

fesmedia  Africa series

**Texting, Tweeting, Mobile Internet**

New Platforms for Democratic Debate in Africa

*By Tom Sarrazin*

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## *About the Author*

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# Summary

New media platforms are changing how people communicate with each other around the world. However, there is great variation in both the kind of communication platforms people make use of as well as in how they access these platforms. Computer ownership and internet access are still the prerogative of the wealthy few in wide swathes of the African continent. All the same, mobile internet access is on the rise and if current growth rates continue, African mobile phone penetration will reach 100 per cent by 2014.

Mobile phone penetration rates, in particular, have resulted in a plethora of ideas for new media platforms aimed at bridging the information divide between the well-connected and the disconnected. Topic areas range from agriculture and conservation to health and human rights. In addition to mobile phone-based platforms, there is also a number of promising internet-based ones.

Both mobile phones and the internet provide exciting new opportunities for one-to-one as well as one-to-many communication. Newly empowered citizen journalists now report on issues and events relevant to their own communities. Political activists take to the web to gather support and organise rallies. Increasingly, ordinary citizens take on tasks previously carried out by professionals.

One concern raised in this context is the matter of quality standards and a code of ethics. There is a feeling among some professional journalists that average citizens are unable to report in a professional manner because of their lack of training. However, experience has shown that journalistic training is not able to guarantee good conduct at all times. Even with relevant codes of ethics in place, countries like Rwanda and Kenya have seen hate campaigns sanctioned by traditional media outlets in the past. The promotion of media literacy and educational measures may therefore be more suited to tackle these issues.

International development agencies can become active in a number of ways in order to support the recent development in new media platforms. Promoting media literacy, lobbying for affordable mobile phone and broadband tariffs and increasing the audiences of alternative citizen media are just some of the possible fields of activity.

## Section One: *Introduction*

Much has been said and written in recent years about the potential of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) for international development cooperation and the new media landscapes they have helped shape around the globe. In an initial phase, the sheer scope of practical applications of ICTs in the development context sent experts and laymen alike into a state of euphoria. This excitement, however, died down soon enough and gave way to the realisation that crucial obstacles on the technology-powered road towards development had been ignored. A stage of disillusionment and re-assessment followed.

A recent working paper from the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC) evaluates the organisation's work in the field of ICTs and media and reaches a series of conclusions that amount to a paradigm shift.<sup>1</sup> According to the authors of the study, technology itself is not suited to make a difference in the practice of international development. It is rather "the economic and social processes behind the technology that drive [...] the change. Thus, ICTs are instrumental, not a goal in [themselves]."<sup>2</sup> This realisation represents a shift away from previous thinking which underscored the significance of new technologies to the development context without providing relevant strategies to implement them in a meaningful manner.

One phenomenon which has been linked to both the proliferation of new technologies as well as an underlying social change in human societies is the rise of social media. Karim Khashaba, an Egyptian political analyst and researcher, traces a shift towards a greater degree of openness in the relationships of young people in Egypt. Research conducted under the auspices of the British Council showed that "some [young Egyptians] were seizing the virtual space to better express themselves away from the 'restrictions' they faced in reality, or 'offline', especially in terms of politics and opposite-sex relationship issues. Research also showed that such practices online could have knock-on effects in the real world."<sup>3</sup>

Other authors have cast doubt on the ability of online phenomena to transcend into offline reality. Appraising the role of social media in the context of social movements, Malcolm Gladwell of the *New Yorker* argues that due to their weak group ties and general lack of hierarchy, Facebook, Twitter and others are unlikely

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1 Kalas, Spurk 2011, p. 3

2 Ibid.

3 Khashaba 2011



to spark social revolution.<sup>4</sup> Interestingly, the on-going upheavals in the Arab world seem to be benefitting in no small measure from the level of connectivity supplied by social media. However, the involvement of these new communication platforms in the precipitation of change is largely incidental and unpremeditated. Facebook and Twitter were not designed with political activism in mind. They just happen to provide astounding new opportunities for group communication.

As unrest gathers pace across the African continent, seemingly spreading to countries south of the Sahara<sup>5</sup>, the significance of social media as perceived by African governments is highlighted by measures such as the banning of Twitter's SMS service by Cameroonian authorities. In order to pre-empt popular uprisings in the run-up to the presidential elections in 2011, Cameroon forced mobile phone operator MTN to end its partnership with Twitter. The micro-blogging website had previously provided a service to Cameroonian users allowing followers to subscribe to automatic SMS updates. This meant that twitterers could reach their followers irrespective of whether those were online or not. As long as their mobile phones were active, followers were able to receive instant SMS updates from the users they followed on Twitter. This technology is said to have played a significant role in the coordination of the Egyptian protests that led to the ousting of Hosni Mubarak.

Prior to the Twitter SMS ban, Cameroon had already seen its own protests on 23 February 2011 when the government enforced a total media blackout which had international media outlets resorting to Twitter for news coverage on the on-going events in the country. However, as Dibussi Tande points out, the Cameroonian government failed to understand the true nature of the news breach as "95% of the tweets which the international media relied on for updates did not originate from within Cameroon. It was information obtained via mobile phones, regular SMS and email which ended up on Twitter and not real-time tweets from activists on the ground."<sup>6</sup>

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4 Gladwell 2010

5 Smith 2011

6 Tande 2011

## 1.1 Citizen journalism

The case of Cameroon demonstrates two things: On the one hand, people used mobile phones rather than scarce internet connections to communicate with the outside world. On the other hand, the reporting on the Cameroonian protests was done by regular citizens. This refers to the SMS messages received and reposted on Twitter by Cameroonian expats as well as to aforementioned explanations provided by Dibussi Tande, a Cameroonian member of the blogosphere. Both the SMS messages as well as Tande's blog post found their way into news stories of traditional media outlets.

This type of civic reporting powered by new technologies has been dubbed *citizen journalism* (CJ). "Loosely speaking, [citizen journalism] is journalism produced by non-professionals."<sup>7</sup> It makes use of a range of tools such as mobile phones, cameras, computers, audio recorders as well as pen and paper. Citizen journalists usually report on issues traditional media do not cover either because they do not consider them newsworthy or because they simply do not have correspondents everywhere. Citizen journalists are potentially ubiquitous. Wherever there is a citizen with the right tools and access to the right channels and platforms there is a potential citizen journalist.

According to Solana Larsen, many citizen journalists do not really think of themselves in terms of journalism.<sup>8</sup> Larsen is the managing editor of Global Voices, a citizen journalism website that will be discussed in greater detail at a later stage. Her take on citizen journalism corresponds with what other members of the community have said: The majority of citizen journalists do not aspire to be journalists in the traditional sense. Reporting to them is not a matter of making a living as it is to professional journalists. Instead they are seeking a "venue of self-expression and [...] the tools and flexibility to rise to the challenge when the occasion calls for it."<sup>9</sup> Citizen journalism does not aim to do away with traditional journalism. There will always be a need for professional journalists, who spend a significant proportion of their time attending committee meetings or court hearings as well as doing investigative background reports on relevant issues. Citizen journalists do not question the prerogative of traditional (print and broadcast) media to inform the public and should therefore not be eyed with suspicion by their professional counterparts. Traditional journalism and citizen journalism rather complement each other. The latter has the potential to "break a story, and mainstream media can carry on with it, professionally. Both are vital in our contexts. You cannot exclude any of them."<sup>10</sup>

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7 Lang 2010, p. 19

8 Larsen 2010, p. 17

9 Ibid.

10 Rezwanul Islam, regional editor of Global Voices for South Asia, in a 2010 conference on citizen journalism. International Institute for Journalism, p. 29

Steve Outing, former senior editor at The Poynter Institute for Media Studies, presents an eleven-point plan for publishers and editors to incorporate citizen journalism into their websites, print and broadcast media.<sup>11</sup> The intertwining of citizen journalism with traditional media is where the true potential of this new way of reporting lies. If conventional media outlets realise that they can benefit from the views and insight provided by citizen journalists, greater attention will be accorded to the voices of people whose views and opinions were previously underrepresented in the general public. Citizen journalism is, therefore, of great significance to the international development context. By creating gateways and platforms for ordinary citizens to take part in the public debate it increases their levels of participation and empowerment, thereby contributing to a multi-faceted society marked by diversity.

## 1.2 Public service content

In the face of state broadcasters acting mostly as government mouth-pieces, high hopes have been pinned on new media and citizen journalism to help fulfil the information needs of the population. These hopes are not unfounded, seeing as it is in the nature of citizen journalism to take on the task of complementing traditional media output. Being part of a wider community, citizen journalists have an inherent knowledge of people's information needs and are, therefore, able to gear their own journalistic activities to the circumstances they encounter in their immediate environment. In a media environment that provides room for representatives of all hues of the political spectrum the contribution of citizen journalists may amount to little more than commentary. However, in a country where the government enforces a media blackout to cover up potential misdeeds against its own citizenry, citizen journalists may take over a whole range of information services usually rendered by public service broadcasters.

Media content as provided by public service broadcasters is usually measured against the standards of *public service content*. While the understanding of this term differs depending on the cultural preferences and particularities of every country, a brief review of the regulations for public service broadcasters in Germany, the UK and South Africa has shown that there is substantial common ground. Article 11 of the German Interstate Treaty on Broadcasting and Telemedia lays out the following requirements: "[P]ublic-service broadcasting corporations are to act as a medium and factor in the process of the formation of free individual and public opinion through the production and transmission of their offers,<sup>12</sup> thereby serving the democratic, social and cultural needs of society."<sup>13</sup> The article goes

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11 Outing 2011

12 With *offers* referring to broadcast programming and Internet services offered by German public broadcasters.

13 Association of State Media Authorities for Broadcasting in Germany 2010, pp. 11f.

on to stipulate that public service broadcasters must “provide a comprehensive overview of international, European, national and regional events in all major areas of life. In so doing, they shall further international understanding, European integration and the social cohesion on the federal and state levels. Their offers shall serve education, information, consultation<sup>14</sup> and entertainment.”<sup>15</sup> Further provisions are made for contributions on culture, the observance of principles of objectivity and impartiality as well as plurality of opinion and general balance in reporting.

The British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) is constitutionally established by the Royal Charter of the BBC. An accompanying Agreement sets out its public obligations in more detail. The provisions of the Agreement largely correspond with the principles governing public service broadcasting in Germany. However, they go beyond the scope of the German regulations and include provisions to promote the understanding of the UK political system as well as media literacy.<sup>16</sup> Furthermore, the Agreement is more comprehensive on the provision of educational content, demanding programming that “encourage[s] either formal or informal learning [...] and provides specialist educational content [...] to facilitate learning at all levels and for all ages.”<sup>17</sup> Subject areas covered by the BBC Agreement which are absent from the German Interstate Treaty on Broadcasting and Telemedia include: coverage of sport and minority sport, production of original content as well as appropriate provision in minority languages.<sup>18</sup>

Much of what is provided for in the South African Broadcasting Act No. 4 of 1999 coincides with what has already been stated regarding the German and British regulatory frameworks for public service broadcasters. The legislative text places particular emphasis on the availability of services in all eleven official languages of the country, thereby reflecting South Africa’s multilingual social fabric.<sup>19</sup> Another focus area of the Act is education. One of the remits of the South African Broadcasting Corporation (SABC) is the provision of educational programming, “both curriculum-based and informal educative topics from a wide range of social, political and economic issues, including, but not limited to, human rights, health, early childhood development, agriculture, culture, religion, justice and commerce.”<sup>20</sup> This may be seen as a possible response to perceived educational needs in South Africa, as neither of the two European legal texts includes such an array of educational content. Moreover, provisions are made “to offer a broad range of services targeting, particularly, children, women, the youth

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14 With *consultation* referring to the provision of advisory services offered by German public broadcasters

15 Association of State Media Authorities for Broadcasting in Germany 2010, p. 12

16 Article 6(2), Department for Culture 2006a, p. 3

17 Article 7, Department for Culture 2006a, p. 3

18 Articles 8(2), 9(1)(a) and 9(2), Department for Culture 2006a, p. 4

19 Article 10(a), Republic of South Africa 1999, p. 18

20 Article 10(e), Republic of South Africa 1999, p. 18

and the disabled.”<sup>21</sup> This requirement is also country-specific and while diverse programming that targets audiences of all social strata is encouraged in Germany as well as the UK, their regulations do not mention any particular groups as the South African Broadcasting Act does. Similarly, Broadcasting Act No. 4 of 1999 calls for a commitment to independence from government,<sup>22</sup> which can certainly be found in the subtext of some of the stipulations of the British and the German public service remits. However, only the South African legislator saw a need to expressly include this in the legal text.

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21 Article 10(g), Republic of South Africa 1999, p. 18

22 Article 10(d), Republic of South Africa 1999, p. 18

## Section two: *ICT penetration in Africa*

In order for new media platforms and citizen journalism to provide a share of public service content traditionally supplied by public service broadcasters, a number of infrastructure requirements have to be met. Where people have no access to media platforms due to a lack of electricity, the cost of electronic devices or scant mobile phone reception, the impact of any communication initiative will be limited.

The following section therefore analyses the penetration of mobile phones and the internet in Africa, both of which have been hailed as agents of change. A number of country profiles will provide a cross-section of the circumstances encountered in different parts of the continent.<sup>23</sup> The subsequent discussion of the data will highlight some general issues relevant to ICT penetration in Africa.

| ETHIOPIA                        | 2000   | 2008      | 2009      |
|---------------------------------|--------|-----------|-----------|
| Mobile phone subscriptions      | 17,757 | 1,954,527 | 4,051,703 |
| Internet user / 100 inhabitants | 0.02   | 0.45      | 0.54      |
| Fixed broadband subscriptions   | 0      | 1,496     | 3,498     |
| Mobile broadband subscriptions  | 0      | 0         | 84,773    |

|   |
|---|
| Population (2010): 88,013,491                     |
| Mobile min./day affordable at min. wage (2009): ? |
| Opera Mini user growth 12/2009 – 12/2010: ?       |
| Facebook users (08/2010): 146,020                 |

|   |
|---|
| Internet penetration (06/2010): 0,5 %       |
| SMSes/day affordable at min. wage (2009): ? |
| Opera Mini top 3 mobile sites (12/2010): ?  |
| Facebook penetration: 0.2 %                 |

Figure 1: ICT country profile Ethiopia

<sup>23</sup> The country profiles present a variety of data extracted from the following sources: Internet World Stats 2011a, Internet World Stats 2011b, International Telecommunication Union 2009d, International

| KENYA                           | 2000    | 2008       | 2009       |
|---------------------------------|---------|------------|------------|
| Mobile phone subscriptions      | 127,404 | 16,303,573 | 19,364,559 |
| Internet user / 100 inhabitants | 0.32    | 8.67       | 10.04      |
| Fixed broadband subscriptions   | 0       | 3,282      | 8,349      |
| Mobile broadband subscriptions  | 0       | 392,964    | 1,981,048  |

|  |
|--|
| Population (2010): 40,046,466                        |
| Mobile min./day affordable at min. wage (2009): 9.91 |
| Opera Mini user growth 12/2009 – 12/2010: 89.3 %     |
| Facebook users (08/2010): 864,760                    |

|   |
|---|
| Internet penetration (06/2010): 10 %  |
| SMSes/day affordable at min. wage (2009): 30                                  |
| Opera Mini top 3 mobile sites (12/2010): facebook.com, google.com, wapdam.com |
| Facebook penetration: 2,2 %   |

Figure 2: ICT country profile Kenya

| MOZAMBIQUE                      | 2000   | 2008      | 2009      |
|---------------------------------|--------|-----------|-----------|
| Mobile phone subscriptions      | 51,065 | 4,405,006 | 5,970,781 |
| Internet user / 100 inhabitants | 0.11   | 1.56      | 2.68      |
| Fixed broadband subscriptions   | 0      | 10,191    | 12,502    |
| Mobile broadband subscriptions  | 0      | 0         | 92,468    |

|   |
|---|
| Population (2010): 22,061,451                     |
| Mobile min./day affordable at min. wage (2009): ? |
| Opera Mini user growth 12/2009 – 12/2010: 77.0 %  |
| Facebook users (08/2010): 45,420                  |

|   |
|---|
| Internet penetration (06/2010): 2.8 %   |
| SMSes/day affordable at min. wage (2009): ?                                     |
| Opera Mini top 3 mobile sites (12/2010): google.com, waptrick.com, facebook.com |
| Facebook penetration: 0.2 %   |

Figure 3: ICT country profile Mozambique

Telecommunication Union 2009a, International Telecommunication Union 2009b, International Telecommunication Union 2009c, Song 2009, von Tetzchner 2010, von Tetzchner 2011b, von Tetzchner 2011a.

| NIGERIA                         | 2000   | 2008       | 2009       |
|---------------------------------|--------|------------|------------|
| Mobile phone subscriptions      | 30,000 | 62,988,492 | 74,518,264 |
| Internet user / 100 inhabitants | 0.06   | 15.86      | 28.43      |
| Fixed broadband subscriptions   | 0      | 67,776     | 81,958     |
| Mobile broadband subscriptions  | 0      | 3,671,494  | 13,862,750 |

|  |  |
|--|--|
| Population (2010): 152,217,341                       | Internet penetration (06/2010): 28.9 %                                       |
| Mobile min./day affordable at min. wage (2009): 6.76 | SMSes/day affordable at min. wage (2009): 17                                 |
| Opera Mini user growth 12/2009 – 12/2010: 140.4 %    | Opera Mini top 3 mobile sites (12/2010): facebook.com, google.com, yahoo.com |
| Facebook users (08/2010): 2,189,900                  | Facebook penetration: 2.0 %  |

Figure 4: ICT country profile Nigeria

| SOUTH AFRICA                    | 2000      | 2008       | 2009       |
|---------------------------------|-----------|------------|------------|
| Mobile phone subscriptions      | 8,339,000 | 45,000,000 | 46,436,000 |
| Internet user / 100 inhabitants | 5.35      | 8.43       | 8.82       |
| Fixed broadband subscriptions   | ?         | 426,000    | 481,000    |
| Mobile broadband subscriptions  | 0         | 2,471,259  | 5,271,825  |

|   |   |
|---|---|
| Population (2010): 49,109,107                         | Internet penetration (06/2010): 13.8 %                                      |
| Mobile min./day affordable at min. wage (2009): 26.41 | SMSes/day affordable at min. wage (2009): 99                                |
| Opera Mini user growth 12/2009 – 12/2010: 55.8 %      | Opera Mini top 3 mobile sites (12/2010): facebook.com, google.com, mxit.com |
| Facebook users (08/2010): 3,452,260                   | Facebook penetration: 7.0 %   |

Figure 5: ICT country profile South Africa



| UGANDA                          | 2000    | 2008      | 2009      |
|---------------------------------|---------|-----------|-----------|
| Mobile phone subscriptions      | 126,913 | 8,554,864 | 9,383,734 |
| Internet user / 100 inhabitants | 0.16    | 7.90      | 9.78      |
| Fixed broadband subscriptions   | 0       | 4,798     | 6,000     |
| Mobile broadband subscriptions  | 0       | 214,293   | 360,000   |

|  |   |
|--|---|
| Population (2010): 33,398,682                        | Internet penetration (06/2010): 9.6 %       |
| Mobile min./day affordable at min. wage (2009): 2.27 | SMSes/day affordable at min. wage (2009): ? |
| Opera Mini user growth 12/2009 – 12/2010: ?          | Opera Mini top 3 mobile sites (12/2010): ?  |
| Facebook users (08/2010): 196,000                    | Facebook penetration: 0.6 %                 |

Figure 6: ICT country profile Uganda

| ZAMBIA                          | 2000   | 2008      | 2009      |
|---------------------------------|--------|-----------|-----------|
| Mobile phone subscriptions      | 98,853 | 3,539,003 | 4,406,682 |
| Internet user / 100 inhabitants | 0.19   | 5.55      | 6.31      |
| Fixed broadband subscriptions   | 21     | 5,671     | 8,000     |
| Mobile broadband subscriptions  | 0      | 0         | 4,314     |

|  |  |
|--|--|
| Population (2010): 12,056,923                        | Internet penetration (06/2010): 6.8 %        |
| Mobile min./day affordable at min. wage (2009): 8.49 | SMSes/day affordable at min. wage (2009): 42 |
| Opera Mini user growth 12/2009 – 12/2010: ?          | Opera Mini top 3 mobile sites (12/2010): ?   |
| Facebook users (08/2010): 56,640                     | Facebook penetration: 2.0 %                  |

Figure 7: ICT country profile Zambia

One striking feature of the data presented in the above figures is the degree of variation between the individual countries. While countries like Nigeria or Kenya achieve significant penetration rates for both mobile phones as well as the internet, others like Ethiopia still have a lot of catching up to do. However, even countries with lower ICT penetration show substantial increases as compared to previous years. Mobile phone subscription more than doubled in Ethiopia from 2008 to 2009. Zambia has seen a major increase in overall internet users in the same period.

One important trend is the rise in mobility. Increasingly, users opt for mobile devices rather than traditional PCs or laptops to access the World Wide Web. The year 2009 marked the beginning of mobile broadband subscriptions in three of the African countries in the analysis at hand. Already mobile broadband subscriptions seem to have overtaken fixed broadband subscriptions in six of the seven countries. Opera Mini, a popular internet browser for mobile devices, shows significant unique-user growth, thereby confirming the trend towards mobile internet access. A substantial share of internet users seems to be active on Facebook, with the highest penetration rate of 7.0 per cent encountered in South Africa. Moreover, Facebook features among the top three websites accessed through Opera Mini which underlines the significance of social networking in the mobile internet context.

Notwithstanding the increase in netizens, there is significantly more access to mobile phones than to the internet. However, affordability of mobile phone communication varies. While South Africans earning minimum wage would be able to spend a day's pay on 26 minutes of mobile phone conversation or the equivalent of 99 SMSes per day, Ugandans would be lost for words at two call minutes or nine SMSes per day.

Call cost has been cited along with handset prices as one of the deterrents to even higher mobile phone penetration in Africa. "The majority of the African population who belong to low income groups cannot afford a mobile handset at all, let alone the ongoing costs of using one. Though alternatives such as community phones have partially solved this problem, it is expected that a reliable supply of affordable, cheap, basic handsets could drive aggressive growth of mobile services markets in Africa."<sup>24</sup> Mobile phone producers have tackled this issue with the launch of a series of low-cost handsets specifically designed for the African market, thereby making mobile telephony more attainable for wide swathes of the population. However, even reasonably-priced mobile devices will not increase the level of connectivity if markets are dominated by one or two providers that keep tariffs high. In a number of countries, a lack of regulation has led to steep interconnection rates<sup>25</sup> which adds to the strain on consumers and at the same time promotes

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24 Africa & Middle East Telecom Week 2008

25 The fees charged for calls made to users on other phone networks.

multiple SIM ownership.<sup>26</sup> Availability of SIM cards, on the other hand, appears to be another factor influencing mobile telephony. In the case of Ethiopia a report from 2010 notes that “[t]here have always been long queues to obtain SIM cards each time the ETC [Ethiopian Telecommunications Corporation] announces their availability. The upgrade of network often takes a year, thus leading to a long list of customers waiting for SIM cards.”<sup>27</sup>

Nonetheless, mobile phones are on the rise in Africa. “At the end of 2010 there were some 175 mobile operators with live operations”<sup>28</sup> 60 per cent of which are affiliated with major international telecommunications groups such as Bharti, Airtel, MTN or Vodafone. While conservative estimates put mobile phone penetration for the continent at 41 per cent for the end of 2010,<sup>29</sup> other sources report 508.6 million mobile subscribers and a penetration rate of 50 per cent for the third quarter of 2010. If the current growth of the market continued, Africa would achieve 100 per cent mobile penetration by the first quarter of 2014.<sup>30</sup>

Internet access is significantly more restricted than access to mobile telephony. Mirroring figures from the above country profiles, Africa lags behind the rest of the world when it comes to internet penetration rates. With an estimated population of 1.01 billion, Africa accounts for just over 110 million of the world’s 1.97 billion internet users.<sup>31</sup>

High cost is one of the principal factors influencing African internet penetration. In Africa, an internet connection with a connection speed of 100 Kbit/second costs around USD 110 per month, whereas a similar connection will be available for USD 20 in Europe.<sup>32</sup> Internet service providers cite infrastructure investment as a reason for maintaining their current price structure. However, little competition and out-dated business models relying on a small client base of governments, international corporations and NGOs rather than low-cost data plans with a potential to reach the masses are likely to be the real culprits of the present underdevelopment.<sup>33</sup>

Mobile internet providers targeting lower-income groups have revitalised the market and made the internet more widely available in recent years. “Mobile operators are offering competitive data plans and providing coverage for a vast stretch of the continent, renewing hope for a significant reduction in Internet access prices and wider connectivity on the continent.”<sup>34</sup> New undersea cables

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26 Habeenzu 2010, p. 25

27 Adam 2010, pp. 20f.

28 Africa & Middle East Telecom Week 2011

29 MobileMonday 2011, p. 19

30 Africa & Middle East Telecom Week 2011

31 Internet World Stats 2011b. Also: Hersman 2006

32 Schulz 2011, p. 31

33 Ibid.

34 MobileMonday 2011, p. 22

linking up the continent with other parts of the world are also likely to generate a greater level of competition and thereby bring down prices for consumers in the long run.

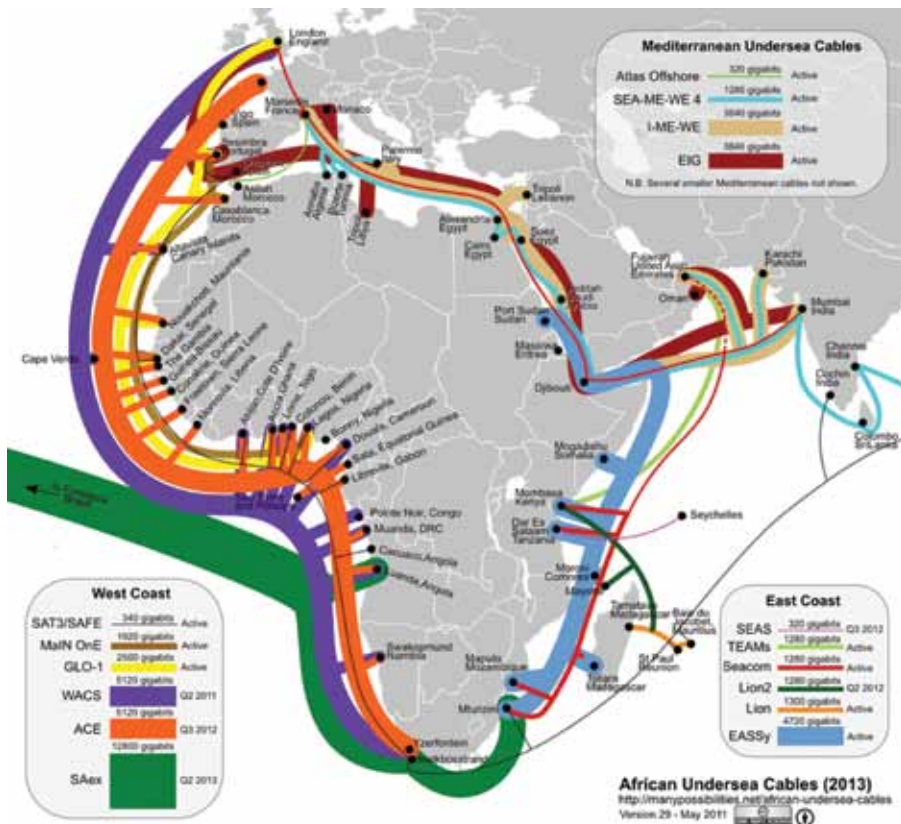


Figure 8: African undersea cables <sup>35</sup>

Other factors contributing to low access and usage of the internet include high prices of computers, a high rate of illiteracy, language barriers, a lack of awareness and poor coverage of the electricity network at household level.<sup>36</sup>

Since Africa is still a long way from a right to free internet access as demanded by some proponents of ICT for development,<sup>37</sup> mobile phones have been promoted as a viable alternative to reach out to both urban and rural populations.<sup>38</sup>

35 Song 2011  
 36 Mabila et al. 2010, p. 15  
 37 Beerfeltz 2010, p. 11  
 38 Watters 2010

One of the lessons drawn from aforementioned SDC working paper is that “[p]ersonal computers (PCs) and [the] Internet are mainly not suitable for the poor” and that “the poor are reached by and communicate themselves via radio and mobile.”<sup>39</sup> However, if SMS and mobile phones are to be used in the international development context, “one has to look carefully at whether the mobile really delivers added value, or whether other means benefit the cause more. A theatre group might have more impact on the issue of HIV/AIDS than an SMS campaign.”<sup>40</sup> Creativity is key and all trends in mobile activism “will rely not so much on technology, but much more on the activists’ ideas for how to use mobile phones as a means of activism and on a critical mass of people participating.”<sup>41</sup> The following section will analyse some of these creative approaches to mobile activism and citizen journalism both in the context of mobile telephony as well as the internet.

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39 Kalas, Spurk 2011, p. 14

40 Kreutz 2010, p. 27

41 Kreutz 2010, p. 18

## Section three: *New media platforms - case studies*

This section aims to provide insight into a number of new media platforms created in recent years. If public service content is content that “encourage[s] either formal or informal learning”<sup>42</sup> and provides “fair and unbiased coverage, impartiality, balance and independence from government,”<sup>43</sup> all of the case studies presented on the following pages may be considered relevant to public service content.

The case studies have been grouped according to the kind of information technology they make use of, resulting in two major categories: mobile phone-based platforms and internet-based platforms. Hybrid platforms based on both mobile phones as well as the internet have been assigned to the mobile phone category for the sake of convenience.

The focus is on African case studies that tap into people’s potential as citizen journalists, boosting their levels of participation and lending a voice to ordinary citizens. However, where appropriate, reference may be made to relevant initiatives from other topical and geographical contexts.

### 3.1 Mobile phone-based case studies

#### 3.1.1 *lindaba Ziyafika – The news is coming*

*lindaba Ziyafika* is a project run by the Rhodes University in Grahamstown and South Africa’s oldest independent newspaper, *Grocott’s Mail*. *lindaba Ziyafika* is isiXhosa for *The news is coming*. The project has been described as having a two-pronged approach:<sup>44</sup> On the one hand, it promotes the use of mobile phones to interact with the community of Grahamstown and involve local residents in the production of news. On the other hand, the project also aims to equip media producers so they can “fully utilise this media.”<sup>45</sup>

To this end, the project is developing a body of knowledge about mobile phones as media platforms. This includes information on how to use mobile phones to receive news via SMS as well as how to contribute in the form of text messages and pictures taken with mobile phone cameras. Additionally, the project provides basic training to local residents so as to enable them to participate in the project and send in news stories themselves. Texts and other kinds of contributions from

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42 Article 7, Department for Culture 2006a, p. 3

43 Article 10(d), Republic of South Africa 1999, p. 18

44 Lang 2010, p. 19

45 *Ibid.*

citizen journalist are gathered centrally by Grocott's Mail and published both on their website as well as in the newspaper itself. The experience gained in the context of the trainings provided at Grocott's Mail's offices is condensed into a training manual that is aimed to serve as a guideline for future training activities both in Grahamstown as well as in other communities.

Another central element of *lindaba Ziyafika* is the development and deployment of an open source content management system (CMS) for newspapers "enabling the publication and [its] website to incrementally include more citizen journalism submissions and more 'audience'/'media' interaction via cell phone."<sup>46</sup> NiKA, the CMS developed within the framework of *lindaba Ziyafika*, is a Microsoft Windows-based application which allows editors to create news stories, import them from other applications, add headlines, pictures and captions and archive stories as well as retrieve earlier versions of stories currently in progress. One important feature of NiKA is its "ability to receive text messages sent from cell phones directly to NiKA, [...] allowing you to send SMS news alerts and headlines to subscribers."<sup>47</sup> NiKA therefore not only enables users to participate in creating news stories, but it also allows them to keep track of the latest developments by sending out news headlines via text message.

The project is funded by the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation. Steven Lang, editor of Grocott's Mail, points out that one of the results of the implementation of *lindaba Ziyafika* has been a closer relationship with the readership of the newspaper.<sup>48</sup> Moreover, citizen journalists in Grahamstown have been able to put some degree of pressure on municipal authorities by providing first-hand information to the local newspaper on stories and issues directly concerning the surrounding community.

### **3.1.2 Voices of Africa**

The Voices of Africa Media Foundation is a media training organisation based in the Netherlands. Voices of Africa trains mobile reporters across the African continent in the use of mobile phones for citizen journalism. These mobile reporters cover events and issues in their immediate environment, producing short video clips and news stories which are then published on the project's website. Voices of Africa collaborates with a number of partner organisations on the ground in order to identify suitable citizen journalists. So far mobile reporters have been trained in Cameroon, Ghana, Kenya, Tanzania, South Africa and Uganda.<sup>49</sup> The project is funded by the Liberty Foundation and Hivos Linkis. Zonzoo, a company that has specialised in second-hand mobile phones, supplies Voices of Africa with camera phones for their video reporters.

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46 *lindaba Ziyafika* 2011 a

47 *lindaba Ziyafika* 2011 b

48 Lang 2010, p. 20

49 Voices of Africa Media Foundation 2011

As a result of the work done by the project, international users of Voicesofafrica.com get to gain insight into the lives of ordinary Africans. Stories range from a day in the life of Joshua, a scrap metal collector in Accra, to heavy rains that damaged a school in Buhemba, Tanzania.<sup>50</sup> These are news stories which probably did not get a lot of attention from major news outlets. Thanks to Voices of Africa some of these stories at least get a chance of being picked up by a specialised audience or possibly even bigger players in the market.

### 3.1.3 FrontlineSMS, Kubatana and Freedom Fone

FrontlineSMS is a piece of software developed by Ken Banks of international communications consultancy kiwanja.net, which provides a platform for users to send out group text messages and receive replies from subscribers. It is essentially a two-way group messaging centre that requires nothing more than a desktop or laptop computer, a mobile phone and a cable to connect the two. Once FrontlineSMS is set up, the administrator is able to send out text messages to a range of subscribers. Subscribers, in turn, are able to respond to messages via SMS and thereby engage in a two-way communication process.

FrontlineSMS does not require an internet connection for either the administrator or the subscribers which means it can be deployed in rural areas of Africa where internet access is still rather limited. The application has proven to be a powerful tool for development in a variety of contexts ranging from health issues to community radio stations or the provision of legal advice and resources.<sup>51</sup> Programmers are constantly incorporating new features and bug fixes, thereby providing localised solutions geared to local needs.<sup>52</sup>



Figure 9: SendConsole screen – compilation and sending of group messages<sup>53</sup>

50 Nuvor 2011, Jacob 2011

51 FrontlineSMS 2011b

52 FrontlineSMS 2011a

53 Kiwanja 2006



Kubatana in Zimbabwe is one of the organisations that use FrontlineSMS to communicate with the public at large. While one of the core activities of the organisation consists in updating and maintaining its internet library with more than 18,400 articles and reports about the Zimbabwean civil society,<sup>54</sup> it also sends out information via text messages. "Kubatana uses SMS to tell subscribers about public events or other upcoming meetings, encourage specific advocacy actions, offer print materials or videos via post, or to share news flashes such as election results."<sup>55</sup> Moreover, subscribers can respond to the messages received by Kubatana, ask questions or simply use the service as a platform to report on events and developments in their neighbourhoods. Subscriber messages may then be re-sent to other subscribers or posted on the Kubatana Blog. Atwood reports 7,500 subscribers for 2010 most of whom are based in Zimbabwe.<sup>56</sup>

Kubatana also offers Freedom Fone,<sup>57</sup> an application that provides information to callers with the help of an interactive voice response menu. Upon calling users are presented with a variety of areas of interest which they can choose from by pressing numbers on their mobile or fixed-line phones.<sup>58</sup> Users are eventually guided to a short audio clip with information on the desired subject. Freedom Fone is similar to FrontlineSMS in that it is essentially a meta-application which organisations of various backgrounds can download and use for their own purposes. A content management system allows administrators to feed the application with audio files, creating their own menus and structures for users to navigate through. Due to its customisation features, Freedom Fone has the potential to be used by a variety of language groups simply by pressing a number for the appropriate language option. In addition, users can leave voice messages with questions or feedback on the audio content of the platform.

If fed with the right content (and possibly in combination with a toll-free number), Freedom Fone may be suited to deliver public service content to a much wider audience than conventional mass media. Freedom Fone does not require a TV/radio set and, unlike SMS platforms, it does not require a certain level of literacy on the part of the user. As long as citizens have access to mobile phones, which they increasingly do, and electricity to charge their phones, Freedom Fone can be used by practically anybody. Atwood concludes that "[t]he simple nature of the user interface, the open nature of telecommunications and the low equipment requirements of the system make it a more affordable and accessible option than starting a radio station or buying an hour of radio airtime each week to communicate an organisation's message."<sup>59</sup>

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54 Kubatana 2011

55 Atwood 2010, p. 89

56 Atwood 2010, p. 89

57 Freedom Fone 2011

58 Along the lines of customer care hotlines: Press 1 for information on our products. Press 2 for support etc

59 Freedom Fone 2011, p. 98

### 3.1.4 Ushahidi

Ushahidi is a crisis mapping platform created in the wake of the Kenyan post-election unrest in 2008. When riots broke out, Ushahidi (Kiswahili for testimony) was set up by Kenyan bloggers to bear witness to incidents of violence and visualise them on a map using popular web mapping service Google Maps.<sup>60</sup>

The platform is essentially a mash-up of a number of different applications. Incident reports may be sent in using mobile phones, computers or any other device with a digital data connection. In Kenya, Ushahidi provided invaluable information both to locals as well as to external aid organisations that used the platform to determine focus areas for their coordinated efforts.

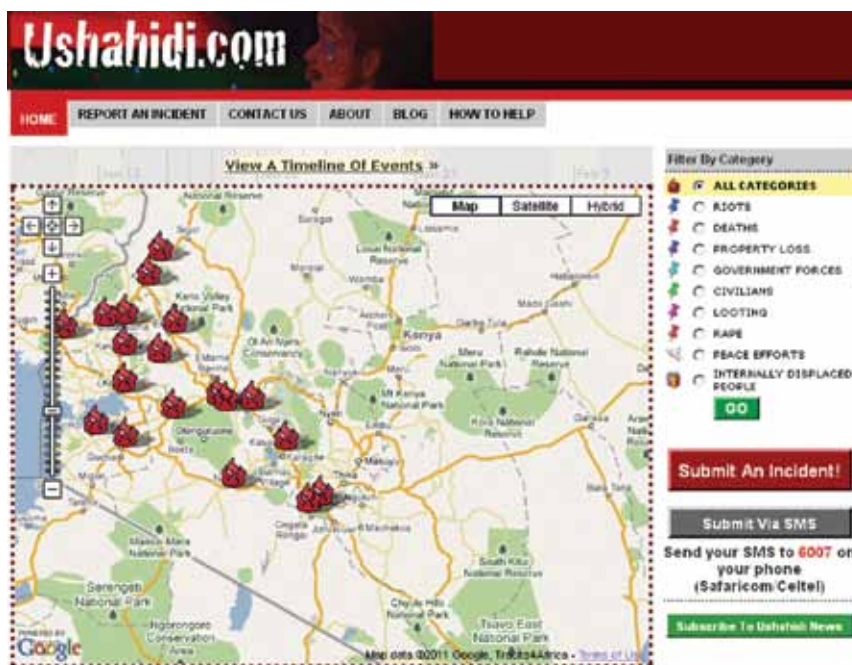


Figure 10: Original Ushahidi deployment for Kenya<sup>61</sup>

Soon after its deployment in Kenya, Ushahidi was used to track xenophobic violence in South Africa. Since then Ushahidi has been deployed in a variety of settings and countries around the globe, including the 2010 earthquakes in Haiti and Chile, the winter storms in Washington D.C. and the recent earth quakes in New Zealand and Japan.<sup>62</sup>

60 Ushahidi 2011

61 Ushahidi 2008

62 Crisis Camp NZ 2011, Sinsai 2011

The core components of Ushahidi are open source which adds to their adaptability to the specific circumstances encountered in the individual crisis situations. Also, the fact that a vast number of programmers is involved in constantly updating the software and adding new components and features to it has led to the development of a number of new applications and services which have been integrated into Ushahidi. The platform is now equipped with a tool that scans and verifies real-time data in order to make the processing of the vast amounts of information pouring in in a crisis situation easier. Moreover, Ushahidi deployments can now be run and administered through the Ushahidi website which speeds up the process of setting up a deployment as well as abolishes the need to purchase own web space.

Despite its compatibility with a series of internet applications Ushahidi does, in fact, not require an internet connection when combined with an SMS hub such as FrontlineSMS. Text messages sent in by citizens can still be mapped (albeit not presented in a visual manner) and an alert system allows subscribers “to receive either an email or SMS when an incident is reported in a specified area.”<sup>63</sup> This makes the platform entirely independent of the World Wide Web and more suited to the conditions in many parts of the African continent.

### **3.1.5 Question Box**

Question Box is a simple telephone intercom service. Run by California-based NGO Open Mind, the service was first introduced in a series of rural villages in India in 2007. Question Box essentially consists of a large tin with a phone inside. Users with questions on just about any topic can press a button to get connected to an operator who speaks their language and is computer literate. Once the question is posed, the operator looks up the answer on the internet and is able to respond in a matter of seconds.<sup>64</sup>

On a local level, Question Box does not require more than mobile phone coverage, a simple mobile telephone and a power supply. Coupled with solar technology Question Box can be deployed practically anywhere. The remote operators, on the other hand, need to have access to a computer with an internet connection if they want to look up information online. However, the service may also be combined with a local computer database that does not require any kind of internet access. Additionally, there is no reason why the operator could not be based in one of the well-connected urban centres of the developing world supporting communities thousands of miles away. As long as users and operators speak the same language and the mobile phone network provides a stable connection there are no conceivable obstacles to this type of service.

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63 Goldstein, Rotich 2010, p. 132

64 Question Box 2011

One advantage of Question Box is that it does not require literacy or information technology skills on the part of the user. Information is literally provided at the push of a button. Also, users do not have to be guided through abstract audio navigation menus in order to get to the desired piece of information. They can rather interact with somebody who speaks their own language, even dialect, which makes for fewer communication barriers and a more natural communication process.

After successful implementation in India, Question Box was introduced in Uganda in 2009.<sup>65</sup> Unlike its Asian counterpart, the service in Uganda does not operate with actual tin boxes. Instead there are question box workers with mobile phones on the ground, who call a hotline on behalf of the users. Once the question has been answered the workers are compensated with mobile phone airtime.

The project has received funds from the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation. In the long run, profitability will decide whether Question Box will continue to have success in Asia and Africa. While users could be asked to make financial contributions upon using the service, another option would be the reassignment of funds traditionally allocated to the production of public service programming. Question Box has the potential to operate on only a fraction of the budget needed for a TV or radio production. Rethinking media priorities and allowing new media platforms to substitute services which have not managed to deliver desired results may play a crucial role in bringing about change in the developing world.

### **3.1.6 MXit**

MXit is a free instant messaging application for mobile phones created in South Africa in 2003. Initially used as a substitute for expensive text messages, the service has turned into Africa's largest social network claiming to have reached "27 million subscribers, most of them South African, and [...] adding 40,000 more every day."<sup>66</sup> The application is particularly appealing because it is Java-based and therefore works on a range of mobile phones regardless of the phone brand and requiring only a basic phone rather than expensive smartphones to operate. Also, MXit connects to other chat applications such as Windows Live Messenger, ICQ, Google Talk, AIM and Facebook, which adds to the appeal because users can simultaneously chat to contacts on mobile phones as well as users on the internet. A series of chat rooms allows MXit users to socialise and meet new people. While MXit charges for chat room communication, traditional one-on-one messaging is free of charge.

MXit has now implemented a range of services such as MXit Music to promote local bands.<sup>67</sup> After registration users can browse through an archive and preview songs. A fee is payable upon downloading a complete track. Another service called

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65 Nixon 2009

66 Web Addicts 2010

67 MXit Music 2011

MXit Xchange provides a platform for users to place classified ads which can be viewed both on mobile phones as well as internet-enabled computers.<sup>68</sup>

While MXit is a platform primarily used for interpersonal communication purposes, a range of practical applications are imaginable for the development context. MXit has already proved to be a valuable platform for education. During a teacher strike in South Africa in September 2010, volunteers helped students prepare for exams harnessing the enormous user base of MXit. Surely, there is room for more permanent services geared towards education or human rights-related needs. Creativity is key, as has been pointed out before.

### **3.1.7 Additional studies and resources**

Apart from above-mentioned case studies, there are a variety of mobile phone-based platforms which have been created in response to certain economic, agricultural or health needs.<sup>69</sup> Nokia, for instance, has implemented a software suite by the name of Nokia Life Tools on a number of its mobile phones in India. Users can navigate through a visual interface and obtain information on core topics of agriculture and education. Particularly rural communities without internet access can benefit from this service, as Nokia Life Tools uses SMS to communicate with Nokia's information database. Farmers can find out about commodity prices without having to travel to faraway markets, thereby saving time and money.<sup>70</sup> In a similar fashion, text-based Google Trader allows Ugandan farmers to find sellers or buyers for their produce and commodities. "In their first five weeks [the] services received a total of more than [one million] queries."<sup>71</sup> Google Trader has now been expanded to Ghana.<sup>72</sup>

For further case studies and research Kiwanja provides an excellent database searchable by geographical area and project category complete with project descriptions and screen shots.<sup>73</sup>

## **3.2 Internet-based case studies**

As with the mobile phone-based case studies the case studies in this section will focus primarily on African platforms. Important international websites and services such as Twitter, Facebook, Wikipedia and YouTube will therefore be set aside for the time being. However, initiatives from other geographical contexts will be mentioned where appropriate in order to contextualise the African efforts.

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68 MXit Xchange 2010

69 The Economist 2009

70 Nokia 2008, Nokia Conversations 2009

71 The Economist 2009

72 Cole 2010

73 Kiwanja 2011

### 3.2.1 Afrigator and other aggregators

Afrigator is a blog directory which collects blogs and blog posts from across the African continent. Users create a profile on Afrigator and register their blogs. Whenever they publish a new blog post on their own blog, this post automatically appears in a news feed on Afrigator. Other users can then read the blog post and comment on it.<sup>74</sup>

Blogs are generally categorised by country and topic. Readers can select their preferred country or topic and view a personalised news feed. South Africa is currently the country with the most registered blogs (10,532), followed by Nigeria (1,494) and Kenya (869).<sup>75</sup>

Afrigator also features a micro-blogging service along the lines of Twitter. Gatorpeeps allows users to post quick links and updates for other users or visitors of the website to read and follow. However, unlike Twitter, Gatorpeeps does not seem to have a character limit.<sup>76</sup>

Similar blog aggregators and micro-blogging websites can be found for individual countries as well. Naijapulse provides one such platform for Nigerian micro-bloggers.<sup>77</sup> While the site creates an environment for Nigerian users to express themselves within the context of their own country, the service is also able to connect to more international platforms like Facebook and Twitter.<sup>78</sup>

The Kenyan Blogs Webring is similar to Afrigator and geared to bloggers from Kenya.<sup>79</sup> Registered user blogs are listed on a separate page along with the latest blog posts.<sup>80</sup> Readers can then access these blogs and comment on blog posts.

Twibes is a platform which builds on the micro-blogging website Twitter. Twibes essentially adds group functionality to Twitter. While Twitter users have to build up a network of friends and *interesting people* whom they want to follow, on Twibes they can simply join a group and use their Twitter accounts to tweet updates to a whole group of people interested in similar topics or geographical areas.<sup>81</sup> There is great potential in a service like this, since it makes finding like-minded people easier and increases a user's followership. One specialised group by the name of Afritweets, for instance, tweets on African affairs.<sup>82</sup> With the help of localised groups residents of a particular area could potentially update each other about

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74 Afrigator 2011a

75 Afrigator 2011b

76 Gatorpeeps 2011

77 NaijaPulse

78 Hersman 2009

79 KenyaUnlimited 2011b

80 KenyaUnlimited 2011a

81 Twibes 2011b

82 Twibes 2011a

on-going events. Similarly, Twibes could be used for group communication and instant updates could be sent out to a whole group of people briefing them on educational or other development-related content.

### **3.2.2 Global Voices**

Global Voices is an internet platform aiming at precisely that: boosting blogs around the world and thereby making citizen journalists heard. The website has focused on compiling reports from blogs and citizen media with particular emphasis on developing countries and marginalised voices within them.

Founded in 2005 in the Netherlands, Global Voices has now built up a community of over 300 bloggers and translators who scout the World Wide Web for relevant news stories and translate them into other languages so as to make them accessible to a wider audience.<sup>83</sup> While the website started off in English only, Global Voices can now be enjoyed in 18 different languages. All the translation work is done by volunteers from the respective language communities.

Blog posts and other entries are classed according to country and topic. Topical categories are varied and range from arts and culture to gender, human rights, media and politics. By delving into the news stories on Global Voices, readers gain access to a parallel news reality, governed by individuals rather than news corporations. Global Voices is a rich and refreshing repository of alternative views and accounts, providing a different take on current events.

In addition, Global Voices started an advocacy campaign to lend support to the blogger community in the developing world. Apart from raising awareness of freedom of speech on the internet, Global Voices Advocacy also compiles guide books and manuals on anonymous blogging.<sup>84</sup> Another project pursued within the framework of the advocacy campaign is Threatened Voices,<sup>85</sup> a collaborative mapping project which aims to track incidents of violence or threats against bloggers. Incidents can be accessed through a map and there is a profile for each of the cases, which provides context and links to support campaigns.

In addition, Global Voices provides a financial support scheme by the name of Rising Voices. Blogging projects can enter a competition and apply for funding in the form of micro grants ranging from USD 1,000 to USD 5,000.<sup>86</sup> 22 blogging projects have received funds so far 15 of which are still alive.<sup>87</sup> Needless to say the project database provides an excellent resource for innovative citizen journalism initiatives.

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83 Global Voices 2010

84 Global Voices Advocacy 2009. A similar assortment of tools for citizen journalism can be found at SourceWatch 2010.

85 Threatened Voices 2011

86 Rising Voices 2011

87 Larsen 2010, p. 14

### 3.2.3 Video-sharing websites

YouTube, Vimeo and Co. have created exciting new possibilities for citizen journalists to share video content with internet users around the globe. In South Africa, two video hosting services have gained popularity in recent years. One of them is Myvideo.co.za. The website features user-generated content along with the possibility to create channels other users can subscribe to. Channels are sorted by topic and are being used by some high profile South African newspapers to publish content.<sup>88</sup> Zoopy.com, a former South African video-sharing website, recently repositioned itself and abandoned all user-generated content in favour of a mobile video platform which now supplies mobile broadband users with infotainment news clips.<sup>89</sup> Previously, Zoopy had attracted a number of high-profile users such as Cape Town's mayor Helen Zille.<sup>90</sup>

### 3.2.4 Gay Rights Uganda

Gay Rights Uganda is an example of a social activism initiative gone online. The website compiles articles about the plight of the lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) community in Uganda.<sup>91</sup> It is simple, but functional and demonstrates that a small blog can have a hand in raising awareness of the lives of people living on the margins of society.

Not every platform needs complicated multimedia features in order to bring across its message. A straightforward design and easy navigability may be much more conducive to a cause than implementing bandwidth-hungry web applications and video clips. In the case of Gay Rights Uganda the internet simply serves as a medium to promote a cause. Blogs written by average people across the African continent as the ones compiled and posted on Afrigator or this particular one advocating the rights of the gay community can provide valuable insight into relevant issues on the ground. They should therefore not be disregarded because of their size, the number of contributors involved in their production or the size of their audiences. Blogs afford citizens the possibility to express themselves, often in a way they would not be able to in reality. Making voices heard has to be the ultimate goal of all communication initiatives.

### 3.2.5 African social bookmarking services

Social bookmarking has become a fashionable way of recommending news stories or simply casting a vote on whether a news item, video, picture or blog is worth reading/viewing or not. International platforms such as reddit or Digg have inspired a number of African spin-offs like South African Muti.co.za and Laaik.it. Laaikit organises user-added content on its homepage according to the level of popularity this content has achieved with other users. By *laaiking* or *dislaaiking*

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88 MyVideo 2011

89 MyBroadband.co.za 2011

90 Zoopy 2008

91 Gay Rights Uganda 2011



content, users can influence where an item is placed on the website.<sup>92</sup> Muti works in a similar way only without the dislike function.<sup>93</sup>

A brief review of Laaikit and Muti showed that both platforms appear to have serious issues with spam posts. While spam is usually filtered out quickly thanks to the user-driven voting system, judging from their homepages, the two South African bookmarking sites did not seem to be able to cope with the amount of commercial advertising published through their web portals. One possible explanation is a relatively small user base. In order for irrelevant posts to disappear from the top spots of popularity rankings enough users need to participate in the voting process. AddThis, the world's largest content sharing platform, currently lists 342 sharing services for the internet.<sup>94</sup> The added benefit of having another social bookmarking platform in this context, albeit a localised one, is not entirely clear.

### 3.2.6 Commercial initiatives

Apart from the many NGO-based initiatives some of which have been presented in the previous pages, there is a host of commercial examples of companies harnessing the potential of citizen journalism.

AllVoices is one of these examples. The website's claim is: "Start reporting, reach millions and make money."<sup>95</sup> News stories posted on AllVoices can be commented on and added to by any member of the community. This results in complex posts with vast amounts of videos and pictures added by many different citizen journalists. Community members are remunerated on the basis of their contributions and some of the top earners of the website allegedly receive up to USD 2,000 a month.<sup>96</sup> Users are paid on the basis of a scoring system which takes into account their general reputation within the community, their level of participation on Allvoices and their enthusiasm in promoting and reposting their own Allvoices reports on other social platforms such as Twitter and Facebook. Revenue for individual users varies depending on their personal score as well as on page views their reports attract. Allvoices pays from USD 1 to USD 3 per 1,000 page views.<sup>97</sup>

Online search giant Yahoo has built up the Yahoo Contributor Network. Writers, photographers and videographers gain access to Yahoo's main platform and subsidiary websites and receive payment through up-front payments, exclusive assignments and performance bonuses based on the traffic their work achieves.<sup>98</sup>

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92 Laaikit 2008

93 Muti 2011

94 AddThis 2011

95 Allvoices 2011b

96 Meyer 2010, p.23

97 Allvoices 2011a

98 Yahoo Contributor Network 2011

There is an assignment desk which users can browse for opportunities to create content for Yahoo or Yahoo-related sites. Up-front payments for these assignments range from USD 2 to USD 25. Users can also submit own topic choices if the assignments provided by Yahoo do not appeal to them. Yahoo editors review the content submitted by users and may then make an offer for publication typically ranging from USD 2 to USD 15. In addition, users can benefit from performance payments which “vary by website, and are based on a wide variety of factors unique to each individual site.”<sup>99</sup> Associated Content, one of Yahoo’s sub-platforms boasts to be “[t]he world’s largest source of community-created content” with content ranging from articles and videos to audio clips and slide shows.<sup>100</sup>

Other platforms have focussed on images and videos. Fizwoz, for instance, provides a space to upload photos and video clips which potential buyers can browse through. Content is then auctioned off and sold to the highest bidder. The original owner of the content receives 60 per cent of the auction price.<sup>101</sup> Professional media outlets can also post assignments having a whole army of citizen journalists at their disposal and then paying the one whose work they like best.<sup>102</sup> Similar services and payment schemes are offered by Demotix, Tvtype and Citizenside.<sup>103</sup>

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99 Ibid.

100 Associated Content 2011

101 Fizwoz 2011b

102 Fizwoz 2011a

103 Demotix 2011, Tvtype 2011, Citizenside 2010

## Section four: *Citizen journalism and sustainability*

Sustainability is, of course, the breaking point of any development initiative. Many of the above case studies have achieved remarkable results thanks to some degree of financial backing from western development agencies. Without these international players a number of ideas would certainly not have translated into real-life results.

Meyer points out that it is important not to forget about failed examples.<sup>104</sup> One of these examples is Reporter.co.za, a South African platform launched in 2006 amidst cheers from the citizen journalism community. Avusa, a media group with important newspaper titles such as The Sunday Times, The Sowetan, The Herald and The Dispatch, provided financial support and know-how to the initiative. Professional journalists were involved in the platform from the very beginning and citizen journalists received a nominal fee for their contributions. The website, however, did not last very long. "After initial success, the owners of the group could not find a workable business model."<sup>105</sup>

OhmyNews, an English-language citizen journalism portal from South Korea shared a similar fate. Founded in 2000, the website was based on community contributions and supported by professional editing staff.<sup>106</sup> Writers would receive USD 2 per news story and bonuses were paid out for particularly successful stories. The website's main source of revenue was advertising which it had to compete for with regular publications and news websites. After ten years in business, OhmyNews had to face up to its financial deficit and do a re-set in September 2010. It is now a forum for the discussion of citizen journalism.<sup>107</sup>

Commercial models like Yahoo's Contributor Network might provide one way out of the sustainability conundrum. However, it is important not to trade the ideal of boosting previously unheard voices and stories for economic success. It is in the nature of private enterprises to prefer content which attracts mass audiences and provides good opportunities for advertising revenue. Such content, however, does not necessarily meet the standards of public service content.

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104 Meyer 2010, p.26

105 Lang 2010, p. 21

106 Woyke 2009

107 OhmyNews 2011

It has been hinted that another form of sustainability may involve redirecting funds traditionally reserved for TV and radio broadcasts to other public service content-related initiatives. If contemporary mainstream media serve but an urban minority with access to the required infrastructure, perhaps it is time to reconsider. Governments, development agencies and other stakeholders should follow the trend in ICT penetration rather than trying to start their own trend wiring an entire continent. Diverse regional and social contexts around the globe call for a different breed of information media altogether; one which allows for personalised information geared to individuals, not an unknown mass whose needs and issues scholars and planners can only speculate about.

## Section five: *Ethics and quality standards*

Another issue frequently raised in the context of citizen journalism is the question of ethics and quality control. The 2010 riots in Mozambique which left 13 people dead and scores injured were coordinated using simple text messages. While it is unclear whether the SMSes called for peaceful protest or actually advocated the use of violence, they were certainly successful in mobilising vast numbers of citizens. In response to the protests state authorities ordered the shutdown of all text messaging services provoking a public outcry from media freedom advocacy groups.<sup>108</sup>

In their study about alternative video-hosting platforms, Machill and Zenker recommend a four-pronged approach for media policy to tackle the issue of inappropriate or undesirable content. According to their analysis, media policy should strive to sensitise the general public, promote the development of technical solutions to filter out pornographic and other inappropriate content, empower users by providing the possibility to flag content, and act as a *Sword of Damocles* in case platforms should not manage to impose self-regulation measures themselves.<sup>109</sup> Some of these recommendations are only applicable to platforms edited and controlled by single entities. Sensitising the public and promoting media literacy, however, may be viable strategies even in contexts where there is no one responsible company or organisation, but a heterogeneous community of users without any discernible hierarchy or structure. Measures suited to the promotion of media literacy could include information campaigns about the make-up and modus operandi of media corporations as well as raising awareness of the power and impact of media messages. These measures are likely to be more effective if implemented at an early age. Media literacy could be incorporated into curriculums, and after-school programmes could contribute to consolidating newly acquired skills. All of these measures create an opportunity for partnerships with the relevant civil society organisations. They should have an active role in promoting media literacy.

Empowering users by providing the necessary tools to report bad practices is another way of activating the self-cleaning mechanisms of new media platforms. Communities are made up of individuals with personal values and each and every one of these users has a hand in building their own community.

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108 News24 2009

109 Machill, Zenker 2007, pp. 23ff.

Citizen journalism, as Maunganidze summarises, is basically impossible to control because of the sheer number of citizen journalists.<sup>110</sup> Media literate readers should always ask themselves whether a story published in citizen media reflects all aspects of the subject or not. Similarly, traditional media should not be trusted to always deliver the complete truth. Readers who are aware of the fallibility of journalists and citizen journalists alike will double check contentious news stories regardless of where they originate from. In the case of citizen journalism they have the possibility to respond to what has been posted, thereby contributing themselves and adding to the bigger picture. As a consequence, citizen journalists with a bad reputation will lose followers along with credibility. In the words of Daoud Kuttab, founder and director of AmmanNet, the first internet-based radio station in the Arab world: "Different parties do get involved and you cannot expect a lot of self-regulation in such a situation. But I think that people do figure out who is credible, who is a big liar, who has an agenda."<sup>111</sup>

Experience has taught us that traditional media outlets are not immune against hate speech and propaganda. Radio Rwanda proved to be a horrific tool for inciting violence against Tutsis during the Rwandan genocide. Similarly, Kenyan media stations have been accused of fuelling ethnic conflict in the post-election violence that shook the country in 2008.<sup>112</sup> Codes of ethics and professional standards were not able to act as a deterrent in these cases. The case of citizen journalism is even more complicated, because most citizen journalists are not even aware of professional codes of ethics and will continue to publish content whether there is a code of ethics or not. Freedom of expression, however, is a fundamental human right at the core of democracy. Censoring citizen journalists could turn into a serious infringement on that right. Thus, it appears that awareness-raising and promoting media literacy among ordinary citizens are the best tools in the fight for balance and fairness in citizen journalism, as it lies in the nature of citizen journalism that ordinary citizens are also potential citizen journalists. The more people participate in a platform, the more likely it is that among these people there will be users who uphold and subscribe to morals and values generally accepted by society at large. Given the right tools, users of new media platforms are likely to flag unethical content, comment on it negatively or simply ignore it, thus putting those who abuse the medium in their place. With this approach, the ethical issues of citizen journalism would be addressed by the media consumers themselves rather than by a single entity. This would also serve to eliminate the potential threat to freedom of expression posed by institutionalised monitoring and supervising.

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110 Maunganidze 2011, p. 30

111 Daoud Kuttab in a 2010 conference on citizen journalism. International Institute for Journalism, p. 32

112 BBC NEWS 2008

## Section six: *The role of development co-operation*

Citizen journalism provides a range of issues for external donors to become involved in. Promoting media literacy, as has been stated before, can be a means of increasing the awareness of audiences as well as helping citizens take part in the global conversation. Meyer suggests that “[f]unders should promote digital media literacy and support educational and training efforts for citizen journalists, especially in emerging democracies and, to the extent possible, where authoritarian regimes rule.”<sup>113</sup> Kohl comes to a similar conclusion and adds that it is “essential to [...] provide guidance to citizen journalists.”<sup>114</sup>

The analysis of a number of case studies has shown that there is great potential in citizen journalism, indeed, and that progress is often achieved by linking up existing concepts and technologies with new ideas. Donors should therefore seize their potential as facilitators, opening up their vast networks to community journalism initiatives. There is no need to reinvent the wheel by contriving entirely new media platforms since valid attempts have already been made. Seeking collaboration with the organisations running these existing initiatives and asking them what kind of support they or their users require may be one point of departure for international donors. This sort of approach makes for a more grassroots-driven development process where projects are based on actual needs rather than donor priorities.

If internet connections, phone calls and text messages are to become more affordable, telecommunications markets need to open up to more competition. If a Ugandan worker earning minimum wage can afford barely more than two minutes on a mobile phone after a day’s work, something has to be wrong with mobile phone tariffs. Therefore, lobbying for true competition and new business models that emphasise mass access rather than access of the elites may be another task for donor agencies.

Finally, making voices heard and increasing the level of participation of ordinary citizens has to be the ultimate goal of any communication initiative in the development context. The fact that bloggers and other citizen journalists have to fear reprisals for voicing their opinions and beliefs highlights the need for a culture of free speech. Organisations, such as the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung and others dealing with media development, should continue to advocate such a culture, not

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113 Meyer 2010, p.27

114 Kohl 2010, p.5

only by lobbying for the implementation of a relevant legal framework, but also by rendering support to awareness campaigns that drive the message home to the common man and woman. Societies are made up of individuals. For a change in attitude towards minorities to occur, for instance, it is crucial to help communicate this change. The promulgation of a law for the protection of minorities, while commendable, is not likely to get to the core of the problem, which is the individual. Increasing the audience of people with alternative viewpoints and possibly lifestyles may be another field of activity for aid organisations. Afrigator, Global Voices and others already provide platforms for a diverse community of citizen journalists to express themselves. A boost in popularity could open up their stories to an entirely new audience and encourage more people to join in the global conversation.



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