

No one should expect a Twitter Revolution in sub-Saharan Africa – at least for now

Bruce Mutsvairo

Showing no shred of skepticism, analysts have been predicting the ubiquity of the Internet's and new media technologies is set to help end tyranny across sub-Saharan Africa.

That's been a worrying trend lately.

Crediting social media platforms for provoking "The Arab Spring" popular protests in 2010-11, commentators have been making unsubstantiated claims that the revolution would re-emerge.

This time further south.

Indeed, it would be imprudent to ignore the social networks' potential as platforms for social and political change.

Globally, several political manifestations have social media to thank for triggering change-driven protests.

Joseph Estrada's demise in The Philippines in 2001 marked what many consider the first time that protests coordinated via social media had helped oust a national leader.

Successive digital campaigns also succeeded in Spain three years later and Moldavia in 2009 with spontaneous mobile messages used to coordinate anti-terror protests in the southern European country before protesters took to Twitter to reject the Moldavia's "fraudulent" parliamentary elections.

Closer to home, ex-Senegalese Abdoulaye Wade attempted but failed to undermine country's constitution after a massive insurgency organised along

the lines of a social movement openly rejected his calls to extend his rule beyond his 2012 mandate. After his bid for a controversial third bid collapsed, he then lost the elections that followed in February 2012.

However, protests organised on social media haven't always been successful as witnessed in Belarus, Iran and Thailand. Dictator Alexander Lukashenko used his army to ruthlessly crush protests ignited by his claims for victory in election international observers concluded had been marred by fraud.

Mamoud Ahmadinejad brutally suppressed protests that followed his 60% victory declaration during the 2009 Iranian elections. The same happened the following year in Thailand when Red Shirts revolution was suppressed. Organisers in both countries had used social media as a platform for protest and dissent.

Earlier this year, authorities in the Democratic Republic of Congo blocked Internet communications in an attempt to quash public protests sparked by President Joseph Kabila's bid to extend his tenure in office. Kabila rode his luck and he remains very much in control in spite of a public outcry.

There are several reasons why those expecting the Arab Spring to come to sub-Saharan Africa should put their hopes on hold.

At least for now.

To measure the Internet's potential in sparking protests, one has to understand local conditions for dissent. If dissent hasn't been tolerated for years in countries like Angola or Equatorial Guinea, it would take more than a Facebook click or clicktivism as it's now called, to meet the activists' desires for change.

Ideally, protests should be locally-driven. We all know that several civil society organisations heavily depend on Western funding. But Western funding comes at a price. There are always conditions attached to it. These may come

in conflict with the receiving organisation's principles, likely forcing them to abandon or shift strategies and needlessly throwing all hope to the shudders.

It's important also to remember that online activities that are not supported by offline engagements may be completely useless. This is where digital theorist Evgeny Morozov's "slactivism" (belief that you can achieve more online by applying minimal effort) argument comes in. When it comes to democracy, you simply can't expect a few clicks or likes to shape your date with destiny. Even in the Arab Spring, it took revolts, some of them violent, for governments in Tunisia, Egypt and many others to see that activists' cheeky online and offline tactics had outmaneuvered them.

They were racing against time.

It may sound completely emancipatory to sign an online petition asking Robert Mugabe to stop rights abuses or joining a Facebook group calling on Ugandan authorities to respect gay rights but if no real-time action outside the cyberspace is encouraged and implemented, then only daydreamers would expect a policy shift from these two long-time leaders.

In spite of these problems, it's clear that ICTs make collaboration between individuals and social movements more likely even though it's true to say in Africa and indeed elsewhere throughout the world, accessibility to the Internet isn't guaranteed to everyone.

Worse still, you cannot ignore the issue of Internet literacy. You would expect every person sitting on the driver's seat to be able to drive. However, that's not always the case.

Hashtags, some of them uninspiring, may raise awareness, empowering others with the much-needed information. However, it's actually what you do with the information that's more important. Civil disobedience and not hashtags could force King Mswati to respect human rights. But then again in

countries where dissent isn't tolerated, protesting on the streets is too big a risk. Protesters get beaten and some end up in jail.

For their part, authoritarian regimes are also massively represented online. That's what many people forget. It's not like the secret service isn't checking who is saying what on the Facebook pages. With Chinese authorities blocking Facebook and monitoring other "unfriendly" websites, you certainly would expect some African governments to adopt the same tactics.

More encouragingly though, recent data from Mckinsey show that Africa's Internet penetration will reach 50 percent by 2025 with the continent expected to be home to 360 million smartphones. Africa had 26.5 percent Internet penetration in 2014 according to Internet World Stats as others predicted a "boom" for democracy across the continent.

The problem is accessibility doesn't translate into democracy. Not everyone with Internet access is interested in democracy. Democracy isn't on the agenda of every Twitter user in Africa. Thus before making overzealous claims of an impending Twitter or Facebook revolution, it's important to remember not everyone is interested.

Better still, Ethan Zuckerman's proposed cute cat theory of digital activism argues that the digital environment is home not just to political content but also pictures of kittens. Should a government choose to suppress or censor a website, this will handicap both groups with users previously seeking unrestricted access to cute kittens automatically becoming politically engaged.

Zuckerman's model is interesting but it needs further testing especially on African soil. What are the chances that blocking the Apostolic Church's website would spark a revolution in Africa? Close to none, if you ask me.

No one doubts the Internet's ability to allow people to form formidable individual and activist communities that could effectively be used to rally them together behind a political or social cause. But fighting for a cause isn't always

on everyone's menu. People have different priorities in life most of which may have nothing to do with the Internet or democracy if at all we know what democracy means. Some may consider democracy a priority but their pockets aren't too deep to afford or even understand the Internet. Africa awaits but my fear, which is backed by empirical evidence, is that the waiting may just be too long.

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