



Book review : Social Media and Elections in Africa, Volume 1 : Theoretical Perspectives and Election Campaigns

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NDLELA (Martin) et MANO
(Winston) (dir.)

***Social Media and Elections
in Africa, Volume 1:
Theoretical Perspectives
and Election Campaigns***

New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2020,
238 pages

Research that seeks to discuss the relationship between social media and electoral participation in particular, and democracy in general, is a classic area of the field of political communication. Most works, however, tackle countries in which democracy and economy are relatively more developed, as is the case with Anglo-American countries (p. 40), whereas there are few references to African countries (p. 43, 147, 217). Against this background, Martin Ndlela and Winston Mano's book is a positive demonstration of the existence of excellent scientific production on the use of social media for political activities in African countries. By applying a comparative approach to an analysis of several countries – Ghana, Uganda, Zimbabwe, Botswana, Lesotho, Eswatini and Cameroon – the book constitutes one of the few spaces for discussion on this topic in relation to African realities. In its eleven chapters, it offers fascinating insights not only through its illustration of how social media, particularly Facebook, WhatsApp, Instagram, YouTube and Twitter, are used in elections, but above all through its study of the way they have been used to create new repertoires of political action (and political mobilisation) on the African continent, as well as "alternative media" practices (p. 61).

In chapter one, Ndlela and Mano demonstrate how social media is changing the face of election campaigning in Africa. In chapter two, Ndlela talks about social media algorithms and their impact on elections in Africa. In the third chapter, Thomas

Ijere discusses the methodological basis for research on an African model of political communication. The fourth chapter, by Mano, analyses the political dimension of alternative responses to presidential tweets about elections in Africa. The seven chapters that follow present specific case studies on social media and elections in different countries: chapter five (written by Allen Munoriyarwa and Collen Chambwera) and chapter eight (by Admire Mare and Trust Matsilele) are both about Zimbabwe; chapter six (written by Wilberforce Dzisah) and chapter eleven (by Akwasi Boateng, Donald McCracken and Musara Lubombo) look at Ghana; chapter seven (by Kingsley Ngange) is on Cameroon; chapter nine (Maxwell Mithembu and Carolyne Lungu) discusses the case of Botswana, Lesotho and Eswatini and chapter ten (by Hannah Muzee and Andrew Enaifoghe) is about Uganda. The book focuses mainly on contemporary case studies, and portrays electoral processes that took place between 2016 and 2018 – which makes it even more desirable from the reader's perspective. The Arab Spring is also mentioned as one of the key case studies for an analysis of the use of social media for political purposes on the African continent (p. 9).

One of the qualities of the book is the particular attention the authors dedicate to defining and justifying each of the terms used in it, thereby ensuring that they are never applied out of context. This helps contextualise the use of concepts that originated outside the continent. Throughout the book, the authors seek to understand the extent to which the African continent has adhered to the trend for modern, digitally enhanced election campaigns. To answer this question, they first analyse the state of digitalisation in general and the emergence of social media in the African continent in particular, and study the role of algorithms in elections (p. 14). What clearly emerges

is that political parties use hybrid media campaigning strategies to engage and mobilise voters, who in turn respond to campaign messages by sharing, commenting on or creating content on different media platforms. Social media enable voters to mobilise on their own terms, either for or against political actors (p. 7).

This is an innovative approach, as it proposes an analytical model that can help us elaborate future approaches to (digital) political communication in Africa without having to rely exclusively on epistemological trends based on countries outside the African continent. In this sense, African comparative scholarship offers a new perspective for theoretical development and the expansion of research (p. 42). Because they adopt a comparative approach, the case studies in the book make it possible to understand the trends, similarities and contextual differences in Africa (p. 43-44). One of the most interesting examples of this is the chapter on Uganda. In chapter ten, Muzee and Enaifoghe examine the Ugandan case of Bobi Wine's successful use of social media for political mobilisation, and argue that social media deliberations enhance democracy in a country in which freedom of expression is continually being curtailed (p. 205). In this context, social media becomes an opportunity to express personal opinions beyond the boundaries of political control. On the other hand, these same social media can also be spaces in which debate becomes polarised, as we see in the case of the 2018 elections in Zimbabwe (p. 27). The authors demonstrate that the "social media are reshaping much of political communication in Africa, setting up new rules, winners and losers. They are changing the way political parties and candidates campaign for public office; how they raise funds, mobilize support and establish and maintain relationships with the electorate; and how they fight their opponents" (p. 8).

Despite the quality of the case studies the book presents, it would have been valuable to address the situation in non-English speaking countries in greater depth (only one chapter does so, focusing on Cameroon). The use of social media as a space for political electoral participation has been growing in almost every country on the continent, and so it would be important to extend the comparison to French and Portuguese-speaking regions. It would also be interesting to expand on the analysis of why, despite an exponential increase in the use of the Internet during elections, electoral abstention is tending to increase across the African continent, especially among young people. This seems to reveal that there is a direct relationship between the increased use of social media and electoral participation, as can be seen from the analysis of Cameroon and Zimbabwe (p. 121, 148). This being the case, the second volume of this study (which was published in February 2020 and includes case studies on Algeria, Zimbabwe, Kenya, South Africa, Nigeria and Uganda) is undoubtedly a useful complement to the first volume, as it helps broaden the perspective of the discussion by showing that despite the fact that "social media can be seen as a liberating technology, other factors can also erode their liberating power" (p. 7). Finally, as is suggested in the book (see p. 163 and 219), more studies need to be undertaken in order to understand the negative dimension of social media, especially in the area of misinformation, hate speech and coercive use by political authorities, if the impact of the new media on electoral processes around the continent is to be completely captured.

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