Chapter 1

New Media and the Question of African Democracy

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ABSTRACT

This introductory chapter maps out the trajectory of democratization in Africa and how old and new forms of mass media remain embedded in these efforts. Drawing on decades of media and political science research, the authors argue that no genuine democracy may exist without a vibrant media environment. Democracy thrives on “transparency” and “difference,” and the media offer the platforms most suitable to ensure their existence and proliferation. The authors provide a theoretical grounding in order to further delineate the democracy media nexus, and review recent approaches to a systematic study of how communication technologies further or reverse the cause of social and political change. The authors conclude with a synoptic look at the important contributions published in this volume.

GENERAL INTRODUCTION

The Internet is the first truly post-colonial medium for the simple reason that its popularity has taken root in a world that is largely decolonized. That has not prevented it from becoming a pivotal tool in peoples’ struggle for democratic governance across the globe, from Ukraine’s “Orange Revolution” to “Occupy Wall Street” in New York. Scrutinize the context of the “Arab Spring,” and it will be impossible to escape the mesmerizing talk of the possibilities the Internet and new media have opened for social and political action in the contemporary world. Indeed, the “Arab Spring” has decimated authoritarian regimes in the Middle East and North Africa, including those of Tunisia’s Zine El Abidine Ben Ali, Egypt’s Hosni Mubarak, and Libya’s Muammar Gaddafi. Like their name-
sake, the “Prague Spring” of 1968, these historical developments reminded the world that the peoples residing in this strategic part of the globe are tired of being denied their basic freedoms, participation in democratic governance and absence of the rule of the law. However, the analogy between the two “springs” might end there because the “Arab Spring” was unprecedented in the way it catapulted scholarly and layman discussions of social media’s potential effects on social and political change. The technological tinge of these debates can be directly gleaned from news headlines that dubbed Egypt’s uprising against authoritarianism a “Twitter Revolution,” or described Tunisia’s sacking of its dictator as the first “WikiLeaks Revolution.” If Twitter and Facebook largely testify to our wired and interconnected “global public sphere” (Sparks, 2001), WikiLeaks and its founder, Julian Assange, speak for an ethos that defends the transparent and free-flow of information. Information and the means of acquiring and spreading it globally have underpinned how the “Arab Spring” was covered in local and global media (Stepanova, 2011), how non-Arab audiences arguably perceived it (Shelley, 2011), and how new media have been mobilized in the struggle for social and political change worldwide.

This introductory chapter maps out the trajectory of democratization in Africa and how old and new forms of mass media remain embedded in these efforts. Drawing on decades of media and political science research, we argue that no genuine democracy may exist without a vibrant media environment. Democracy thrives on “transparency” and “difference,” and the media offer the platforms most suitable to ensure their existence and proliferation. We provide a theoretical grounding in order to further delineate the democracy media nexus, and review recent approaches to a systematic study of how communication technologies further or reverse the cause of social and political change. We conclude with a synoptic look at the important contributions published in this volume.

**THE DEMOCRACY/MEDIA NEXUS: AFRICA’S “LOST” DECADES**

The advent of mass media has coincided with the growing legitimacy of modern democracy as a form of governance. Since liberal democracy is predicated on the rule of law, free elections, press freedom and civil society (Henze, 1998), a brief look at how it functions would reveal a symbiotic relationship between the democracy and media. Democracy involves the peaceful competition among political actors and parties to implement their social and economic vision in a society. Instead of resorting to arms and guns to settle ideological disputes, these political actors resort to the ballot box through which voters voice their support for or rejection of a political platform or a leader. Democracy involves “checks and balances,” the institutional constraints placed on those who gain voter support, what is usually known as the executive branch of government. A third condition or aspect of democracy is ensuring that all citizens have the right to express their opinions and enjoy their civil liberties without fear of reprisal. In all these steps of the democratic ladder, the news media enhance the democratic process. The news media offer a platform to these political actors to air and share their visions with voters and the rest of society. The media’s coverage of elections not only seek to hold political candidates to task, but they guarantee most citizens and voters sufficient information to make informed judgments about the merits of each election’s platforms. Finally, the media strengthen those “checks and balances” in their “watchdog” functions on those who wield political power. Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights captures this link between these two fundamental freedoms:

*Everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression; this right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers.*