SOCIAL MEDIA DYNAMICS
AS A NEW FACTOR IN AFRICAN POLITICS

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In the last years, the African political landscape has become increasingly influenced by the effects of the introduction of social media as a major channel for political debate. Apart from democratising the discourse, it has contributed massively to the spread of rumour, hate speech and disinformation, which had significant real-life effects on the ground. Re-starting the war in South Sudan in 2016 is thought to be the most spectacular of them. In the social media era, the distortion of the flow of information is a global phenomenon, which has caught the attention of analysts and the academia itself in the context of the US and European political developments. The article aims to draw a picture of its impact on African politics.

The framework for discussing the role of social media in shaping public debate and political reality in the world in the last decade can be defined by three fundamental trends:

1. New prospects for 'civic mobilization'. Social media offers potential for accelerating freedom aspirations, politicising masses, getting around censorship and administrative blockades, and finally, creating a momentum which forces authoritarian governments to back down. All of which were envisaged after the developments of the Arab Spring of 2010-2011.
2. 'Mobilisation of fear', where social media becomes a catalyser for inciting xenophobic feelings, dehumanising "the other", mobilising around hate speech and fear. This effect was seen particularly clearly during the 2015 migrant crisis in Europe.
3. 'Crisis of trust', which distorts the conduct of public debate. Its quality is affected by a number of social media-related factors:
    • The very format of the social media 'walls' which promotes the extreme shortness of texts and puts emphasis on images;
    • The emergence of a type of discourse where truthfulness or the falsehood of statements does not matter ('post-truth') (Oxford Living Dictionaries, n.d.);
    • The adoption of war-like strategies in debates where "defeating" adversaries is more valued than mutual learning and where openness to being convinced is rare;
    • The dominance of political emotions over merits;

- 'Death of expertise', where established knowledge is being perceived with suspicion, and the voices of experts are no longer considered more valuable than those of the laypeople (Nichols, 2017);
- The emergence of self-made experts and commentators exercising "power of public publishers" (acting like journalists) without skills in selecting and verifying sources, lacking standards and professional integrity (Werner, 2016);
- The fragmentation of the online public opinion into closed 'filter bubbles' (only accepting statements which confirm the established worldview of the readers) mixed with the illusion of contact with the full spectrum of the debate (Morozov, 2012);
- The gradual atomisation of the political discourse and the replacement of coherent, universal political stories with self-contradicting messages tuned up for specific sections of an electorate.

The most illustrious example of these trends was made visible during the US presidential campaign in 2016.

Each of those mechanisms, despite being highlighted in specific socio-political and cultural contexts, tends to be far more universal than many would have thought. They are indeed manifestations of wider communication problems that hamper the progress of present-day societies. The rapid expansion of social media and its quiet takeover of the role of the main channel for acquiring and spreading information on political processes and for conducting public debate have proceeded faster than the development of its users' awareness of mechanisms that shape its frames. Africa is not, therefore, repeating the experiences of others but is facing challenges in mass communication with profound political effects that are similar throughout the world. Thus, while details of specific cases in Africa will often be deeply rooted in local contexts, they will also be closely linked and parallel with processes observed elsewhere.

Conditions for conducting public debate vary from one African state to another depending on its history, political system or type of current problems (armed conflicts, political crises, social tensions, etc.). Different environments create different characteristics of trends in political discussions on Twitter or types of politics-related fake news. It is still fair to say that the politicized social media of Africa mostly relates to crises and conflicts where emotions fly high, hunger for information is problematic and the lack of the availability of objective, verified facts is evident. In the case of electoral campaigns, the goal of discrediting rivals is what mostly drives social media to exert leverage over real-life politics.

African Fake News

The African information environment, heavily impacted by the rise of social media, is undergoing a test of credibility, as its active participants (journalists, commentators), and end-users (readers) are not always aware that they share distorted pieces of information. Educational and pre-emptive activities, such as establishment in 2012 of the first verification service for stories from the African media – Africa Check

– seem to be not enough when confronting with the ubiquitousness of the phenomenon. Other counteractions, despite their systemic ambitions, are clearly of a short-term, hasty nature: the compilation of instructions on how to identify fake news, published on the website of the South African Eyewitness News, accompanied by a list of fake media outlets (Bath, 2017) was motivated by the anticipation of a disinformation campaign by the special online team (War Room) of the ruling ANC before local elections (Olewe, 2017).

Popular fake news is produced mostly for clickability and monetized through commercials. By carrying political relevance they generate huge online traffic. Such were "news" on lifting visa requirements for Nigerians by the United Kingdom or alleged remarks by Zimbabwean president that "stealing is in every Kenyan's blood"

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(Olewe, 2017). The existence and the popularity of such stories become problematic when they are given credibility by mainstream media or influential participants in the public debate. Respected Kenyan sport newspaper Game Yetu repeated "news" created by a fake news site based in South Africa that Zimbabwean female footballers were being sent to Brazil to be impregnated by local football legends. Thanks to algorithms, fake stories even popped up in the section 'you may like' placed below the very anti-fake news guidebook published by the Huffington Post South Africa (Olewe, 2017). In South Sudan, after 2013, extreme emotions accompanied discussions about the role of the informal tribal lobby group of section of the Dinka people, the Jieng Council of Elders, which exercised influence on the president. An evidently false "document" told to be authored by the group, which sketched a "plan for the Dinka rule for 200 years" (South Sudan Nation, 2016), was uncritically accepted and analysed by Peter Adwok Nyaba, one of the most experienced local public intellectuals (Nyaba, 2016). Thus, this "program" became a real subject of debate and a point of reference. When one marginal website's author added new details to the social-media-driven false story on Nigeria's President Buhari's alleged death and conspiracy to replace him with a double (Dare 2018), it was not expected to make any impact. But after an influential Christian preacher, Bishop David Oyedepo, picked it up in his televised speech (Nyesen, 2018), the president himself felt obliged to publicly assure Nigerians he was real (Mbachu, 2018). Similarly, pre-electoral fake news in Zimbabwe got a boost when integrated into the official discourse of the main newspapers (Moyo, 2018).

Well-established titles are still generally more trusted in Africa than new online sources. For this reason, often impression is deliberately given that fake news originates in reliable sources. This gives them impetus to a spontaneous spread in social media. It became notorious during a pre-election period in Kenya in 2017. A "front page" imitating the respected Kenyan Daily Nation, reporting sensational political transfer, attempted to influence the pace of pre-electoral nominations (Portland Communications, 2017). A doctored page imitating a Focus on Africa section on the BBC website, including a message predicting a certain victory of Uhuru Kenyatta was massively shared by WhatsApp users, which prompted an official *dementi* by the BBC (Akwei, 2017). A similar reaction was forced upon CNN after a high-quality video imitating its programme was released (Daldorph, 2017). When the killing of a high electoral official in Kenya before the 2017 elections elevated rumours to a higher level, the operators of Facebook announced that the platform would provide Kenyans with a special anti-fake news tool in its app (Miriri, 2017). During the Zimbabwean campaign in 2018, supporters of Nelson Chamisa used symbols similar to those of the South African Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF) to present images of crowded EFF rallies as their own in the social media (Moyo, 2018). The teams of both main candidates hired "online warriors": Varakashi (Destroyers) worked for the ruling ZANU-PF and Nerrorists (after Nero, the nickname of MDC's Nelson Chamisa) for the opposition. Both focused on sharing doctored documents while the opposition also clearly aimed at discrediting the Zimbabwe Electoral Commission to depict it as a biased, non-neutral body, unable to guarantee the fairness of the elections. Thus, it contributed to creating an atmosphere of uncertainty, pushing each side to reject any unfavourable result, and raised the risk of violence.

In Kenya, automatic Twitter accounts – bots – had approximately 25% share among the politically active ones, which is symptomatic for the significance of efforts to influence the perception of political developments. A fair portion of influential Twitter commentators in 2018 was based abroad: in cases of the elections of Liberia and Equatorial Guinea, as much as 54% of influencers resided outside of Africa (Mbah, 2018). While the overlap between Twitter and real-life politics is growing, it would be far from the truth to perceive discussions on this medium as representative.

Another aspect of distorting the debate comes from the involvement of companies specialised in the analysis of metadata for political marketing and influencing sentiments. Symbolically, Kenyan authorities hired the infamous Cambridge Analytica to work for their public image and help in conducting electoral struggle, where a wide assortment of techniques used during the 2016 US elections was employed. The representatives of the company boosted rebranding the government Jubilee Party as its biggest success story (Nyabola, 2018).

The spread of fake news prompts administrative reactions in many African states. During the 2017 campaign, the Communications Authority of Kenya and the National Cohesion and Integration Commission announced a requirement for administrators to remove each reported false material in 24 hours. The obligation was, however, never properly implemented (Sambuli, 2017). Another sign of radical

approach towards the issue came from Ivory Coast. In January 2018, the court sentenced Michel Gbagbo, the son of a former president for 6 months prison and a fine for "complicity in disclosing fake news", after he spoke of 250 political prisoners still being kept in the country in 2016. Also, Koaci.com was punished for spreading those remarks (BBC, 2018a). Obviously, these measures cannot be treated simply as targeting the danger of misinformation, but rather as part of the political agenda. Similarly, when Ugandan authorities announced in June 2018 the introduction of tax for users of Facebook, WhatsApp, Viber and Twitter to reduce the spread of "gossip", it did not sound very convincing in the context of earlier efforts to control the critical coverage online. Tanzania started to require that bloggers obtain licences and disclose their sources of financing (BBC, 2018b). Leaders more and more often treat the very existence of its citizens' problems with navigating in the information environment as an excuse for their own failures. A drastic example came from the South Sudanese President Salva Kiir, who, in 2017 told in a Deutsche Welle interview that a million of refugees who had escaped the war in his country to Uganda did so without a proper reason, after taking social media rumours too seriously (Kriesch, 2017).

An African Spring?
The events of the Arab Spring had a direct influencing effect on a wave of popular pro-freedom demands in Sub-Saharan Africa. Examples from Northern Africa helped to mobilise protest movements in Djibouti, Swaziland and other countries. If in North Africa in 2010-2011 social media was decisive, at the same time in Sub-Saharan Africa, it was not that widespread to play a key role (Fortier, 2011). The biggest success of the African extension of the Arab Spring materialised in putting a blockade to an authoritarian turn of Senegalese President Abdoulaye Wade in 2011. Under pressure from the streets, animated in traditional ways by the new youth movement Y'en a Marre, he was forced to backtrack on his plans to change electoral laws to allow a candidate winning 25% in the first round and to be declared winner. The son of Wade, Karim, whom he hoped to be his successor, was to benefit from the projected legislation. Similarly, 3 years later in Burkina Faso, an awareness-raising street movement, Le Balai Citoyen, mobilised hundreds of thousands of protesters in the capital Ouagadougou through agitation at meetings and concerts. Even if social media played not more than a subsidiary role in engaging people in politics in those cases due to limited Internet access, it was enough for Burkinabe diaspora supporting protesters in 2014 to call them a "Revolution 2.0". The most popular hashtags of the day included #AfricanSpring and #Lwili (a patriotic reference to popular Burkinabe fabrics) (Becker, 2018). But the role of Twitter took on a new importance in the following years. In 2016, 8.67% of the most popular African Twitter hashtags bared political connotations (a higher percentage than in the US, France, or the UK) while politicians and journalists still contributed to less than 10% of the discussions significant for shaping political opinions (Rwanda, where this rate was 31% by 2017, is exceptional) (Portland Communications, 2018). During the Nigerian 2015 elections, a hashtag #NigeriaDecides had far more references to the

winning Muhammadu Buhari than his competitor, incumbent Goodluck Jonathan, despite the fact that the latter was far more active on Twitter (he had poor following though). #StopNkurunziza played a significant role in mobilising protests against the leader of Burundi, Pierre Nkurunziza in 2015, which pushed the authorities to cut off mobile social media (including Facebook, Twitter, WhatsApp) in April of that year (News24, 2015), which looked like a rather odd and desperate step. In the following year, 2016, this practice became the norm: there were as many as 11 cases where state authorities cut off the Internet. Those included Cameroon where marginalised Anglophone citizens were mobilising to express their grievances, Togo where protesters demanded President Faure Gnassingbé that he depart, Ethiopia during the rising of the ethnic Oromo protest movement and Uganda during the general polls where authorities feared social unrest. In 2017 and 2018 the trend continued, with Chad and the Democratic Republic of Congo among states attempting to limit popular discontent by cutting off social media access. In each of those cases, authorities calculated that the risk of leaving the domestic social media environment free was more dangerous than the negative consequences of blackouts for their economies, such as the reduced trust of investors (Dahir, 2017). It clearly indicates that social media is believed to limit the sense of impunity of African authorities.

Hate Speech Online, Real-Life Violence
Throughout the history of rumours, half-truths and lies channelling the destructive energy of people against certain communities were spread by word of the mouth or the mass media. In Rwanda, programs based on hateful anti-Tutsi stereotypes aired by Radio Télévision Libre des Mille Collines prepared ground for the 1994 genocide (Kellow, Steeves, 1998). Xenophobic gossip repeated from mouth to mouth resulted in ethnic violence at Tana River in Kenya, where Orma and Pokoma ethnic groups fought in 2012 (Boyd et al., 2015). Thus, the development of social media has not brought any novelty in terms of content. However, the way pieces of information are seen and exchanged (like memes where striking images and "interpretative" lines of text are merged) offers a sense of comprehensiveness in explaining reality, thus their reliability is boosted. Hate speech "under the guise of open sharing of information" (LeRiche, 2016) makes its proponents believe to be contributing to freedom of speech, often restricted in their home countries. The use of mobile phones massively accelerates the speed of fake stories' spread and offers a sense of belonging to the rebelling "community of the informed", which multiplies the mobilising effect of the rumours. It not only allows sensational "news" to reach its audiences but also often revives the long-forgotten stories, which are given second or third lives and rise to a dangerous scale. A scene of the aftermath of the explosion of the fuel cistern in the Democratic Republic of Congo, verified back in 2011 by the debunking site Loonwatch, was repeatedly recycled to depict a poorly defined "Nigerian genocide" or post-electoral conflict in Ivory Coast (France24, 2016). In 2015, in South African KwaZulu province, bloody anti-foreigner riots took the lives of 7 people and displaced 7 thousand. Violence was a consequence of sharing a statement on social media attributed to the king Goodwill

Zwelithini during a rally in Pongola: it was believed that he said that foreigners were changing the structure of South African society and should pack their bags and leave (Patel, 2016). While the very ruler denied saying these words, they have spread, in the specific context of ethnic tensions and economic rivalry. They triggered an avalanche which was impossible to be stopped. A government-commissioned report stated that "the spreading of misinformation on social media platforms contributed to widespread panic at the height of the attacks in April 2015" (Patel, 2016). Similar background stood behind the violent riots in the capital of Zambia, Lusaka, in 2016, where mobs targeted Rwandan shopkeepers, the representatives of a small and well-integrated minority of 6 thousand people who had settled after fleeing the 1994 genocide. After a series of mysterious, ritual-like killings, the expectations of the public to be given explanations fuelled online speculations. According to a rumour, body parts were used by Rwandan merchants as amulets to help them succeed in business. Alarming statements placed spontaneously on social media pointing to Rwandans to be responsible for the tragedies prompted the mobilisation of militants. In April 2016, at least 62 shops were attacked, and police arrested 250 perpetrators. While ethnic tensions or competition between locals and newcomers are nothing new in South African politics, they were previously unknown to Zambians (BBC, 2016). They were nurtured inside an online "filter bubble", unnoticed by the general public, but still led some to engage in physical violence.

When Good Intentions Are Not Enough

The problem with political consequences of providing a false depiction of the situation does not only lead to attacks but also to subsequent reactions, during which new stories are built. Users exchanging messages to condemn specific acts of violence often use images taken at a different time and place and in a different context. In February 2017, attacks against DR Congolese and Nigerian immigrants in Gauteng, South Africa were reported. People sympathizing with victims of violence, including the immigrants themselves, shared drastic videos depicting scenes of killings from Brazil as these would have happened in South Africa (where there were actually no victims that time). Such a user contacted by Africa Check admitted that his intention was to raise awareness about the problem which, in his view, excused him for using means of doubtful credibility.

He spread the film to express disagreement on the alleged silence of Nigerian and Congolese governments in the wake of the attacks against their citizens (France24, 2017). Notably, the very assumption of the passivity of the governments was false: actually, Nigerian Minister of State and Foreign Affairs repeatedly requested South African authorities to guarantee safety for his compatriots and widely reported this to

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the public (Channels Television, 2017). In this case, a justified need to speak about the actually alarming situation could not only affect the international reception of the events but also influence the conduct of intergovernmental relations. Kenyan social media users passionately shared false information about election-related "mayhem in Nairobi's Mathare slum" where police was believed to have massacred residents. Emotions were so high that a disclaimer by the head of Kenyan Red Cross saying nothing similar was happening, channelled the anger of people against him. He was quickly accused of complicity in hiding the truth (Sambuli, 2017). Again, honest intentions to react to the perceived deadly crisis unfolding initiated new dynamics and gave life to new tensions on the ground.

An armed conflict brings a particularly delicate context for the information environment as its features can translate into rising ethnic tensions, fighting and other acts of violence. South Sudan, which exploded into a civil war in 2013, proved to be a ground where lines between social media discussions and real-life politics (and war) are blurred. The atmosphere of "fear and paranoia" built after the experience of the massacre of thousands of ethnic Nuers in Juba on 15-17 December 2013, left people in "survival mode" (LeRiche, 2016). This state of spirit, combined with harsh restrictions on media (hence very limited access to proven information), made the online crowd eager to pick up any piece of information that it found relevant. On 8 July 2016, James Gatdet Dak, official spokesman of the recently appeased fighting force led by Vice President Riek Machar, posted an unverified and very false statement that his boss had just been arrested in the presidential palace. As soldiers of the forces of Machar, which stationed outside the building, were killing time by scrolling Facebook walls on their mobiles, the post caused panic among troops. Chaotic shooting set the ball rolling: messages building on the shooting story, told about targeted attacks on Nuers (LeRiche, 2016), which quickly became a self-fulfilling prophecy. The toll of the fatal day was 272 dead, and it brought the collapse of the fragile peace and the renewal of an open conflict. The South Sudanese ambassador to Kenya pointed directly to the misleading Facebook post as being an impulse for the new war (Kaberia, 2016). The second phase of the South Sudanese civil war was probably the first modern armed conflict triggered by social media fake news.

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Conclusions

African social media dynamics filters into real-life politics with spectacular speed, quickly catching up with global trends in solidifying interdependency between the online and the offline. Governments increasingly consider the control of social media debates as a prerequisite for avoiding political unrest. Influencing social media debates has become one of the key features of the electoral campaigns in Africa. On the other side, grassroots hunger for relevant information, especially in crisis situations, makes it extremely difficult to prevent both intentional and spontaneous flaws of the public debate. While organised counteractions are clearly needed to limit the destructive impact of hate speech, spreading fear, social distrust and false information, these require parallel efforts and the goodwill of authorities, administrators, authors and (social) media users. Shutting down access to the Internet, which is increasingly popular among African leaders, is not a solution. Reports that in 2018 Russia brought disinformation experts to the Central African Republic, in an attempt to incite anti-French sentiments (Beau, 2018), which would give their country an advantage over the former colonial metropolis, and in 2019 to Sudan in order to undermine unity of the street protest movement against its ally President Omar al-Bashir (Elbagir, Lister, Shukla, 2019), signals the opening of a new chapter in the story: one where social media has become instrumental in a renewed competition of international powers for influences in Africa. ☀

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