

## REVIEW ESSAY NEW MEDIA AND INFORMATION: FOR DEMOCRATIZATION AND MANAGEMENT

By R. Sooryamoorthy

Mudhai, Okoth F. (2013). *Civic Engagement, Digital Networks, and Political Reform in Africa*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 259 pp.

Powell, Mike. (2003). *Information Management for Development Organisations*. Second edition. Oxford: Oxfam, 294 pp.

### INTRODUCTION

In several ways information and communication technologies (ICTs) have changed human activities and continue to influence the way individuals have been doing and managing things. ICTs have become an integral part of human development.<sup>1</sup> Development and political activity are two such spheres of human activity that are greatly affected by the advent of and the access to ICTs. As a growing region in terms of connectivity, coverage and access, Africa provides a laboratory to study how ICT has been impacting on development and political activities. Studies have investigated the relationship between the influence and/or the effects of ICTs on the political life of the public. ICTs, particularly the internet, have the advantage and potential to stimulate democratic culture through citizen participation.<sup>2</sup> Bratton, for instance, examined the way technology has been shaping civic engagement in the political sphere.<sup>3</sup> Communication technologies, including cell phones, have turned out to be a great force in several African countries for the mobilization of civil society and advancement of democracy. In addition, cell phone use is associated with an increase in political awareness and civic engagement.<sup>4</sup> Bratton's correlational analysis showed that there has been a consistent affinity between the spread of cell phones and growth in some important dimensions of civic activism.<sup>5</sup> In a study of Eritrean politics, Bernal explored the interaction between politics and new media, showing how websites can be useful to provide a space for Eritrean civil society.<sup>6</sup>

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There are two important themes that are explored in this essay: the use of ICTs by civil society and NGOs for the purpose of democratization and political participation of the public, and how NGOs manage information within their organizations.

## NEW MEDIA AND POLITICAL PARTICIPATION

Although the title implies otherwise, at the outset Mudhai declares that his work, *Civic Engagement, Digital Networks, and Political Reform in Africa*, should not be perceived as one that presents generalized trends in Africa. It is not about political reforms in Africa as a whole but about two African countries, namely Kenya and Zambia. These two countries were selected due to their historical and political similarities. Both countries share commonalities due to their colonial history and their adoption of single-party politics and later multipartyism. The incumbents in presidential positions in both countries had tried to extend their terms of office by manipulating the constitution. These two countries were not characterized by failing statehood, although the state power has been abused dictatorially. The framework of the state, law and authority remained intact in both countries and there has been political continuity since they achieved independence. Additionally, they were among the more ICT and media developed countries in Africa.<sup>7</sup>

Mudhai's work deals with urban civic actors and news media. This follows the framework of Fagan<sup>8</sup>, who believed that the structures in the society might be used to extend communications of consequence to the gross functioning of the political system. Influenced further by Lasswell (cited in Fagan)<sup>9</sup>, Mudhai examines the processes rather than the effects and consequences of the use of the ICTs and media. The methodology adopted for the study is a combination of interviews, observations and communications conducted in the selected two countries. Mudhai's arguments can be summarized as follows:

- Democratization in African countries is not illusionary and the new digital media had a role in effecting the transfer of political power from a limited political elite to the public, as happened in the selected countries of Kenya and Zambia.
- The process of democratization and the deployment of the new digital media by civic organizations are both more complex than they may appear to be.
- The process of socio political change in Africa can be explained by using the Habermassian notion of the public sphere and their

relationships for emancipatory democracy, but it has limitations in explaining the partial process of democratization.

- ICTs, from the perspectives of civic activists, have enhanced efficiency and hastened democratic transition in countries like Kenya and Zambia.
- ICTs do not substitute or replace the existing socio political networks and communications that are conducted face-to-face, but rather add to these.
- In this investigation Mudhai relies on democratic theory and two of its related perspectives—the civic networks perspective covering civil society theory, and social movements theory. The civil society theory is useful in the analysis of political activities outside the boundaries of the state but not of political institutions. Mudhai finds it problematic as the civil society theory views political and economic societies differently from civic societies. This theory emphasizes that democratic structures and laws alone cannot give rise to democracy but requires strong civil societies in these. Civil societies are indispensable for the functioning of democratic societies. The relevance of civil society and NGOs in the promotion of democracy in Africa has been widely recognized. They were in the forefront of bringing in formal democracy to several parts of Africa against authoritarianism. Evidence from many parts of Africa agrees with Mudhai's view on civil societies and their role in political participation.

### DEMOCRACY AND ICTs

The notion of the public sphere deriving from Habermas and its modifications in the context of the development of networked spaces through new ICTs connects democracy and new media. The new media include cell phones, email, the internet and the social networking sites that recognize the reconfiguration of the public space. Mudhai argues that the new media has strengthened the importance of civic societies in protecting individual freedoms from the oppressive and suppressive state machinery. The adoption of pluralist politics in Africa is to be viewed in the context of social pluralism that does not accept absolute and uncontrolled state power and majoritarian institutional pluralism. Although civil society interacts with the state and economy, it is not always opposed to economy and the state. According to the author, this interaction could be elaborated further as civil society is not a unified entity. They exist for varied *raison d'être*, programs and agendas. Some are even

closer to the state than to society, for reasons of their own existence and survival.

While examining e-democracy, the author supports the view that new modes of communication have always provided platforms for the expression of political views and behavior. He sees problems with e-democracy. The extensive coverage of the new mass media and its usage for political information means it is controlled by a limited number of people. The other issue with e-democracy, for the author, relates to access, resources and surveillance. However, the author hopes that ICTs have the potential to change the relationship between citizens and parties if they all use the internet facilities. This observation overlooks the disparity between the haves and have nots in access to the internet which is still not evenly distributed in the world. His key argument is that the internet does not offer any new possibilities for democratic communications and is not likely to change the habits of users. If the author is trying to explain that the potential for the internet in the political sphere is limited, we need to wait for that to happen as we anticipate its arrival in some parts of the world. Mudhai acknowledges (and shows us) that ICTs, and the internet in particular, is a threat to the state in Africa (for authoritarian regimes in particular) and that despite its limited coverage and access it has greater impact on Africa than elsewhere.

Internet usage in Africa has been growing over the years. The number of internet users have increased from 4.5 million in 2000 to 140 million in 2011.<sup>10</sup> As of December 2013, the internet penetration formed 21.3 per cent of the population in Africa, as against 42.3 per cent for the rest of the world and 39 per cent for the world.<sup>11</sup> Kenya is one of the few African countries with a higher number of internet users. In 2013 it had a penetration rate of 47.3 per cent of the population compared to 15.4 per cent for Zambia.<sup>12</sup> However, the limited access to the internet for the people in Africa did not allow authoritarian leaders to have their way all the time, as they could not control the flow of information any longer. The electronic media made it possible for people to directly participate in politics and enhanced their role in policy making. This is a significant observation made by the author. This is why, as authors like Hyslop<sup>13</sup> and Huntington<sup>14</sup> thought, ICTs in Africa provide an impetus for the 'third wave' of democratization. Among the ICTs, email, social networking media and the cell phone are prominent tools. Any research on the ICTs and its effects on the political domain in particular should, as Mudhai believes, take into account its legal, economic, social and technical spheres. For this reason, Mudhai takes a dialectical approach to his study considering the kinds of informationality with specific socio cultural and political expressions.

Given current internet usage in Africa, there is a great potential for its growth but much depends on the cost. This, as many think, will have a strong

effect on the promotion of democracy, particularly for civil society organizations. Mudhai thinks that the internet has been viewed from both the free-market libertarianism ideologies and the net libertarianism from postmodernism, and has been involved in the debates on democracy like other new media of its predecessors.

Africa is known for the controlling of information by many of its leaders, which permitted the expression of only the dominant political views. Mudhai considers the perception that the impact of the ICTs in Africa has been disproportionately greater than the overall situation. This analysis is based on the assumption that ICTs do not replace the existing socio political networks and face-to-face communication but only supplement these. Civic actors use media other than ICTs such as landline, fax, postal mail, television and radio. It seems true that ICTs cannot be viewed as radical tools of social change. They continue to play a supplementary role along with the other traditional means of communication and have not completely taken over the existing media. This is more so in Africa, specifically for reasons of coverage and access as detailed earlier.

Mudhai takes up some key issues in relation to new media and its political impact: in what ways and how the new media influence society; what civil society and NGOs do in drawing on the uses of the new media to influence democracy; and how the public sphere is reconstituted or reconstructed by the impact of the new media. The relations between media, technology, political organization and political action are further investigated. The author thinks that there are several dimensions of communication means such as the internet that expand its scope in democratic communication and action. Among them are the ability of the internet to improve the access for activist civil society groups and NGOs to obtain internal information from institutions of political decision-making; the potential of the internet to set up group initiatives for political participation; the record of the internet in organizing networks of civil society amidst resistance from authoritarian political leaders; and its power to bring back neglected public issues to the attention of political actors.

In both Kenya and Zambia the press is mainly owned by the state. In Kenya the broadcast media is half owned by the government while it is fully owned by the government in Zambia. This has implications for the participation of the public in political matters. The attempts of the Kenyan government to control the new media is evident in its demanding information about subscribers and list-servs from service providers. Mudhai suggests that, nevertheless, the media in Kenya and Zambia has played a role in the democratization process by way of reporting corruption, government-initiated violence and political assassinations. Journalists in Africa now have the

advantage of the internet and email which they use to gather information and to contribute to foreign publications, without being greatly concerned with state control. Mudhai rightly points out that in the new era where more private newspapers and FM radio stations exist in Kenya and Zambia, the freedom of the media has been enhanced. He concludes that governments should not be monitoring and controlling the public communication space. In future one would anticipate seeing the declining influence of state control of the media used by people. The power of the media to influence the draconian new information bill drafted by the government of South Africa is a case in point.

Among the variety of ICTs, email and cell phones have expanded extensively. This growth was consequently reflected in the participation of the public in political affairs. The technological advantages of these tools (for instance, emails can be sent and received not necessarily via a computer but through other mediums like cell phones) have facilitated political participation of the public. It is true that in Africa the cell phone is used much more than the landline and the internet. Africans are adopting cell phones at a faster pace, foregoing landlines in a way.<sup>15</sup>

Madhai's view is that the phenomenal growth of cell phones in African countries is because they were late adopters and governments were liberalizing cellular markets. While this is correct, it is not completely the case. The expansion of cell phone networks in African countries and its abnormally high call rates also have to do with the power of the monopoly service providers and their coalition with governments. Reporting on the situations in Kenya and Zambia, van Rensburg noted that although there has been growth in mobile access in these countries there has not been much policy intervention for more competitive markets or for regulations of pricing.<sup>16</sup> Although cell phones cannot rival other mass media like the radio, they can empower people. This applies especially to those in rural areas by allowing them to access the internet directly.

### ICTs FOR NGOs

In Kenya some NGOs train people to report corruption using cell phones.<sup>17</sup> In a study of civil society organizations in South Africa, Pillay and Maharaj<sup>18</sup> found that quite a number of organizations use cell phones for advanced purposes rather than for the elementary purposes of making and receiving calls. Adopting cell phones, Mudhai reports that some NGOs in the study areas of Kenya and Zambia use their observers to monitor elections, gather data and transmit them to the offices in the city to be disseminated later to the media. Mudhai's analysis of how new media and their use affect the state shows that the state's formal sovereignty is not largely affected and is not diminished. He indicates that civic organizations in Kenya and Zambia

consider ICTs as a means to improve their organizational and networking efficiency that in turn improves their role in influencing policies in the public sphere. This has also led to the counter launch of websites by individual politicians and parties in both countries. This also emphasizes that it is not easy for governments to control the new ICTs any longer, as was the case with the print media.

It is not certain how far NGOs in Africa are effective in using ICTs as a political tool. Mudhai's study has its limitations because of its source of data. Going by other authors such as that of van Rensburg,<sup>19</sup> the potential of the internet for stimulating democracy in Zambia was not particularly evident. As for political participation, the Kenyan political elite regard it unnecessary to have any popular political participation other than voting. This, according to Mudhai, provides only a limited idea and context for democracy when public political participation is limited and the public space is closed between elections, thus facilitating the elite's ability to rule as they please. For the leadership, any public participation in politics would threaten the political order. Mudhai finds that strong efforts were made in Kenya to suppress dissent while in Zambia a more open democratization occurred because of its weaker tradition of dissent as opposed to Kenya. It is not clear whether the author is referring to both countries when he says that the political system, institutions and the political elite worked against popular representation and accountability.

Mudhai accepts the weaknesses of civil society and NGOs as well. Their dependence on external funding preclude them from making independent decisions that are not always tied to the interests and wishes of the funders. This might have encouraged the author to observe that, as NGOs are currently structured, they are not viable vehicles for democratization in Africa. Furthermore he agrees with others that they are limited by the existing structural conditions, historical legacies, restrictions imposed by the regimes and their own internal issues. The major handicaps are not only the reliance on the external funding they receive but also the registration requirements and the room for the government to control the finances. Despite these, NGOs in both countries have helped consolidate civil society and democratic politics. But the author does not clearly spell out the role NGOs played in political transformation in Kenya and Zambia. Perhaps this is why Mudhai argues that it is so complex to study.

Mudhai's analysis is largely based on the analysis of the literature and on the work of scholars who worked in related areas. The conclusions drawn from the study confirm that the use of ICTs by civil society and NGOs has changed and expanded the public communication space for the better, and widened the opportunity to influence policies. The availability of ICTs was instrumental for NGOs to establish links with local, regional and international

actors to put pressure on the governments to make pro-people policies. It is a good sign that they continue to use ICTs in a more intensive manner. They now realize that ICTs offer them opportunities to achieve greater democracy in their own countries. In summary, the author notes that: democratization and the new media in the selected countries have been instrumental in diffusing political activity and political power; and that the processes of democratization and the deployment of new media is more complex than it appears to be.

### MANAGING INFORMATION

Access to ICTs by civil society and NGOs and using them for handling information—collecting, storing, managing and accessing—are two different things. Mike Powell's book is meant for managers to assist them in managing information and communication. Written for practical than for academic reasons, the rationale of this book is the view that the managers in development organizations are expected to perform a number of activities that inevitably depend on information and how this information is used or managed. Powell makes it clear that the book does not prescribe what managers should do in their organization but rather helps them to think differently about information as a resource. Powell's major arguments are:

- Management of information in organizations is the responsibility of everyone in the organization and, for that matter, of every manager.
- Effective management of information is always based on a general approach to management that can build the capacity of the people who work in the organization and learn from their experience. It should be a primary goal for any organization to use the information produced and received during the course of its work, since this is essential to promote organizational learning.

In Powell's view, the traditional management approaches have their share of problems. In such approaches severe constraints are put on the flow of information which can institutionalize confusion, rumor, gossip, division and discrimination. Opposed to this are the modern approaches grounded in the information society model which has a clear approach to open exchange of information and is based on the understanding that information is something which gains value while it is being shared. The sharing of information increases its value as it is subjected to more uses, comments, corrections and reshaping. ICTs serve as a practical tool for development organizations. Here Powell is touching on a very important aspect of information: how it expands its value, use and application during the process of transmission and sharing. This is very relevant for all those who seek to use information and not only for the



managers in NGOs.

According to Powell, in terms of approaches there are a number of choices for managers to choose between. In an organization there are a wide variety of sources of information—records, reports, policy statements, manuals and so on. Information can be classified according to the purposes for which it is collected namely, for purposes of financial, monitoring, transport, and management. Before information is planned for its management a resource base of data should be created. In line with his argument, the process of managing information in development NGOs does not happen independently of the daily activities of everyone. Rather, it involves everyone in the organization. To him, information management for managers in development organizations can take place in the three different contexts of:

- Managers need to be aware that it is an integral part of their work that information is a resource which is to be developed and used.
- Information management should be applied to the organizational level. Development organizations should have proper structures for information management, otherwise called information architecture.
- Information management can be applied to the tools and skills, analytical or practical, used to help with the management of information.

Powell believes that if development agencies of all hues move into the information age, they will be able to learn from their own experience. The management of information begins with knowledge about what information is to be managed, for which appropriate tools and methodologies are to be adopted. Powell develops the concept of 'information architecture' that provides an overview of who is producing and using information, for what purpose/s, where it is stored, how can it be accessed and how it flows in the organization. Strategic thinking is crucial which underlies several meanings: information is to be viewed as a strategic priority; information management to support the organizational strategy of the organization; strategic implementation of change in information management; and ICT strategy.

Powell's information architecture is appropriate for development NGOs and all organizations that need information. It provides a holistic picture of all information resources, links and flows within the organization. According to him, there is a need for information architecture for managers to have an overall view of information within the organization. It can be in the form of detailed descriptions, maps or diagrams, a 3D model or computer graphics. However, what is important is that it should be in a form that is understandable for the intended audience. It should be kept for the purpose of using it



repeatedly, and for managers to revisit it to understand what has been begun and what changes had occurred. Information architecture could be used for all potential purposes such as the introduction and the use of ICT in the organization. It can be employed as an analytical tool of a practical guide, and as a mechanism for communication and motivation. The advantages of an information architecture are many: it creates a sense of common ownership; assists staff to understand information is a resource and to accept the vision of the organization clearly; for the staff to see whether the existing information flows are appropriate; and for the greater accuracy in describing present practices.

Powell makes several important observations in the management of information in development NGOs. His point that it is not going to work when managers design the processes of information management and expect their staff to simply comply with them is correct. This is something which NGOs cannot afford to overlook. Both the staff and managers should be committed to the processes that are designed for the purpose.

On the use of ICTs in information management, Powell explores the relationship between the two. In his view, ICTs are not essential for information management as information can be managed without technical support. But if the organization chooses to adopt the supporting technology of ICT, it should be integrally linked to the management of the organization. Those who manage ICTs in the organization should ensure that the system exists for the organization, the integrity of data is maintained, data is accessible and relevant, the system is sustained, and the guidelines for ICT users are put in place.

Mitrovic<sup>20</sup> raises two challenges in the management of information in organizations that are also applicable to development organizations: first, ensuring technology is aligned with the strategies and processes of the organization so that the organization benefits, and secondly the challenge of having competent and skilled (as he terms them, e-competent and e-skilled) employees in the organization. Powell's thesis seems to agree with this theoretical framework.

## CONCLUSION

As in many other spheres, the new media had a robust influence on public political activity. Civil society organizations and NGOs took advantage of the developments in the new media to advance their agendas and programs. Africa is one of the regions that had benefitted substantially from the advancement of the media for political activists, civil society organizations and NGOs to ensure public participation and democratization. The growing trends in terms of coverage, access and use of the new media will probably have a

much greater impact on the process of democratization in Africa. It will increase public participation and downgrade the political elite from center stage. As in any organization, information is a rich resource base and tool for NGOs. How this information is handled and managed within the organization is now more crucial than the availability of information.

#### NOTES

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