

P O S T C A R D

42. Digital connections in the face of inequality

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On 4 August 2015 a popular Kenyan blogger, Jackson Biko, posted a *blog* about a student who was battling a brain tumour. Emmanuel Jadudi was desperately trying to raise \$10,000 in a few days so he could fly to India for life-saving surgery. At the end of the blog, Biko made an appeal for donations of between US\$1 and US\$3 towards Jadudi's treatment. Donations could be sent via M-Pesa, the ground-breaking mobile payment system. Then he went to bed. By the time he checked next morning, the blog had gone viral and donations for Jadudi were flooding in. In just 48 hours, the appeal had raised \$64,000 – more than six times what Jadudi was looking for.

For a nation ranked sixth in sub-Saharan Africa on the extreme poverty index (Turner et al., 2015), and where inequality remains deeply entrenched, that was astounding.

Biko was inundated with questions about the secret of raising so much money so quickly through a blog. His answer came in *an article* a week later. He said he could only speculate but, really, he didn't know. He is not alone. We know about the social and economic impact of digital media and mobile phone technology, but we are only beginning to figure out how it really works and why it succeeds.

Sometimes the insights come out of left field. On 18 February 2016 Uganda went to the polls, with President Yoweri Museveni seeking to extend his thirty-year rule. Ahead of the vote, the election commission announced a ban on taking mobile phones and other handheld devices into the polling stations. It relented in the face of a public outcry and allegations that it was trying to prevent people from recording vote cheating. But it had only retreated, not given up. On voting day access to Facebook and Twitter, and to mobile money platforms, was blocked. The industry regulator had ordered mobile phone companies and internet service providers to block the social media sites, upon the request of the election

commission, for 'security reasons'. The opposition, for its part, alleged that their use was an attempt to prevent vote fiddling, in what ultimately turned out to be a *very chaotic* election.

This suppression of social media had two unintended effects. One was to show how much the state saw them as a potentially subversive force. But it was also a measure of how much the people valued them as a tool for having their voices heard, and in this case, upholding vigilance at election stations.

There were many exchanges on both social media and messaging about how to work around the blockage using virtual private networks (VPNs). Use of the anonymous web-browsing network Tor, and Google searches for 'VPN' from Uganda, spiked dramatically.

Perhaps without these digital tools, the election wouldn't have trended as it did in all the neighbouring countries, shaping an *unflattering narrative* of an election dogged by protests and irregularities. Social media had given people a voice in the face of political inequalities, and a means to be heard across the world.

A discussion of digital media and access to it, however, would ultimately be meaningless without understanding the structural changes that are giving them important roles in organizing politics, activism, economics and society in new ways.

There is little research in this area in Africa, but I have a tentative theory.

The state of politics and of economies in Africa today owes its roots in part to the economic liberalization and privatization that followed the end of the Cold War. Before then, family and the 'village' (clan, ethnic community) were very important support systems. They were shattered from the end of the 1980s by one of the first things that hit on a scale that the support systems couldn't cope with – HIV/AIDS.

At about the same time, subsidies were being dismantled and fuel price controls lifted. State-run bus companies folded or were privatized as costs spiralled. Today, if you are a Tanzanian worker from the lakeside town of Mwanza working in Dar es Salaam, the cost of the nearly 1,200 km journey to the countryside every month is impossible unless you are highly paid. The very important connection to rural communities and family for Africans in urban areas frayed at the very moment when there was the greatest need for it.

The other pillar of African societies, patrilineality, which also defined systems of support, was weakened at the same time. The number of single mother-led families rose sharply, with one study (Clark and Hamplová, n.d., p. 1) finding that 'a substantial proportion of women experience at least one episode of being a single mother before the age of 45, ranging from 30 per cent in Ethiopia to nearly 70 per cent in Zimbabwe'.

In the face of these pressures and changes, a new marketplace of support, more rational and impersonal, arose to fill the vacuum. It coincided almost perfectly with the arrival of the mobile phone and the internet in Africa. It was a convergence made in heaven.

Bibliography

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