanja, Chisena, Chilomwe and Chitumbuka as their native language. Even though UNESCO (2015) pegs the country's literacy rate at 65 per cent, the fact that discussions online continue to be in English gives a false picture of offline realities since the language is not spoken by the majority of the population. If other local languages were used on the site, it would have pointed to the presence of inclusivity, which clearly is not there.

DISCUSSION: CONCEPTUALISING THE DIGITAL DIVIDE

A vibrant community of online participation facilitated by Facebook and other social media platforms is emerging in the Malawian digital public sphere. However, concerns for digital divide are still present with Facebook acknowledging the existence of this challenge when it teamed up with other local mobile operators to offer freely accessible information on issues such as health and women empowerment for the local population. The much publicised exponential growth of the use of ICTs on a global scale normally ignores the existing inequalities associated with accessing and using the telecommunications infrastructures, the internet and other digital technologies, which are well documented in scientific scholarship

(Compaine 2001; Ragnedda and Muschert 2013; Van Dijk and Hacker 2003; Vidyasagar 2006). Digital divide and digital inequalities cannot be reduced to a simple matter of access to the internet. It is clear, as underlined by Castells (2001, 232) that without access to the internet, other factors will be irrelevant. Indeed, lack of internet access and network infrastructure are hindrances to exploiting the benefits of online activities (Hassani 2006).

The majority of the leading participants on Malawi24's Facebook page that we followed over a 6-month period are located in the country's major cities, Blantyre and Lilongwe. Only a handful of the sampled 20, including Chipita 1 and Mulanje 2 (respondents are identified by the town or village where they reside) live outside these cities. It obviously was not possible for us to verify the authenticity of the users' exact location but we were able to verify that in the period of study, the sampled participants maintained the same location. While again this does not authenticate their original base, it provides a pattern that could be followed leaving us to assume they lived in places they claimed to be based. This is important because there has to be a reason why there is a small number of rural participants. Traditionally, rural Africa is perceived to have the highest number of an uneducated population with poor infrastructure further inhibiting rural development (Mutsvairo and Harris 2016) especially in comparison with the urban folk. Indeed, our observations do not outrightly prove the existence of the digital divide in Malawi but they provide a good basis for us to assume it exists because important local political stories do not lead to intense online discussion. If many people had unhindered online access, we argue, the case potentially would have been different. Besides, only four of the 20 highest frequently contributing participants over the 6-month period, were female or at least had female names, potentially proving a gender-based divide is in existence.

The opportunities for an individual, or a segment of population, to access and use the telecommunications infrastructure are at the base of what we can define as the first level of the digital divide. This issue has been at the centre of the early stage of research on the digital divide. In fact, both scientific and policy research have concluded that access to the internet and ownership of ICTs are the most vital factors in identifying its existence (Correa 2010; DiMaggio, Hargittai, Celeste and Shafe 2004; Hargittai and Walejko 2008). This early approach in analysing the digital divide, has been accompanied and followed by a more sophisticated approach which takes into consideration not only the access, but also the different use of ICTs (Ragnedda and Muschert 2016). This multidimensional and more elaborate approach considers not only who has access to the internet, but which kind of activities are carried out while online. This shift from the first level of the digital divide to the

second level (Attewell 2001) focuses more on digital skills, digital competences and purpose for usage. Finally, a new approach in analysing digital inequalities and digital divide has been proposed by Ragnedda (2017) who introduces the third level of the digital divide, seen as the social and cultural benefits deriving from accessing (first level of the digital divide) and using (second level of the digital divide) the internet. In other words, this new approach includes both levels of the digital divide, but it mainly attempts to understand who gains the most advantage from accessing and using the internet. This approach sounds particularly interesting and useful also in analysing the digital activism. Indeed, accessing the internet (first level of the digital divide) cannot be seen as a synonymous of digital activism, because many other variables occur.

The power of the internet in the political change has been widely documented from Ukraine (Goldstein 2007) to the Philippines (Castells, Fernández-Ardèvol, Linchuan Qiu and Sey 2007; Shirky 2011); from the so-called Arab Spring uprisings of 2011 (Mungiu-Pippidi and Munteanu 2009; Stepanova 2011) to the broader anti-globalisation protests (Castells 1996; Hardt and Negri 2000; Rheingold 1995). However, the role played by ICTs in promoting political change has often been overestimated (Gladwell 2010; Morozov 2012; Van Laer and Van Aelst 2010). The “techno-evangelist” approach both overestimated the role of the ICTs and underestimate the social and political background of users. More specifically, underestimating the digital skills (second level of the digital divide) and users’ capacities to reinvest online activities into their social realm (third level of the digital divide) might imply a reduction of “political activism” into a simple “clicktivism”, where users/citizens are asked to simply share information or click “I like” on a social media post. In analysing digital activism is not only vital to consider grounds for activism or physical activism (Ruiu and Ragnedda 2017), but also the socio-cultural background of users, that could likely influence what they do online and how they reinvest offline, the valuable knowledge and information acquired in the digital realm. In other words, what we are arguing is that digital activism cannot be separated by the digital divide, which as we have seen, is a sophisticated phenomenon that cannot be analysed in a dichotomous way (have vs. have no access).

Some works have pursued the impact of the digital divide in Africa with one major study zooming in on Ghana and South Africa. Lower levels of connectivity have been registered in several African countries, including Malawi as noted. Compaine (2001, 3) defines the digital divide as “those who have access to information tools and the capability of using information and those who presumably do not”. This definition is centred on unequal

access to the internet. However, as we have seen above, these approaches tend to focus only on the first level of the digital divide, while a more comprehensive approach is required. Something has been done in this direction, such as the research carried out by Fuchs and Horak (2007). Identifying one of the main cause of the digital divide, they have blamed “certain stratification processes that produce classes of winners and losers of the information society, and participation in institutions governing ICTs and society.” Fuchs and Horak’s (2007) analysis emphasises how the socio-economic background influences user access and use of the internet. This in line with corresponding research, which has stressed on the relationship between digital divide and digital inequality with the digital skills of citizens coming from different socio-economic backgrounds (Hargittai 2002; Van Deursen and Van Dijk 2009). This is particularly true in a country where, not only the access, but also education and level of digital literacy is strongly related to socio-economic variable. We therefore argue that it is true also for the digital activism in Malawi, maintaining our hypothesis that the country’s rural farming communities are poorly networked digitally, there explaining why the majority of the participants are based in Malawi. Those purporting to be living outside bigger cities were only partial participants as they averaged a weekly appearance of three times (in the case of Mulanje 1, Mulanje 2 and Mulanje 3). On the other hand, Blantyre 1 and Lilongwe 4 had an 80–100 per cent appearance, frequently commenting and liking posts during the six-month period.

While the UN “Sustainable development goals” (SDGs) 2015 were aimed at striving “to provide universal and affordable access to the internet in least developed countries by 2020”, reaching this goal seems rather a far-fetched ambition. Indeed, 70 per cent of people in the world’s least-developed countries cannot afford to pay for a basic monthly broadband plan. More specifically, the Alliance for Affordable Internet (2016), has shown how, on current trends, the world’s least developed countries will not achieve it until 2042. Among these countries, Malawi is found, where the estimated number of years to reach 90 per cent internet penetration is 30 years (2046). Moreover, as already noted, according to an ITU report (2014, 167), Malawians pay the highest mobile phone expenses in the world, relative to their income. As a result of this, the majority of Malawians are offline, do not participate in the digital economy, and are excluded from the benefits of the ICT. More specifically, rural, the elderly, women, traditionally marginalized groups, and people living in poverty are less likely to benefit from the growth, and by consequences are the less “active” in participating in any form of digital activism. Bridging the digital gap in a country where only 26 per cent of boys and 16 per cent of girls complete primary school (UNICEF 2015) should

be concentrated on improving living and educational standards for the population rather than providing internet access to an otherwise digitally-illiterate citizenship.

Thus, while discussing digital activism and online participation, we must bear in mind the socio-economic environment and analyse the data accordingly. To stress further this point, we should keep in mind that not everybody has the possibility to access the internet and even those who are online are not automatically digital activists. A story entitled “Livingstonia University – Ekwendeni Campus is up in flames” or “Be blessed this morning on [Malawi24](#): Live your life in faith” discussing the importance of being religious attracted more than 200 likes while “Malawi President Mutharika under fire over long stay in US” had a readership rate of less than 100 people. The findings showed that there is hardly any form of activism taking place on this Facebook site apart from comments in direct response to articles, some of which take a political slant. Digital activism is defined as “an organizing manual for citizens who want to use the Internet to improve their communities and gain influence in politics” (Schwartz 1996). Nothing organisational is taking place on the Malawi 24 page and not all political stories attract attention. In identifying the drawbacks of our research, we are keen to admit that it is very difficult to prove the existence of a digital divide in Malawi. That, however, does not take away the prospects of its existence, since as shown in the current research, patterns of a digital divide are present in Malawi. A possible explanation for lack of political digital engagement could be the lack of leadership or indeed the current president’s decision to abandon the totalitarian style leadership pursued by his brother. Malawi is reasonably free with no records of arrested journalists in the year 2016 (Freedom House 2016).

The dormant attitude towards digital participation could therefore be attributed to the fact that the nation’s majority are economically poor making it impossible for them to access the internet and mobile technologies. A more sophisticated level of skills is required to participate in online discussion and a strong social network in the offline realm is required to exploit the benefits of the digital activism. With only close to one million citizens with access to the internet, Malawi citizens have yet to realise the full potential of ICT connection. As rightly posited by Fuchs and Horak (2007) only specific social classes benefits from the access and participation in institutions governing ICTs and society. This seems to be particularly true in a society such as Malawi where the majority of the population are offline. Those living in rural Malawi are less likely going to realise the full fruits of digitalisation because it is not their major priority. Moreover, the socio-economic background influences not only how we access the internet (first level of the digital divide) and how we use the

internet, which kind of digital skills we have and our digital literacy (second level of the digital divide), but also how we “use” and “reinvest” online activities into our social realm and network of offline relation (third level of the digital divide). In analysing these ethnographic data, we kept in mind this dynamic and have interpreted it accordingly.

CONCLUSION

The article has argued that the potential for digital activism in Malawi is plagued by lack of technological infrastructure as well as the powerful presence of a debilitating digital divide, which is illustrated along gender, economic status and location. We have shown that with communication dominated by the use of the English language, there is a clear danger of an expanding digital divide because those who cannot speak the language are kept away from participating. Indeed, digital activism is taking a slow pace in comparison to the 2011 political uprisings. We speculate that a change in government policy is likely the main reason behind the declining digital activism in the country. The study’s main contribution to the discipline is in its attempts to provide an updated account of Malawi’s experiences with the so-called digital revolution. More research will need to be expanded to demonstrate other activities of online activism in Malawi. Opportunities for citizens and activists alike in Africa are emerging in the online environments but it should be noted that there are several challenges, as noted in the article, which are associated with citizen engagement online. There are noble prospects for digital activism in Malawi but first internet access has to be cheaply and readily available for citizens and apart from affordability, the quality of life for the majority of the population needs to drastically improve so as to curb potential digital inequalities. Taxing data services, we argue, is visibly a regressive step on the part of the government.

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