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Ambivalence and Activism: Netizens, Social Transformation and African Virtual Publics

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Abstract

Despite the fact that Africa is the least connected continent on the internet, the use of information and communication technologies (ICTs) is becoming pervasive and deeply embedded in social and political relations. They are impacting on the way citizens live their lives and relate to both the state and other actors in the society. In this process, some citizens are becoming 'netizens'. Cyber networking, which has been facilitated by access to ICTs, has given rise to a public sphere that is virtual. This paper explores some of the key issues relating to the development of ICTs in Africa and the social and political processes they have spawned in their wake. It is argued that while the virtual public is not unique to Africa, its manifestations, organisational modes, and concerns in Africa are informed by African conditions, both in terms of the specific issues addressed and the wider context of technological deficit that the continent faces.

Résumé

En Afrique, l'utilisation des technologies de l'information et de la communication devient de plus en plus répandue et s'ancre davantage dans les relations sociales et politiques malgré le fait qu'elle est le continent le moins connecté sur internet. Les TIC ont affecté la façon dont les citoyens mènent leur vie, mais aussi comment ils interagissent avec l'Etat et les autres acteurs de la société. C'est ainsi que certains citoyens sont devenus des 'netoyens'. L'accès aux TIC a facilité le réseautage à travers le cyber ; ce qui a donné naissance à un espace public virtuel. Cet article explore des questions essentielles par rapport au développement des TIC en Afrique aussi bien que les processus sociaux et politiques qu'elles ont engendré. Selon l'article, même si l'espace public virtuel n'est pas propre à l'Afrique, ses manifestations, ses

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modes d'organisation et ses préoccupations dans ce continent sont plutôt déterminés pas les conditions, les questions spécifiques abordées et le contexte général de déficit technologique auxquels le continent est confronté.

Introduction

Africa is the least connected continent on the internet, with low information technology penetration ratios. Still, the use of information and communication technologies (ICTs) is becoming pervasive on the continent. ICTs are becoming deeply embedded in social relations and in associational life. They are impacting on the way citizens live their lives and relate to both the state and other actors in the society. In this process, some citizens are becoming 'netizens'. Cyber networking, which has been facilitated by access to ICTs, has given rise to a public sphere that is virtual. While the virtual public is not unique to Africa, its manifestations, organisational modes, and concerns in Africa are informed by African conditions, both in terms of the specific issues addressed and the wider context of technological deficit that the continent faces. How do we understand the virtual public in Africa? How does it relate to the state? How can we situate the virtual public within the context of globalisation? What are its democratic/authoritarian impulses? How does it relate to broad social struggles and causes across the continent? Is a gendered reading of the virtual space possible? It would seem that the virtual public in Africa is a site of ambivalences. It is simultaneously a 'we', 'us' and 'them' space, depending on what the issues are. It is both globally and locally rooted. What are the circumstances that make this differentiation possible and in what situation do these different manifestations of sub-virtual publics arise? Like the physical world, the virtual space is inhabited by various cultures, sub-cultures and counter cultures. Cyber citizens are subject to contradictory impulses which pool them along specific social, economic, political and cultural engagements. How does a virtual public relate to a geospatial one? How can we theorise the virtual public in Africa?

A starting point for such theorisation would be to unearth the manifestations of the virtual public sphere in Africa. This paper will attempt such an unearthing, concentrating on developing a topology of the virtual space in Africa both in terms of its concerns, mode of substantiation and its multiple levels of inclusions and exclusions. It will draw from existing cyber networks, examining the myriad ways they negotiate space and use of technology as a tool for social organising as well as the kinds of politics that such negotiation and uses impose on the African virtual sphere. In this process, the paper seeks to shade light on the impacts and implications of ICTs on the public sphere in Africa.

The Public Sphere and ICTs

Central to the concept of the public sphere is the existence of a social space that is not necessarily spatial, where citizens can engage in rational debate and discussion on social issues. This space, although subject to government policy making is independent of government. As a communicative realm, the size and reach of the public sphere is mediated by the means of communication. Because debate and discussion pre-figure dialogue, the public sphere is best facilitated through interactivity. Yet in its drive for reach and inclusivity, the public sphere has to embrace non-interactive communication platforms. A tension, therefore, exists within the public sphere between interactive (one-on-one) media such as the telephone and the mass (few-to-many) media such as television and newspaper; while the latter may be lacking in interactivity, it has a greater reach. The increasing dominance of the mass media over the interactive ones, along with its increasing subordination to the imperatives of profit was decried by public sphere theorists like Habermas who saw such a trend as undermining the quality of the public sphere.

However, the convergence of interactive and mass media, arising from the advent of the digital revolution, has resulted in the spectrum that is now referred to as information and communication technologies (ICTs). These have transformed the public sphere through a number of ways. First, although ICTs are part of the rubrics of media technologies, they have their own unique characteristics that make their engagement with citizens qualitatively different. They have greater speed of dissemination, have global reach and entail little costs. As Patelis (2000) notes, 'in the world of bits, there is no packaging, there is no distribution (they are automatic). Marginal costs are abolished, the consequence of which economic scale no longer yield a competitive advantage'. This is largely true, although the case about the economy of scale is overstated, since the Internet itself tends to favour the very big.

Second, ICTs have integrated older forms of media technologies with new ones, leading to capabilities that were hitherto impossible. The Internet, which is the core of the ICTs, supports all forms of media content from text and video to audio and graphics. A website can engage in newspaper publishing and radio and television broadcasting simultaneously. In addition, the process of doing so has been de-mystified through the reduction of the skill content required on the part of the producer. Non-professionals can today produce good quality television or radio programmes and other media products. ICTs have led to what MacFarlene (1993) calls the 'de-institutionalisation of the process of information dissemination', in that news production and dissemination are no longer the preserve of media organisations and professionals.

Third, while traditional mass media technologies impose a dichotomy between producers and users, with ICTs, all users are producers simultaneously. Everyone can set up a website allowing him/her to disseminate information while receiving same from others. Moreover, the cost of doing so is extremely low compared to the cost of setting up a traditional media outfit. Furthermore, this one-person media outfit has global reach, which the traditional forms of media technologies do not often provide. Fourth, ICTs have allowed interactivity to a great extent in the use of the communication space. Even reading a mail on the internet involves the making of a new text of the mail. Users of virtual spaces are therefore not just mere passive recipients of texts but are simultaneously involved in the process of producing and disseminating their own sub-texts. The interactivity of ICTs has unleashed a torrent of creativity on the part of their users.

Habermas' conception of the public sphere places emphasis on three key issues: participation is open to all (there is a principle of inclusivity); all participants are considered equal (social status or rank is disregarded); and any issue can be raised for rational debate. Cyberspace is potentially open to all, even though in practice there are a number of barriers, but so it has always been with other forms of communication platforms. In so far as the cyberspace is concerned, all are also potentially considered equal, though here again practical exigencies put some limit to this equality. Theoretically, all forms of rational debate can take place in cyberspace, though in practice even irrational ones, such as websites which preach racial hatred for example, also make an appearance. Censorship is also placing limits to the debates that can take place, at least in some countries, if not globally.

How do we then conceptualise the virtual public against the background of these tensions between expectations and reality? Is the virtual public the same as the virtual space? Can it be reduced to its constitutive online communities? Like the traditional public sphere, the virtual public sphere can only be imagined as a social space for citizens' engagements with socio-political issues – the abode of netizens. While the virtual space provides the context and contours for the emergence of the virtual public, the two cannot be conflated for the virtual space contains within it also private and government controlled spaces. In the same vein, online communities cannot be conflated with the virtual public sphere. There are online governance structures, some of a commercial corporate nature, which are also part of the online communities. Since the public sphere should be an unfettered communicative discursive phenomenon, the virtual space should be the articulation of online communicative discursive practices of citizens as they engage freely on political and social issues. They should be platforms for citizens' articulation of issues free from the exigency of profit and

government control and direction. While they tend to mirror civil society, the virtual public spheres are not reduced to organised associational platforms.

In reality therefore, such virtual spaces that constitute the virtual public sphere should include portals that provide spaces for free public discourses, discussion platforms, citizens' mailing lists, chat platforms, wikis, blogs and online open publications. Yet even within this category of virtual spaces there is a problem: portals such as yahoo and google that are set up and driven by profit motive are providing substantial spaces for citizens engagement in the virtual space through the many discussion groups, mailing lists, blogs and other online publications they host, and therefore cannot be dissociated from the virtual public sphere. One implication of ICTs in the making of the virtual public is that they not only de-territorialised the public sphere but they also create a variety of public spaces that are disconnected from the national space. This gives rise to specific features of the virtual sphere, such as the fact that they cut across countries and not do necessary organise on the basis of nationalities. The need for both interactivity and simultaneity, required for a public sphere, has been intensely facilitated by ICTs, especially through the internet with its global reach and instantaneous networking. The virtual public sphere that has emerged through the uptake of ICTs is centred around the use of internet-based tools and resources. These include the sharing of views using emails, mail groups, blogging, chats rooms, and other online publications and webcast.

Working with various cyber platforms and tools, there have emerged both national and global virtual public spheres, providing opportunity for citizens – netizens – to network and articulate their visions on different public issues. They have been exerting influence on many global issues. At the global level, many such virtual spheres have risen to contest dominant paradigms. The influence of cyber networking can be seen, for example, in the way citizens from diverse countries and continents, coordinating through the internet, mobilised for the now famous Seattle Protest against the WTO Ministerial of 2002. There has even been what is referred to as 'cyber protest', with activists jamming the website of the World Economic Summit during its 2002 summit, causing it to crash (Shatchtman 2002, quoted in Wiltse 2003).

There have been many other less dramatic, but nonetheless, important episodes of cyber mobilisation to articulate and campaign for specific public issues. For example, O'Neill (1999) has documented how citizens and civil society organisations have used cyber networking to place corporate social responsibility on the spotlight. The World Social Forum (www.wsf.org), which has become the major platform for anti-globalisation struggles across the world, works largely online, with activists in different countries having

only email contacts and interacting through discussion groups and online publications spaces. Even in social and political struggles of a physical type, for instance by groups such as the Zapatistas and Osama bin Laden's Al-Qaeda, the cultivation of a virtual public sphere is a prominent feature. Ed Wiltse (2003) has also drawn attention to what he calls 'fandom', the rise of virtual communities of affection, that not only mobilise on specific social issues, but also offer online solidarity and affection to each other across the globe on the basis of shared concerns and views. Closer home in Africa we cannot fail to note the role that social networks such as facebook and twitter have played in the pro-democracy struggles in both Algeria and Egypt. The activities of wikileaks in 2010 have also led to the emergence of 'hacktivists' who attack websites of institutions and organisations that are hostile to wikileaks. Netizens, hacktivists, and fandom are different manifestation of the grip of ICTs on contemporary global society. How are these phenomena manifested in Africa?

Studying the Virtual Public in African: Methodological Problems

Unearthing the manifestations of the virtual public sphere in Africa is fraught with many methodological problems. For one, virtual publics are not continent specific. In fact the very nature of border porosity of ICTs (Ya'u 2004) makes such locational virtual publics difficult to imagine. Virtual networks are by their nature transcontinental. As argued by Guobin Yang (nd), online publics are less visible and less bound to physical locations and thus more de-territorialised. They elaborate discourses and practices whose consumption is beyond national boundaries. In this sense, speaking of an African virtual sphere as distinct from a generic (global) virtual public sphere may seem to be theorising an unsubstantiated subject. Secondly, most virtual networks are open-ended with no clear cut attributes for membership. Anyone sufficiently interested on any issues for which a group exist is free to join. Thus, in a given cyber group it is possible to find an array of organisational types: civil society organisations, government agencies, private individuals, government or political personalities, and African and non-Africans actors. How is such a virtual public to be named? What makes it African, if such a label is to be attached? Is it because it is constituted predominantly by Africans or is it because of the issues it concerns itself with, or perhaps, both? How can any of these attributes be empirically established?

Third, virtual publics, by virtue of being virtual, are difficult to substantially observe beyond what is reported or retrieved in the virtual places. But reporting/retrieving is time bound since cyber content is dynamic. Content keeps changing by the minutes. Even with the best of archiving, it is difficult to keep track of online production. Add to this problem the fact that many

sites are for a number of reasons not visible to common search engines, and are, therefore, very likely to be missed. This is becoming more serious with the attempt to commercialise search engines listings. There is also internet censorship in which countries block access to specific sites for their citizens, usually for political reasons. There is even preemptive blocking of traffics from 'suspect' countries, such as from Nigeria, by a number of international organisations who regard communication from such a country as suspect. Furthermore commercial pressures are making web companies to block unprofitable countries from their networks (Stone and Helft 2009).

Fourth, how does one distinguish between the African Diaspora which operates on the basis of two publics (one in their natal country, and a second in their country of abode) and those members of virtual networks that are based in Africa? Because of the better facilities in their diasporic locations, diasporan Africans attend to produce more online content and discourse about Africa than is produced locally on the continent. While such diasporan cyber spaces are available to Africans on the mainland, they would most likely be listed as European or American spaces. Fifth, many cyber discussion groups and many mailing lists in Africa are personalised, with many hosted by websites that are not visible to many search engines. Many create their personal mailing lists which facilitate discussion among the lists members but these lists would appear only as email traffic and not be registered as public discussion lists. There is also the fact that mailing lists using gsm text messaging which is a very widespread phenomenon in Africa would not appear on listings of virtual public spaces.

While this paper does not intend to address these and many other methodological problems in studying the virtual public sphere in Africa and how such an African virtual sphere (and its sub-sets) can be isolated and mapped, it assumes, rather problematically, that the notion of the African virtual sphere can be conceptualised and rationalised, and is, therefore, a legitimate subject of intellectual and policy inquiry. Without specifically answering the many questions raised above, the paper assumes that the African virtual public sphere can be conceptualised as the way Africans and African interests appropriate and engage with ICTs to create spaces and discourses on issues and problems that may be local, national, continental or global. In creating and using these spaces and discourses, it must be admitted that they are open to citizens of other continents just as Africans could engage with virtual spheres that purport to be specific to some other continents. Finally, this paper does not seek to study specific instances of African virtual spheres, but draws generalisations from specific manifestations of the African virtual sphere such that its contours, practices and substantiation can be broadly outlined.

Towards a Typology of the Virtual Space in Africa

The African virtual public can be studied by locating several virtual spaces both as free discussion spaces as well as electronic/online publishing platforms that are devoted to social issues on Africa and its countries. These spaces include portals such as *Pambazuka* (www.pambazuka.org), several discuss groups on the yahoo, google and several other portals and the several mailing lists that have been set up by various organisations including both state and non-state actors. Most of these listserves, electronic publications and mailing lists are open to the public and can be accessed by signing up for membership. Membership allows one the privilege of receiving and making postings to these spaces. The websites on the other hand have places for interactivity to articulate and share positions with other visitors.

The major tools that are used by African virtual public sphere are emails, chat rooms, yahoo groups, wikis, social networking tools (facebook, twitter, etc), and limited online publications. There is also extensive use of mobile phone technology, especially through the use of short text messaging (stm) technology. Blogs are open spaces for people to share their views with the wide online public. They are, in a sense personal journals, maintained by individuals and groups. Blogging by Africans within Africa is still at its infancy. This is largely related to both cost and the limitations of infrastructure. Table 1 gives the relative position of Africa with respect to the number of blogs from a blog listing survey. As can be seen, Africa has the least number of blogs.

Table 1: Number of Blogs by Continent

Continent	Google
Africa	964
South America	1,850
Australasia	2,251
Asia	8,065
Europe	12,911
North America	38,017

Source: http://www.globeofblogs.com/?x=location, accessed last on 8th September, 2008

The small size of the African virtual space can also be seen by looking at statistics relating to online discussion groups. This is shown in Table 2. While Europe and Asia have 31,184 and 30,124 google groups respectively

Africa has only 3187, just about 10 per cent of the European total. The situation is similar with the yahoo specialised groups. The implication of this is that there are few African online platforms that engage people in social discourse.

Table 2: Distribution of Discussion Groups

Region	Google	Yahoo specialised groups
Europe	31,184	1,840
Asia	30,124	6,166
Latin America	12,510	215
Middle East	3,778	1,279
Africa	3,187	776

Source: from http://www.globeofblogs.com/?x=location&region=1 and http://dir.groups.yahoo.com/dir/1600043921

In addition to portals, many African newspapers are now online. Some of them allow for online discussion while others keep blogs for their columnists only. This has created sub virtual spaces around them. The significance of this is that the newspapers have improved their reach and accessibility, since most of the online editions are freely accessible. Through these online newspapers diasporan Africans also keep in close touch with developments in their home countries.

What the continent misses in terms of dense internet penetration, it seems to make up for in terms of the spread of gsm technology. Africa is the fastest growing market for gsm technology. While its penetration is yet to match that of the technologically advanced countries, it is possible to bridge that gap in a few years on the basis of current growth rates. Access to gsm phones has spread a culture of text messaging that is used for social activism in three ways. First, it provides a social network and numerous public spheres for the sharing of ideas and the articulation of positions by citizens. Second, it is used as a means of organisational coordination by civil society organisations as well as for general mobilisation of citizens behind specific causes. This particular use is best illustrated by the use of the gsm text messaging by civil society during the build up to the September 2003 consumer boycott of gsm service providers in Nigeria. People were mobilised using text messaging, resulting in a fairly successful one-day protest (Obadare 2004). Thirdly, text messaging is also used as a tool for advocacy to lobby state actors to support a cause or protest their support of unpopular causes.

Again to draw from a Nigerian example, during the campaign to get the National Assembly to pass the Freedom of Information Bill, the Freedom of Information Coalition initiated a text-based mobilisation in which members of the coalition sent text messages to members of the National Assembly urging them to support the passage of the bill. Similarly during the debate on the attempt to amend the constitution to allow the president a third term in 2006, civil society activists used text messaging to send protest messages to legislators who were known to be supporting the proposed amendment.

The African virtual public articulates personal, local and international problems. It allows individuals and groups to work together towards a common public goal. It is also a mechanism for political mobilisation, as different political actors use cyberspace to mobilise around their agendas. African virtual publics, like other virtual publics show diversity both in terms of the issues they engage with and their membership. This diversity is understandable as online subjects of interests to people tend to reflect their traditional issues of concern. The issues range from human rights, good governance, unemployment, HIV/AIDS, to human trafficking. The diversity of issues can be seen in the topics of concern to African discussion groups hosted by yahoo.

Table 3: Subject Distribution of African Online Discussion Groups

Issue	Number
Society	576
Business and finance	382
Schools and universities	360
Recreation	298
Computers	284
People	236
Arts and entertainment	193
Science and Technology	184
News	147
Health	134
Others	96
Home	39

Source: http://dir.groups.yahoo.com/dir/1600043921

Because of this diversity, there is also segmentation, and even fragmentation, as virtual spaces can be based on national, sub-national, ethnic-based, or religious memberships. For example there is a *Naija* group devoted to discussing politics in Nigeria just as there is a sub-national Igbo group devoted to the political engagements of the Pan Igbo ethnic community. There are also cultural platforms such as ethnic Yoruba www.yoruba.org. It is this fragmentation that reveals a tendency towards an 'us and them' framework of discourse. Sub-national groupings tend to consider the 'we' in terms of very specific cultural, religious, or ethnic markers which exclude as much as they unify. However, this correspondence between cultural group and the virtual public is only notional since participants needs not be limited to citizens of a given geo-cultural space. For example, *gamji* (www.gamiji.com), is widely seen as the virtual space for the articulation of political perspectives from northern Nigeria. This is based on the ethno-regional symbolism of its name. Yet postings are not limited to either those from northern Nigeria or even Nigeria. In general, the 'we' in the African virtual public becomes more inclusive when discourse borders on global issues such as imperialism and the environment; Western countries are usually seen as the 'them' against a collective African 'we'.

Fragmentation and differentiation in the African virtual public are also informed by the historic experiences of different discourses around nationality, ethnicity, citizenship and territorial claims in different parts of continent. These experiences – and their related unresolved discourses – have only found additional outlets for articulation in the virtual sphere. There is also evidence of unevenness in both the size and engagements of the virtual public across African countries. This unevenness is understandable as some countries have relatively better cyber capabilities than others.

Gender issues have received attention in the African virtual sphere. There is evidence of a number of virtual spaces for the articulation of gender discourses and the promotion of gender equality. The E-Network of National Gender Equality Monitoring in Africa (MGMnet-Africa Information Portal) of UNECA (http://www.uneca.org/daweca/gender_networks_in_africa.asp) provides a listing of some these spaces.

While there is yet no empirical mapping of the political impact of the African virtual sphere, there are indications that it exerts influence on politics and governance on the continent. It exerts influence on the political system in four complementary ways. First, it provides platforms for direct political mobilisation. When civil society groups uses e-posting to canvass support for legislation or to protest a policy, they are mobilising political opinion. Secondly, it provides avenues for civil society organisations to coordinate and work together on a common agenda. Third, it provides spaces for the

articulation of new social issues and problems, inserting them into local, national, regional and even global agendas. One of the successful uses of cyber platforms to insert specific issues onto policy agenda was the use of e-platforms by the African Youth Information and Communication Technologies for Development (ICT4D) Network (AYISN). It campaigned to have the right to represent youth voices in national, continental and global policy making on ICT. Networking over poor ICT infrastructure in their respective countries, the youths have featured prominently in such development forums as NEPAD, the AU, and the African Development Forum, the last of which focused on youths. This networking has thrown African youths unto the centre stage of policy making on ICTs within the African continent (Segan 2004 Ya'u 2004). Another sub-virtual public sphere that has exerted influence is the online community cultivated by the Treatment Action Campaign (TAC) in South Africa. It was able to use electronic networking to mobilise public opinion around the issue of treatment for HIV patients in South Africa (Wasserman, 2005). Fourth, government and government functionaries are reached directly via the virtual space. They are reached indirectly when traditional media appropriate the products of online deliberations.

Nevertheless, survey results suggest that there is no particular relationship between the state and the virtual spaces in Africa. This is partly the result of the open-ended nature of virtual space and the fact that it is variegated. The inability to fix its boundaries or define its distinguishing characteristics means that states find it difficult to relate to. At one level, a virtual network could be intensely opposed to the state. This is most noticed where the issues at stake are human rights and democratisation. Examples of such oppositional stance include the opposition to Mugabe's election in Zimbabwe, campaign against the manipulation of the election in Kenya, and the mobilisation of support against the state-sanctioned murders in Darfur. However, on some global issues, such as those surrounding the WTO, there have been instances when the views expressed by African states have coincided with those expressed on some cyber platforms. Despite this ambiguous relationship between the state and the African virtual public, what is certain is that most governments in Africa tend to fear the freedom the virtual public sphere offers to citizens and their organisations.

The great majority of global cyber networks have their origins in the West. Few have their origins in Africa. One possible implication of this is that these networks may serve as conduits for projecting Euro-centric perspectives on global issues. But counter hegemonic views, such as in the anti-globalisation movement, have also spread from the West. In general, the pluralism of the virtual public in Africa informs its overall ambivalence toward issues of globalisation and politics. While some virtual spheres are

created to enhance counter hegemonic discourses, others are there to reinforce these discourses. Still others approach the discourses from either religious or ethno-cultural standpoints.

Limitation of the Virtual Sphere in Africa

Certain limitations are common to all virtual publics. These include the increasing pressure for the commercialisation of cyberspace, the phenomenon of information overload, and the growing global trend towards censorship by governments in the wake of the September 11 attacks. However, there are some limitations that are specific to Africa. First, there is limited access to ICTs on the continent, making the virtual sphere a small island of the privileged who can overcome the barriers of cost and poor infrastructure. Access is both a function of available infrastructure as well as the cost of immediate access. Access to internet, like access to other ICTs, is more costly in Africa than in other continents. Using conventional tele-penetration indicators, we can see that in spite of the progress of the last few years, Africa still remains the least connected continent in terms of access to ICTs. While its share of world population is about 12 per cent, its total share of internet subscribers is less than 2 per cent. Similarly its share of internet users is just about 3.6 per cent of global users. Table 4 gives the relevant internet penetration indicators for different countries and continents.

Table 4: Internet Penetration Figures for the Year 2007

Continent/ country	Internet Subscribers (in 1000)	Subscribers Density	Internet Users (in 1000)	Users Density
Africa	9,674.0	1.15	49,682.3	5.19
Asia	265,761.0	6.85	569,798.0	14.34
Europe	137,446.0	20.71	331,799.4	41.22
USA	72,721.0	23.78	220,000.0	71.94
Canada	8,700.0	26.72	28,000.0	85.17

Source: From ITU website

Second, the dominance of foreign languages in ICT traffic in Africa excludes the majority of African citizens. Most of the discussions are conducted in European languages such as English, French and Portuguese which are the colonially imposed languages of formal learning in most African countries. Indigenous African languages are only beginning to establish their presence

in the cyberspace. The languages of discourse of various African discussion groups reflect this foreign linguistic dominance. A count from yahoo shows that out of the 34 African groups only one uses Swahili. All the others use any of English, French, or Portuguese. Third, Africa suffers from limited hosting capacity. Cyber networking is web-based. It means that there must be space for hosting the networks. Most African countries have only rudimentary capacity for hosting websites. This means most African cyber platforms are hosted outside the continent. In fact many African platforms are even cyber squatting on other continental systems. The reality is that without local hosting capacity, the necessary proliferation of platforms that will democratise access to the internet cannot take place.

Fourth, every technology comes with its specific skills demand. The use of ICTs requires not just functional literary but also digital literacy. Yet in many African countries, basic literacy and numeracy are still limited to a proportion of the population. For some of the countries, adult literacy is as low as 50 per cent. For such countries, therefore the mass of illiterate citizens are excluded from the use of most ICTs. Skills and knowledge on ICTs are not only unevenly distributed across Africa, they are also extremely low in comparison to other continents. A survey from google, shown in Table 5, suggests that most African discussion groups have membership sizes of less than 100 people. This however is not peculiar to African as the same trend can be observed for the other continents. One of the Africa discussion groups, *NaijaPolitics* (NaijaPolitics@yahoogroups.com, a group that started in 2006 and is devoted to the discussion of Nigerian politics, has a fairly large membership at 5,525. On the other hand *Africa Politics*, founded in 2002, has 1,311 members and *AfricanaPerspectives*, founded in 2000, has just about 146 members. It seems that some of the groups hardly expand with time.

Fifth, the often very slow speed of internet in Africa makes participation in the virtual sphere a time consuming proposition. It is difficult to provide an empirical correlation between the slow speed of internet access and its limited use. But an indirect indicator can be the frequency with which members make postings to their discussion groups. About 2,423 of the African groups on google did not register a single posting in a month, while about 376 had postings of less than 10 messages per month. These figures indicate low participation levels. They also suggest that many of the members of the groups are only passive recipients rather than active senders and recipients. A slightly different measure is the last time a group had a posting. As shown in Table 6, the majority of the African groups had their last post in the interval between 100-9,999 days. For nearly three months, the groups appear inactive. That goes to show that some of the groups are barely active.

Table 5: Membership Size of Sampled Discussion Groups

Continent	No	1-9 Member	10-99 Members	100-999 Member	1,000-9,9999 Members	10,000-99,999 Members	100,000 and above Members
Africa	3	1,823	961	216	41	1	0
Asia	303	17,309	9,231	2,189	292	33	2
Europe	1,360	15,501	9,462	2,328	212	17	1
USA (country)	38	18,595	7,170	1,470	153	11	0

Source: http://groups.google.com/groups/dir?sel=region=61168

Table 6: Days Since Last Post

Continent	Zero day	1-9 days	10-99 days	100-999 days	1000 and above days
Africa	118	678	520	907	80
Asia	1,080	7,503	4,204	9,693	1,561
Europe	1,624	7,635	6,177	1,703	0
USA (country)	681	12,356	2,613	6,974	746

Source: http://groups.google.com/groups/dir?sel=region=61168

Conclusion

A virtual public sphere has emerged in Africa but it is limited in size and influence, especially in relation to issues within the continent. It provides space for intense discussions on various social issues of concern among its privileged members. It is not an autonomous sphere, independent of the traditional public sphere but rather a specialised sub-sphere of the African public sphere. The African virtual public sphere is variegated both in terms of its concerns and composition. It includes and excludes depending on the issue at stake. Mechanisms of inclusion/exclusion include, for example, age (as in the case of youth networks), gender, religion, ethnicity, and nationality. Because it tends to be anonymous, state agents and non-state actors can occupy the same virtual public and work on common issues only to later confront each other as adversaries in other forums. The African virtual public sphere is populated by elites for obvious reasons. While cost is a barrier to participation, literacy is the key inhibitor of the growth of the size of the sphere. In this sense, it sits problematically with Habermas' concept of the public sphere which must be inclusive. For this reason, its actual utilisation for political engagement and mobilisation is limited. But it most be noted that quite often cyberspace is used alongside the traditional public sphere. Thus the virtual sphere is best seen as an extension of, and compliment to, the non-virtual public sphere. It is not a distinct alternative.

Much of cyber networking in Africa is done by youths and professionals who are often academics, journalists, civil society activists, development workers, or government officials. This means that social status is critical to participation in the virtual public of Africa. This is contrary to Habermas' conception of the public sphere as an arena open to all. However, one salutary

consequence of the occupation of the virtual public by youth in Africa is the demystification of gerontocracy; youths who are more adept in the use of ICTs are getting more space for the articulation of their viewpoints and visions than the traditional public sphere would normally allow.

While in most African countries there has been no conscious attempt at censoring the internet, the fact remains that not all subjects can be freely discussed. Censorship is an attempt to control the virtual public sphere. Countries such as Zimbabwe, Egypt, Zambia, Tunisia and Algeria have already attempted censorship of the internet. While Tunisia attempted censorship in the built up to the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS) and Algeria places a censor on Facebook. Access to the social networking website Facebook (http://www.facebook.com) was blocked without explanation from 24 August 2008 in Tunisia. One of possible reasons for this action is the creation of personal webpages by dissidents on Facebook, launching debates about Tunisian society (Balancing Act, 2008). In fact many countries in Africa would have loved to censor the internet but for their lack of the requisite technological capacity to do so.

African virtual public sphere is small, but it is expanding, and has great potential to contribute to the expansion and consolidation of democracy on the continent. Many civil society organisations, pro-democracy activists, and journalists are using the e-platform to reach out to virtual communities, and mobilising such communities in the struggles for democratisation. The African virtual public sphere can also promote African integration, with online communities working together across countries, sharing experiences and learning from each other. The availability of instantaneous online language translation capabilities has bridged part of the communication gap between different components of the public sphere in Africa. It also allows for a much more open and inclusive exchange of ideas.

There is a growing knowledge divide in the world, despite the decreasing digital divide. It is important to draw a distinction between the digital divide which is seen in terms of differential access to ICTs and the knowledge divide which is the differential that exists in terms of the production and use of knowledge. In an unequal world, Africa faces the problem of diminishing knowledge production and increasing marginalisation. The struggle against globalisation in this context often takes the form of a struggle against implicit re-colonisation. The information age, that is facilitated by the use of ICTs is knowledge driven and Africa has to overcome its deficit in the area of knowledge production, to make its participation in the global virtual sphere more meaningful.

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