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Abstract

Social media platforms have exploded in the last decade and have emerged as the arenas for discursive democracy, sociality, and digital dissidence across Africa. This article historicizes and genealogizes the exponential, if slightly imperceptible but nonetheless phenomenal, growth, maturation, and spread of social media on a continent that had been described in the scholarly literature as the blackhole of informational capitalism. It argues that the progressive centrality of social media in the quotidian lives of Africans, which has invited consternation and censorship from many African governments and inspired precarity in the traditional media sphere, instantiates the materialization of the demotic turn in communication, which situates the ordinary person as the fulcrum of the communicative process.

1 | INTRODUCTION

Social media have not only become core constituents of today's media ecosystem, they have also transfigured into, as Marshall McLuhan (1964) would put, an extension of our bodies and of nature itself (Strate, 2008). They are now the primary platforms that people deploy to connect, collaborate, organize, and interact across vast geographic and temporal boundaries. More than ever before, social networking accounts for the preponderance of time spent online in the world. According to Statistica (2019), for instance, "As of 2019, the average daily social media usage of Internet users worldwide amounted to 144 minutes per day, up from 142 minutes in the previous year."

By 2020, worldwide social media usage rocketed even higher to an average of more than 3 h a day (Whatagraph, 2020).[1] When one considers that in 2012, the average worldwide social media usage was mere 90 min, the trend points to a relentlessly exponential growth. Thus, social media platforms have become both unavoidable and the primary reason why most people use the Internet.

Nonetheless, while there is universal acknowledgement in social science scholarship of the intricate embeddedness of social media in the everyday lives of people in the West and parts of Asia, not much has been written about the initially imperceptible evolution but ultimately phenomenal profusion of social media usage on the African

continent, which had for long been a digital pariah in a social media-suffused world. This paper chronicles the emergence, growth, and democratization of social media in Africa's media culture—or what has been called the demotic turn in communication, which the next section briefly conceptualizes and connects to the mainstreaming of social media usage in Africa.

2 | THE DEMOTIC TURN IN MEDIA USAGE: A REVIEW

As an everyday term, "demotic" means relating to or about ordinary people. To describe something as demotic is to denote its everydayness, its popularity, its ubiquity, and its ever-present colloquiality. It is derived from "*demos*," the Greek word for "the people." That means "demotic" shares etymological affinities with "democracy" because, as Ober (2007, p. 1) points out, "Democracy... [i]n origin...is... a composite of *demos* and *kratos*. Since *demos* can be translated as 'the people' (qua 'native adult male residents of a polis') and *kratos* as 'power,' democracy has a root meaning of 'the power of the people.'"

However, although "democratic" and "demotic" are etymological kin, they are not always semantic kith. As Chouliaraki (2015) found out in her study of the citizen journalistic coverage of post-Arab Spring conflict in the Middle East, "The rise of citizen voice constitutes, in this context, a 'demotic,' rather than a 'democratic,' turn in that, by trading professional validity for personal authenticity, [it] prioritises the immediacy of experience over fact-checking and expert analysis" (p. 4). In other words, what is commonplace, or demotic, is not always common sense, or democratic. While this is an ontologically problematic claim to make because democracy also has within it the seeds of its own destruction such as its capacity to spawn toxic populism, understanding the difference between the demotic and the democratic is important.

The notion of the "demotic turn" in communication was first deployed by Graeme Turner (2004) to encapsulate the "increasing visibility of the 'ordinary person' as they have turned themselves into media content through celebrity culture, reality TV, DIY web-sites, talk radio and the like" (p. 2). It is, in many ways, similar to Henry Jenkin's (2001) notion of "media convergence," which he said, "fosters a new participatory folk culture by giving average people the tools to archive, annotate, appropriate and recirculate content." In essence, the demotic turn centers the everyday communicator, rather than oligopolistic media institutions, as the fulcrum of communicative encounters in an increasingly networked, internet-fueled society.

In his 2010 book titled *Ordinary People and the Media: The Demotic Turn*, Turner further expanded and problematized the contours and content of the demotic turn in communication by arguing, for instance, that while the world has seen the unmatched proliferation of delivery technologies, platform diversity, collaborative content creation, a cornucopia of choices for the consumer, empowerment of the ordinary media user, "consumption of media has become so individualized and fragmented" (p. 2) that the emancipatory potential of democratized and demotic media access is undermined. He nonetheless praised the "interactivity of 'web 2.0' and digital culture, in which the ordinary person is more producer than consumer, more representing than represented" (West, 2012, p. 84).

The demotic turn in communication or media usage is therefore what one might characterize as the quotidianization or de-elitization of communication or media usage. In other words, it is the communication culture in which everyday people become both consumers and co-creators of media messages, where the process of communication is decentered and de-hierarchized. It is the turn that empowers hitherto powerless people, that gives voice to the voiceless, that provides platforms to represent the unrepresented, and that gives a face to the previously invisible. The demotic turn, in short, centers the hitherto decentered in emergent, more liberalized, and less hierarchized communicative spaces.

Since the social media landscape is horizontal, pervasive, invites collective participation, and draws more people into it than any other media ecological sphere before it, it is the most fully realized manifestation of the demotic turn in communication. The next section conceptualizes social media and shows how its vigorous diffusion in Africa has transformed the continent's communicative landscape.

3 | SOCIAL MEDIA AND MEDIA CULTURE IN AFRICA

Kaplan and Haenlein's (2010) definition of social media as "a group of Internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0, and that allow the creation and exchange of User Generated Content" (p. 61) has become canonical even if a little dated since it does not capture mobile applications through which most social media platforms are now accessed, but it nonetheless capsulizes the supremacy of the collaborative and co-creative energies of everyday people to the idea of social media. Without ordinary people creating and co-creating volitional free content to give expression to their subjectivities, there would be no social media.

The definition of social network sites by Boyd and Ellison (2008) also centralizes the intrinsically collaborative character of social media. According to them,

> We define social network sites as web-based services that allow individuals to (1) construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, (2) articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and (3) view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system (p. 211).

As the definition makes clear, individual users—in intentional, spontaneous collaborative exchanges with other users—are the building blocks of social media networks. In other words, the idea of social media is powered by a kind of demotic "voluntary cultural labor" (Kperogi, 2011, p. 321) that builds on what Andrew Ross (2000, p. 6) has called the principle of "cultural discount," which ensures that "artists and other arts workers accept non-monetary rewards— the gratification of producing art—as a compensation for their work, thereby discounting the cash price of their labor." In the era of social media, this might be called demotic cultural discount.

Certain technological and philosophical foundations have been pivotal to the growth, mass appeal, and universal acceptance of social media networks: they are free, require no special skills to use, create opportunities for prosumption (i.e., the simultaneous production and consumption of content), are devolved and non-hierarchical, are alterable sometimes immediately, and are perpetually evolving.

In the last decade, social media platforms, particularly Facebook, Twitter, WhatsApp, and Instagram, have emerged as the most consequential spaces for sociality, civic engagement, public opinion formation and accretion, critical democratic citizenship, citizen and traditional journalism, social movements, identity assertion, and dissidence against oppressive governments across Africa. The inexorably progressive intensification of Internet penetration in the continent will ensure that this will be an abiding feature of the continent's media ecology for the foreseeable future.

The growing importance of social media to the everyday lives of Africans is underscored by the fact that the average daily time spent on social media in the continent as of 2020 was 3 h 10 min, which is similar to the global average. This record is outrivaled only by South America where the average time spent on social media is 3 h 24 min. In Asia and Oceania, it is 2 h 16 min. In North America, it is 2 h 6 min. Europe had the lowest at 1 h 15 min (BroadbandSearch).[2]

The diffusion of social media in Africa is stimulated by the enormous growth and explosion of mobile technology, which has helped leapfrog the continent to the global network society (James, 2009). The progressive lowering of the cost of access to the Internet is also aiding the popularization of social media. Every projection for the future of internet-ready mobile telephony in Africa (see, for instance, Ogone, 2020) points to the unstoppable certainty of its continued growth and blossoming and for the central role it will continue to play in powering Africa's frenetic social media scene.

It used to be argued that what former U.S. Secretary of State Colin Powell once called "digital apartheid" (see Graham, 2011, p. 212), which consigned much of Africa to the fringes of the information society, was actuated by a "proximity gap" between the more industrialized countries of the world and Africa, which impeded the sale of mobile phones to everyday folks on the continent (Naude, 2009). From the early 2000s, however, Chinese phone

manufacturers bridged the proximity gap by flooding African markets with cheap mobile phones that were initially derisively called "Shanzhai handsets"[3] because they were crude but handy counterfeits of more established phone brands from the West (Chen & Wen, 2016). As Olaleye et al. (2019, p. 732) point out, in time, with "the introduction of the Chinese own [sic] flagship Time Division Synchronous Code Division Multiple Access (TD-SCDMA) for 3G mobile phones [which] revolutionized the Chinese mobile phone industry, leading to the emergence of Chinese genuine mobile phone manufacturers like Huawei and ZTE," genuine, affordable, multifunctional phones manufactured in China replaced the "Shanzhai handsets" in African markets, although several of the low-cost Chinese phones sold in such countries as Ethiopia, Ghana, Cameroon and South Africa have been found to be pre-installed with malware (Ziady, 2020).

The inundation of the African market with low-priced Chinese smartphones coincided with the emergence of an African consumer middle class and of consumerism as a lifestyle (Ncube & Lufumba, 2015), a continent-wide youth bulge, and the strengthening of transnational connections between many African homelands and their diasporas in the West (Kperogi, 2008; Skjerdal, 2011). These factors conduced to the incipience, maturation, and democratization of social media in much of Africa, although social media access on the continent is still far from extensively diffused. Out of Africa's roughly 1.3 billion people as of October 2021, a little over 500 million (which represents about 40% of the continent's population) have access to the Internet. Nonetheless, while this suggests that Internet access and social media usage are still elitist and reflect reigning social hierarchies, an assessment of the growth and spread of the Internet, communication technologies, and social media usage over the last 2 decades indicates a progressive ease of access. For instance, there has been a 100% Internet growth on the continent from 2000 to 2021. The number of Internet users on the continent increased from 360,985,492 in December 2000 to 5,053,891,122 in December 2020. Ncube and Lufumba (2015, p. 2) quoted the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development as saying that "Cellphone use has grown faster in Africa than any other region of the world since 2003."

But social media was not always organic to the quotidian life of Africans. In fact, up until the 1990s, Africa used to be characterized as the world's digital outcast; it was located on the desolate margins of the information society. Manuel Castells (1998) even once characterized the continent as a constituent of the "black hole of informational capitalism." Considering the continent's hitherto abysmally low connectivity to the emergent digital universe of the 1990s and the early 2000s, this characterization seemed justified.

As Hjort and Poulsen (2019) pointed out, as of 2000, there was more Internet bandwidth in Luxembourg, one of Europe's smallest countries, than there was in the entire African continent. Even by 2013, only 13% of Africa had access to the Internet. However, in the last few years, much of Africa has been "leapfrogging Internet connectivity using mobile phones" (Masinde, 2019). Although Africa still lags the rest of the world in Internet penetration, there has been a steadily admirable rise in Internet connectivity and in social media usage. The next section genealogizes and historicizes the emergence of social media in Africa.

4 | A SHORT HISTORY OF SOCIAL MEDIA IN AFRICA

When Sixdegrees.com, recognized by most scholars as the world's first social media site (see, e.g., Boyd & Ellison, 2008; Donath & Boyd, 2004; Ezumah, 2013; Howard, 2008), was first launched in 1997, there were scarcely, if any, Africans among the site's 3,500,000 members. Although Sixdgrees.com had a "BlackPlanet" community tool—along with an "AsianAvenue" one—which "allowed users to create personal, professional, and dating profiles" (Boyd & Ellison, 2008, p. 214), only the Black Diaspora in the West could participate in it since Internet access was severely inadequate on the continent in the 1990s. The situation remained largely unchained even up to 2001 when Sixdegrees.com closed shop.

Successors or contemporaries to Sixdegrees.com—such as LiveJournal (launched in 1999), Friendster (launched in 2002) and MySpace (launched in 2003)—did not have many Africans from the continent for the same reason of

constrained or non-existent Internet access. An assessment of the geographic footholds of the world's earliest social media sites shows that all of Africa was excluded from their universes.

For instance, while Friendster was rooted in the United States, it gained footing in the Pacific Islands. Orkut, a social media site launched in 2004 by Google, was popular in India and Brazil (Boyd & Ellison, 2008). Hi5, an American social media site formed in 2003, grew popular in South America, Europe, and Asia before its decline. In other words, from 1997 when the first social media site evolved until the turn of the century Africans were not part of the world's social media conversation.

The introduction and democratization of social media in most parts of Africa started in earnest in the late 2000s, which is co-extensive with the osmotic growth of internet-enabled mobile telephony on the continent (Essoun-gou, 2010). At the close of the 2000s, there were only 4,514,400 Internet users in the entire continent, but "[s]eventeen years later it had increased to 453,329,534, giving Africa an Internet penetration of 35.2%" (Mkono, 2018).This growth popularized social media and fueled participation in social media conversations.

As of March 2020, there were 212,911,701 Facebook subscribers in Africa, representing a little over 40% of the continent's 526,710,313 Internet users. Egypt leads the continent with 42,400,000 Facebook subscribers followed by Nigeria with 27,120,000 subscribers (Internet World Stats). A December 2020 eMarketer report also shows that although India has the world's largest concentration of Facebook users, "the three fastest-growing countries are all in Africa: Nigeria, Egypt, and South Africa" (Williamson, 2020). That is a remarkable turnaround for a continent that was almost entirely excluded from social media a decade earlier.

An indication of the connection between increased social media usage and mobile telephony emerged in 2018 when Facebook revealed that 98% of Africans who accessed the social media platform did so through mobile devices (Shapshak, 2018), which is consistent with the global pattern that shows that up to 92% of the world's Internet traffic on social media platforms come from mobile devices (Kemp, 2020).

Twitter and Instagram are also growing exponentially in the continent, particularly in Egypt, Nigeria, South Africa, Kenya, and Ghana. With a growth rate of 13.92% between April 2019 and January 2020, Africa is second only to Asia's 16.98% in the growth of social media users worldwide (Dean, 2021).

The vigorous democratization of the Internet and, with it, the evolution of social media have vaulted the continent to the global, Internet-fueled network society. This fact has expanded and deepened Africa's deliberative spaces, inspired digital activism, nourished ecommerce, and enabled robust citizen participation in and engagement with governance. It has also animated social movements, actuated transnational connections, disrupted settled cultural certainties, and threatened the security and smug self-satisfaction of autocracies, as the next section illustrates.

5 | DEMOTIC USES OF SOCIAL MEDIA IN AFRICA

Social media platforms have displaced the traditional media as the most consequential discursive spaces in most of Africa. For instance, from at least the late 2000s, Facebook and Twitter have become the primary arenas for electoral contests in many African countries. Both the electorate and people seeking electoral offices have come to regard social media spaces as important showgrounds for the push and pull of contending viewpoints, for canvassing votes, for connecting with voters, for mobilizing sentiments against candidates, and for giving expression to electoral anxieties. That was why Smyth (2013) pointed out that, "Elections are also a boom time for discourse on social media in many African nations, as citizens review their electoral choices, encourage each other to vote, and report what they are seeing" (pp. 1–2).

For example, a study of the 2007 general elections in Nigeria showed that "citizens' access to social media electronically empowers the electorates to be actively involved in negotiating the terms of democratic governance with institutionally empowered politicians and leaders" (Ifukor, 2010, p. 407). Similarly, a study of the 2011 elections in Nigeria showed that although citizen media reports on social media platforms "did not influence the outcome of the election, they shaped its processes and conduct and guided its discourse" (Kperogi, 2012, p. 455). Four years later,

it was found that "social media networks, particularly Facebook and Twitter, played central roles in Nigeria's 2015 presidential elections that saw an opposition candidate, Muhammadu Buhari, defeat incumbent President Goodluck Jonathan" (Kperogi, 2016, p. 28). Scholars have also documented the increasingly visible roles that social media platforms have played in elections in several African countries (see e.g., Ndlela & Mano, 2020).

Africans have deployed social media not just to fight electoral battles but also to fight against corruption (Tanga et al., 2019), energize social movements, call attention to injustice, and collaborate with global networks in holding domestic governments accountable. As Kalyango and Adu-Kumi (2013) have found out in one of the earliest studies on social media usage in Africa,

> Netizens indicated that they experience unlimited freedom and autonomy from state intimidation, and as such they build selfesteem through communicating with others and building local and international contacts with whom they share common interests and opportunities. The majority of netizens said that spending more time on virtual social network sites such as Myspace or Friendster than at what some called physical "drinking-joints" or "socialite-bars," increases their awareness of "universal basic rights and the meaning of true democracy," and it fulfills their dreams of making a change in the national discourse without the help of their local traditional media: newspapers, radio, or television stations.

As this quotation shows, right from their incipience in Africa, social media platforms have emerged as spheres for sociality and as alternatives or complements to the traditional media. In Uganda, for instance, the hugely popular and interactive talk radio programs known as "Ekimeeza" have been replaced by Facebook, causing a Ugandan scholar to characterize Facebook in the country as "FaceBimeeza" (Alina, 2022). The spirit of public debate and civic journalism that the Ekimeeza radio formats encapsulated (Nassanga, 2008) now find infinitely more untrammeled avenues on Facebook. Similarly, evidence has emerged that social media platforms have robustly challenged and, in some cases, supplanted the traditional media as sources of news in South Africa (Bosch, 2014), Nigeria (Kperogi, 2020; Uwalaka & Watkins, 2018), Egypt (bib_Jebril_and_Loveless_2017Jebril & Loveless, 2017), Zimbabwe (Ndlela, 2020), and many other countries across the continent.

There is also mounting trove of evidence that young Africans now increasingly use Instagram as a global photographic public sphere to dispel stereotypes of the continent by sharing photos of parts of the continent that are often marginalized in global portrayals of Africa. Since its mass embrace by Africans in the last half of the past decade, Instagram has evolved from merely being a platform for photographic voyeurism and pictorial preening by youngsters to a platform to challenge negative representations of the continent while not concealing its problems. As Zimbabwean Instagrammer Zash Chinhara told the BBC, "We do not need to discount the bad things that are going on; however, there is a life and a vibrancy here. We need to paint a fuller picture of what Africa is" (Mba, 2019).

There is also a well-known Instagram handle called "EverydayAfrica," which is a collaborative photographic page managed by Africans on the continent and by Westerners who had lived there whose major project is to turn "their cameras away from photographing refugees and victims of the decade-long civil war in the Ivory Coast and instead began capturing scenes of everyday life" (Canal & Sepehr, 2019).

But, as with every media platform, the uses of social media are not always benign on the continent. Social media platforms have also occasionally been used to spread intentionally false news, smear innocent people, scapegoat and demonize particular ethnic and immigrant groups, circulate hate speech, and destabilize the fabric of societies (Chenzi, 2020; Mare et al., 2019; Mutahi & Kimari, 2020; Wasserman & Madrid-Morales, 2019). Governments on the continent have used this reality as a pretext to muzzle critical voices and constrict the deliberative space online.

Although social media platforms have proliferated on the continent and are embedded in the fabric of everyday life, they are now increasingly threatened by regimes that are disquieted by their disruption. Amid the expansion of the discursive space that social media has stirred is also a threat from various African governments to constrict and constrain its luxuriance. From Tanzania requiring bloggers to pay $900 a year for the privilege to blog (Dahir, 2018)

to Uganda imposing a tax on citizens to use social media (Namubiru, 2018), to Cameroon's periodic shutting down of the Internet to stall the spread of digital rebellion against the government (Monks, 2018), to various African leaders deploying surveillance technology to spy on citizens who are critical of governments (Mojeed, 2019), to restrictive laws designed to asphyxiate dissent in such countries as Nigeria, Zambia, Zimbabwe, Mali, Rwanda, Ethiopia, Sudan, and other countries, there is a war on Internet freedom on the continent and an active campaign to constrict the discursive space of the continent's various virtual public spheres.

6 | CONCLUSIONS

Although social media was slow to take roots in Africa—and its growth is still uneven on the continent—it has become integral to the quotidian lives of vast swathes of everyday Africans and is one of the fastest growing in the world. The rise of Internet-supported mobile telephony on the continent seems poised to ensure the continued relevance of social media in Africa's media culture and ecology. Traditional media formations and hitherto habitual forms of sociality are being challenged and redefined with breathtaking rapidity by the inexorable march of social media spread.

The pervasively collaborative nature of the connected presence that social media platforms enable also imbues everyday Africans with unexampled agential powers for self-presentation, digital resistance, deliberative democracy, and sociality. Although Africa was late to embrace social media, it is not only catching up with the rest of the world, it is also in some cases surpassing others.

Social media users on the continent find the same uses and gratification from social media as the rest of the world. Most importantly, though, social media use has inserted more everyday Africans into the structures of emergent Internet-enabled global public spheres like never before even though audience fragmentation and ideological silos remain ever-present hindrances to the emergence of seamless global or even domestic public spheres on the Internet. While the mainstreaming of social media usage on the continent in no way suggests a path to the extirpation of the existential challenges that plague it, it signals the transformation of its media landscape from an oligopolistic, elite-driven one to a demotic one. This reality does not, of course, elide the "data colonialism" (Couldry & Mejias, 2019) of social media spaces by big tech companies domiciled in the West, which expropriate the creative energies of social media users in the Global South for profit.

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ENDNOTES

¹ Whatagraph is an Amsterdam-based "cloud-based reporting solution designed to help organizations create and automate marketing reports using predefined templates and various data sources."

² According to Crunchbase, Broadband Search is a comprehensive online database online "of all the Internet & TV Providers in the United States."

³ Shanzhai is a Chinese coinage originally invented to semanticize fake phones from China. The word's meaning has now been expanded to capture any Chinese simulation of an original product. For an exploration of the emergence and evolution of the term, see Han (2017).

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