#WhatWouldMagufuliDo? Kenya's digital 'practices' and 'individuation' as a (non)political act

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The ubiquity of new media technologies in many parts of Africa today and the celebratory narratives with which their adoption is routinely discussed in the continent often firmly silence some important questions. Among these is new media technologies' inherent capacity to also exclude, neuter or appropriate "popular" voices. This article attempts to explore this paradox. Focusing on Web 2.0 applications, more specifically Twitter, and using Kenya as a case study, the article explores the emergent expressive cultures new media technologies have incubated in the country. It argues that they "disrupt" the "normal" thus creating important pockets of "indiscipline" which variously challenge and confront power, and very often from the margins- but only partly. For while digital technologies enable and encourage public participation in "popular" conversations about self, community and nation through practices such as "individuation", the article also explores how these possibilities are constrained by problematic material conditions that render claims of popular inclusion and participation in these digital spaces fundamentally tenuous.

Keywords: individuation, KOT, digital media, digital technology, Twitter, 'popular', Magufuli

The ubiquity and the presumed openness and inclusive nature of digital technology sit uncomfortably with the lived experiences of many people in the developing world. In most of these regions, the contradictory face of the so-called "digital revolution" is to be found in its simultaneous exclusion of those on the margins and sometimes singular appropriation by those who represent capital and power. It is of course arguable that today digital technology enables, even if nominally, incursions into power and creates important pockets of "indiscipline" by and through which those on the margins of society may speak. This is variously made possible through a range of innovative discursive practices and other

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expressive cultures. This article seeks to tease out and explore some of these practices. This is however discussed against the paradox of digital technology's inherent capacity to also inversely enable forms of popular exclusion. I will specifically focus on the impact of disruptive technologies in the form of Web 2.0 applications particularly the micro-blogging site Twitter, with my examples drawn primarily from Kenya. I focus on Twitter for two key reasons. My interest in this article is fundamentally political. While various social media are widely used in Kenya, the dominant use of Twitter as a platform for civic and political debate makes it especially relevant for this discussion. This political bent is supported by various research on social media use in Kenya[1]. Kenya has one of the most active online communities in Africa coming fourth after Egypt, Nigeria and South Africa[2]. More importantly, one in 10 of the most popular hashtags in Africa in 2015 for example related to political issues and politicians[3]. The other reason I am focusing on Twitter rests on its unique "communicative structure"[4]. This structure is distinctive for the reason that it has "two overlapping and independent networks - one based on follower-followee relationships, the other based on shared interests in a topic coordinated by a common hashtag"[5]. The potential thus for broader targeted public participation in online debates is not only likely but also enabling of a focused study than other social media such as Facebook.

More broadly, I argue that digital media technologies in Kenya have incubated new expressive communication infrastructures and cultures. These include the emergence of a new community of communication practitioners and practices outside the formalised structures of legacy media, and an emergent web-enabled communication infrastructure and economy that has made possible the relative broadening of the public sphere through "alternative journalisms" and other forms of expressive digital practices. The article further argues that the very nature of these digital practices presupposes a specific kind of digital literacy, level of access and capital, issues which collectively undermine public participation

and therefore rather than articulate the "popular", digital platforms sometimes expressly deny that possibility. I therefore submit that although Kenya is in the throes of an important age, one in which the normative is daily problematized by technology, it is not an age of unlimited progressive possibilities.

The politics of social media practices

The cautionary position above notwithstanding, the ubiquity and ease with which digital technology is now "domesticated" has seen the widespread adoption of social media in particular as a tool for daily communication, organization, as well as for social and political campaigns in Kenya. While the narrative used to discuss these roles on occasion tends to be overly techno-deterministic, some key facts remain arguable.

In much of contemporary African campaign practices - both political and civic, social media are now either rightly or wrongly assigned prominent and sometimes critical roles of influence. From forms of political protest such as the "Arab Spring" in North Africa, to demonstrations against university fees in #feesmustfall in South Africa, #bringbackourgirls in Nigeria, to crowdfunding appeals for the needy such as #1MilliforJadudi in Kenya, the organizing potential of social media frames key discussions on critical events and issues in the continent. These roles seem to inhere in the very nature of the technology. Their in-built functionalities allow instant interactivity and easy distribution of messages, enabling the scaling up of 'causes'. This way they are able to attract attention, participation and even "infiltrate mainstream media channels as the viral communication spreads".[6] As Fenton and Barassi and others thus argue, it is in part because of these characteristics that "social media platforms enable new ways in which to think and act political engagement".[7] Indeed, as Plevrity observes, "the advent of Web 2.0 has gradually led to a participatory model of culture, in which individuals are not merely passive consumers of content; instead, they

function within collaborative networks in order to actively and critically evaluate, reshape and disseminate media content".[8]

These characteristics and roles are in part captured by two related concepts attributed to two prominent scholars, Bernard Stiegler and Manuel Castells. Some of whose thoughts on technology are particularly relevant to this discussion more generally and also key to understanding the place of social media in mediating the political, broadly defined, in Kenya. By political, I use Fenton and Barassi's description of the political as going beyond the narrow confines of politics to simultaneously include the personal, gendered and cultural[9].

Stiegler introduces us to the idea of "individuation" in his reading of digital technologies while Castells talks about the "creative autonomy" and self-mass communication that social networks make possible. Both concepts are well summarised by Fenton and Barassi, whose reading inform this discussion.

Stiegler believes that "individuation" - that process of disentangling oneself from the collective - is only made possible by "the act of speaking out".[10] He argues that "by speaking for oneself the individual is able to establish his or her singularity with reference to a collective".[11] For him, social media are therefore "spaces for the construction of a digital singularity; a process that—although at times can be seen as narcissistic[12]—can in fact lead to the growth of radical and creative alternatives".[13] Castells similarly sees social networks enabling "new political and creative possibilities functioning at once as sites of democratic engagement and mass collaboration, while also offering individual autonomy".[14]

On one level at least, Fenton and Barassi agree with Castells and Stiegler that indeed, through the mass communication of the self, social media can enable the participation of citizens in politically significant ways. However, they also argue that it is just as important "to further critique the nature of participation".[15] They suggest that rather than take the idea

of participation as unproblematic, we need to ask ourselves this critical question: "Participation for whom and for what purpose?".[16]

They argue that this "form of political individualism not only denigrates the collective creativity of politics it also presumes a level of significance for social media that is, at the very least, open to question".[17] They contend that "in a world of communicative abundance, putting one's political faith in the ability of individual instances of communicative experience, albeit in a networked form, to deliver social and political change, is a dubious practice".[18]

More importantly they observe that "social media cannot escape, and indeed are part of, the stratified online eyeball economy", an economy in which "the traditional and the mainstream are still dominant"[19] citing the fact that "mainstream news and information sites still attract the most traffic just as certain celebrities and elites generate the largest networks".[20] I broadly locate my discussion below within these theoretical constructs.

Twitter as an (alternative) discursive space in Kenya

The online platform as an important space for social and political engagement in Kenya is a subject that has now attracted significant scholarly attention. Some of these include Simon *et al*'s discussion of how Twitter became the "dominant social media platform used by the public and responding organizations"[21] during the Westgate Mall terrorist attack in Nairobi in September 2013. Tully and Ekdale look at the everyday use of Twitter in Kenya arguing that it provides space for popular engagement with both the banal and the serious[22]. They propose that these sites should be examined within ICTD research as discussions therein constitute important issues related to development. Focusing on the political, Makinen and Kuira offer a useful discussion of the role played by social media during Kenya's post-election crisis[23]. With the state curtailing free expression in mainstream media, for example by banning live

broadcasts, many Kenyans "migrated" online for rolling news and more intimate conversations - ugly, subversive and controversial relating to the unfolding crisis.[24]

Dugmore and Ligaga on their part have studied smaller online platforms and citizen journalists in Kenya and South Africa. They argue more generally that the online platform is increasingly facilitating the creation of alternative spaces for public deliberation that are far more representative of public interest and that enable "popular" inclusion in such discussions[25]. Ligaga further provides an insightful discussion of how the internet in Kenya has provided "space for a vast majority of people to articulate their opinions and desires, perform their identities, present the unsaid, circulate informal information, and to generally negotiate the meanings of political and cultural issues in their lives"[26]. Arguing that these practices are inherently "alternative", she observes that these online platforms "bring to the fore aspects of social and political lives and ideas that would otherwise have remained hidden from public discourse"[27].

Researching Twitter however provides significant methodological challenges.[28] Although now a site of increasing scholarly interest there is no single approach in social media research that has been widely adopted. Twitter datasets are usually large, requiring big financial investment in appropriate analytics software. Other challenges include "the self-selecting nature of social media users, inequalities in access to social media platforms and data, the difficulty of obtaining meaning from heterogenous data of variable quality and provenance and a dependence on observing and interpreting what is 'out there' in a way that differs from traditional sampling approaches".[29] In this article, I adopt Tully and Ekdale's approach which instead combines fieldwork and participant observation on Kenya's Twittersphere[30]. Like them, I focus only on civically tagged tweets. Additionally I only look at trending topics and even then only focus on those hashtags that received attention in mainstream press. The discussion threads are mined from Twitter's own archive. I also want

to stress that the examples I cite are at best only indicative of the conversations that Kenyans on Twitter engage in rather than an exhaustive account of the social and political debates online.

Kenyans on Twitter, or KOT as they are popularly known, is a community which although dispersed and heterogeneous constitutes itself as a public.[31] Most of the conversations within this community with participants drawn from within and outside Kenya have Kenya as their primary reference. This community has a notable reputation for scaling up various political and social issues and stories in the country. Once the stories go viral, they routinely make "news" in the mainstream legacy press whose coverage still seem to validate their significance. What is equally interesting is the fact that although participation is notably horizontal, open to all, unmoderated and in principle non-hierarchical, this online community has created its own hierarchies. Most conversations on KOT are generally scaled up or popularised by a few well-known bloggers, activists, politicians, celebrities and journalists. Notable names include Ory Okolloh, Robert Alai, Cyprian Nyakundi, Larry Madowo and Boniface Mwangi, among others. They have between them millions of "followers" not only on Twitter but on other social media sites such as Google+, Instagram, Facebook and individual blogs. They have become almost by default the community's "primary definers" and seem to have significant impact on which stories trend and therefore which are picked up by mainstream press. This re-ordering of the online space into hierarchies has implications for its democratic claims. It is an argument I illustrate using a few notable examples.

In Kenya Robert Alai has arguably been one of the most known, if controversial, and visible bloggers in the country with a particularly large following on Twitter and other social media platforms.[32] He has to his credit exposed instances of injustice, particularly those involving powerful and wealthy individuals, interventions which on occasion have seen him arrested and charged in court for various alleged illegal indiscretions. Such cases not only

enhanced his public profile but also made him a "focal point of reference for those seeking redress from powerful corporate organizations… or those frustrated by government bureaucracy and inefficiency".[33] His significant online following ensures that most of the issues he tweets about are easily scaled up and picked up by mainstream media which gives them the kind of visibility and legitimacy that quite often provokes some form of practical action. In essence, Alai's online profile gave him social capital which not only had practical utility, but also made it possible for him to shape discourse online.

Importantly though, Alai cashed in on this fame. For example, a number of corporate organizations in Kenya use him "to communicate with their customers and public in general".[34] He retweets their messages or passes these as his own tweets to his followers. It has become an "affective" but problematic transactional relationship whose abuse was especially manifest in a case involving him, a local news organisation (NTV) and an aviation college in Nairobi. In February 2015, Dennis Okari a journalist with NTV was doing an investigative story on the Nairobi Aviation College, an institution which had been suspected of awarding bogus degrees at a fee. In a conversation covertly recorded by the journalist, Alai asked the journalist to drop the story because "his client" was apparently complaining that they were not given a "right of reply". Having refused his request, Alai then went ahead to troll Okari and his NTV colleagues. Alai's involvement with the Nairobi Aviation College is a good example of how corporate organizations easily if covertly appropriate "popular online voices".

Less linear is the case of Boniface Mwangi, a well-known photo-journalist turned citizen journalist, activist and "artivist" in Kenya. Mwangi runs a number of social enterprise initiatives which often merge social activism with political objectives. He has been at the forefront of some of the most visible social and political campaigns involving mainly "shock art" and demonstrations in the country. In January 2013, he led a demonstration against an

attempt by Kenyan MPs to increase their salaries by releasing a pig and piglets drenched in blood in front of the country's Parliament. These unusual forms of shock art not only attract immediate media coverage locally, they also easily go viral due to their powerful visual character, something Mwangi has exploited to great effect over the years.

One of his most "successful" social/political interventions was his organisation of the #Occupyplayground demonstration which went viral with the hashtag #Occupyplayground. In January 2015 a school playground in Lang'ata, a suburb South West of Nairobi was alleged to have been grabbed by a private developer for the expansion of a hotel. The mainstream media largely ignored the story when it emerged that a powerful politician, later revealed to have been the deputy president, was one of the owners of the hotel.[35] When the story appeared on Twitter, Mwangi began a campaign on the platform condemning the alleged land grab. He popularised the Twitter hashtag #Occupyplayground, inspired by the 'Occupy' movement. Already familiar with the Occupy protest movement, Mwangi's campaign had ready participants and a transnational audience. Public interest and response to the hashtag saw it trend nationally thus attracting significant local and international media attention. The UK's *Guardian* newspaper for example covered the story.[36]

Discussions on the hashtag went beyond the land in question to include a much more expansive and heated conversation about the spiralling corruption in the country and more importantly, the government's inability to address the problem. KOT named similar cases of land grabbed by government officials and businessmen. For example, Kenya Dialogues Prj @SIDKDP on 22 July 2015 tweeted:

> "Since #OccupyPlayGround, 350 schools have reported cases of land grabbing to the
> @Land_Commission #ShuleYangu"
> #ShuleYangu Milimani pri ground (Kirichwa Rd) was grabbed by Jehova Witnesses in the 90's. Is
> it too late? #OccupyPlayGround @bonifacemwangi
> We no tire. One school at a time til all schoolgrabs r history & schools off the market
> #OccupyPlayground #ShuleYangu

Others such as Michael ORWA IV. @Sangodala on 23 April 2015 tweeted:

"We shall not tire. Must not relent. Those facilitating theft of children's playground will fall #OccupyPlayGround @KideroEvans @WilliamsRuto"

"The cry of a nation. We shall not relent. We must not waver. @EACCKenya @UKenyatta #OccupyPlayGround #ListOfShame" .

It is significant to note that the President through the twitter handle @UhuruKenyatta and the subject of the online ire, Deputy President William Ruto @WilliamsRuto, were constantly tagged in the #Occupyplayground twitter thread as was the body tasked with investigating corruption cases in the country, the Ethics and Anti-Corruption Commission of Kenya (@EACCKenya). Other hashtags were created alongside the #Occupyplayground such as #shuleyangu (my school) which helped cascade the conversation if at the same reasserting public support for Mwangi's campaign.

These hashtags were in many ways a form of "popular entrapment" in which authority was confronted, subjected to criticism and humiliated. Importantly, through the occupy hashtag, a farmer could directly confront the President and the Deputy President. The relational distance between the centre and the margins was compressed as political hierarchies were at least temporarily dismantled. The hashtag allowed for a less vertical but more horizontal participation in the discussion, one which is certainly not possible with mainstream media where careful gatekeeping processes routinely inhibit popular participation particularly in such controversial stories involving powerful individuals. Meanwhile, the accused were directly addressed by the public and "forced" to respond. The Deputy President for example through proxies who included his close political associates finally denied involvement in the Lang'ata land grab as the scandal escalated online.

 #Occupyplayground soon morphed to become a legitimate peg on which acts of state vandalism by the political class through instances of corruption were hinged and interrogated online. A similar case in which land belonging to the United States International University

(USIU) on the outskirts of Nairobi was discussed by one Mo @mohi101 on 13 July 2016:

"#ShuleYangu It got out of hand long time ago at #OccupyPlayGround #LangátaPriSchool now its a bottomless pit #USIULandGrabbed"

Meanwhile, Irũngũ Houghton @irunguhoughton on 11March 2016 tweeted:

"@IPOA_KE vital 4 strengthening @NPSOfficial_KE deepening democracy. Thankful 4 #OccupyPlayground role #SetRecordStraight #DevolutionFridays".

Individuals increasingly began using the #Occupyplayground hashtag as reference for political accountability. Any number of similar hashtags are now routinely used to animate discussions on a range of social and political issues.

Humour as a narrative strategy by KOT

Although the emergence of these (class) hierarchies online reveal how uneven power relations among members structure participation in such a way that some voices are heard loudly and others merely as murmurs, KOT seems to have adopted narrative strategies that tend to encourage popular participation. One such strategy is through popular forms of expression such as humour.

The use of humour is a popular narrative strategy for civic and political engagement in Africa that has been widely studied. Achille Mbembe provides a detailed reading of humour as a political text of social and political engagement in Africa. [37] He reflects on the humorous "performance" or "mutual zombification" between the rulers and the ruled, but one where "truths" are narrated and contested and the public face of power and the public's complicity in its own domination routinely unmasked. Similarly, Street argues that humour often "sheds its pleasures and becomes — through the uses to which it is put and through judgments made of it — a form of political practice"[38]. It is a cultural form that can encode forms of political consciousness. Scott also reminds us that in forms of popular engagement

such as rumour, gossip, folktales, rituals and even humour, which he calls "hidden transcripts", are written "the anger and reciprocal aggression denied by the presence of domination"[39].

In Kenya, Musila provides a critical reading of how one of the country's most popular comedy groups Redykyulass use humour to "fracture certain conventions embedded in the socio-political terrains of Kenyan public life"[40], ranging from patriarchy to normalised practices of political dominance. Musila pursues the same argument in a subsequent article focusing on racialized humour and the way in which it allows for popular engagement with difficult social and political subjects[41]. Similarly, Ogola discusses how popular cultural forms such as humour columns in Kenya's mainstream print press incubated oppositional countercultures[42], an argument shared by Ligaga who observes how these practices have become "virtual alternative expressions" in the Kenyan blogosphere[43]. The adoption of humour by KOT thus emerges from a well developed tradition in Kenyan popular culture.

Aware of the power the state still wields in legislating this online environment, KOT often turn to the use of humour to discuss particularly sensitive political stories. This narrative strategy is aimed at an audience familiar with the fact that in this country, the "truth is often told laughingly"[44]. Owing to the restrictive environment that has attended Kenya's political history since independence, Kenyans have often taken to using humour as a tool for subversion. Through humour they prosecute and deliver judgements on accused persons almost as a brazen affront to the formal institutions of justice, which many see as deeply compromised. Using humour to satirize power in Kenya is a tradition most Kenyans are familiar with having been arguably one of the most effective means of public censure of the government especially during former president Daniel Moi's autocratic rule in the 1980s. KOT thus also use humour as a direct challenge to the state to demonstrate ordinary people's ability to establish their own public spaces whenever such freedoms are denied by the state.

This can be illustrated in the case of the #Occupyplayground campaign. During the campaign, then Cabinet Secretary for Land, Charity Ngilu, was forced to name the owners of the company that owned the controversial Weston Hotel and who had allegedly grabbed the Lang'ata School playground. She named a group of businessmen all with the surname Sikh. These businessmen were quickly unmasked by KOT as "fronts" for the Deputy President who was then also sarcastically depicted as a "Sikh" (newspaper cartoons, for example, started depicting him wearing a turban). Addressed as a 'Sikh', he was not only mocked but accordingly stripped of the majesty of power that comes with his political stature. He became an ordinary citizen, subject to criticism like any other. Under the hashtag #NgiluSinghJokes (most Kenyans mispronounce Sikh as Singh hence the misspelling in the hashtag), KOT made a mockery of the Cabinet Secretary's suspect disclosure. Some of these tweets include:

> @Kevoice on 22 January 2015 tweeted: "Ruto WhatsApp status; 'I will Singh & Rejoice in the Lord.'"
>
> @shaffieweru tweeted thus: "Singh is believing.#NgiluSinghJokes".
>
> @peterwakaba tweeted: "what dyu call a land grabber lying in an open field. Relak singh. NgiluSinghJokes".
>
> @JohnOdande tweeted "BrowSingh about land grabbing in Kenya and Google directs me to NgiluSinghJokes".
>
> @Abdimalikodowa tweeted: "Teacher: What's the present tense of Arap Sang?
> Student: Arap SINGH!#NgiluSinghJokes".

In @Abdimalikodowa's tweet, the joke on the name "Arap Sang" is particularly instructive. Being a Kalenjin name, the tweet immediately identifies the subject of the ridicule as the Deputy President Ruto who is Kalenjin.

By turning to humour, power is often quite easily disrobed and, once naked, not only mocked but also judged and disciplined by delegitimising one's assumed or invented political power. In Kenya, power is quite often clothed in various accessories of power including deferential titles.

Twitter hashtags once started quickly assume a life of their own, enabling the capture and use of transnational discourses on democracy and social justice to lend legitimacy to local campaigns. They also enable people to effectively extend the boundaries of the expressible.

#WhatwouldMagufulido? Humour and memes as subversive acts

Complementing these humorous hashtags in facilitating popular and alternative forms of public expression by KOT is the use of memes. Memes are part of a much older tradition of satire as political practice. They are "multimodal symbolic artefacts created, circulated, and transferred by countless mediated cultural participants".[45] Plevriti observes that due to a shift towards visual content on Web 2.0 applications, memes satirizing politics have particularly grown in prevalence and popularity around the world. He notes that memes are "characterized by some key attributes including their evolution through remixes and commentary, are rapidly created and distributed, reaching an extended audience without being limited by geographic boundaries".[46] Importantly, they also "depend on intertextuality, relating not only to each other, but to popular culture at large".[47] As a result, they are thus imbued with the ability to easily interpellate and engage large audiences. Memes are also able to borrow from global circuits and transnational discourse practices to not only make sense of the local but also to lend the local both agency and sometimes legitimacy.

One of the most widely circulated hashtags in Africa in 2015 and one which gave rise to numerous memes as a result was the viral hashtag #WhatwouldMagufulido[48]. This hashtag was created following the election and inauguration of John Pombe Magufuli as the President of the United Republic of Tanzania in October 2015. Considered an outsider by the inner circle of the independence party Chama Cha Mapinduzi (CCP), Magufuli elected to confirm that tag and campaigned as such, in part acutely aware of the growing public disillusionment

with the governing party establishment. A former government minister, Magufuli popularised the idea of *kutumbua jipu bila ganze*, Kiswahili for "lancing a boil without using anaesthetic". He sacked corrupt public officials at short notice winning public praise. He was often referred to as "the Bulldozer", accused by some of being too abrasive, but praised by others as a man capable of dismantling corruption networks in the country.

As President, Magufuli quickly introduced a raft of radical measures in Tanzania - at least initially aimed at curbing runaway corruption and instituting fiscal discipline in his government. Within his first 100 days, he cancelled the country's independence celebrations, banned foreign travel for his ministers, reduced the number of ministers in his cabinet from 30 to 19 and sacked many public officials for poor or non-performance. These decisions were unusual and quite literally offered a commentary on the problems facing Kenya. He quickly became an ogre of a theme for KOT and other such communities across Africa in their criticism of governments around the continent. In Kenya, the government's excesses were ridiculed online with Magufuli inspired memes dramatizing President Uhuru Kenyatta's failures. #WhatwouldMagufulido quickly morphed to become a metaphor for fiscal discipline and good governance.

@MGoyayi for example tweeted "#whatwouldmagufulido" and provided a link to a story by the local Citizen TV citing a report showing that the government had spent 4 billion Kenyan shillings (approximately 38 million US dollars) on travel in just six months. This was contrasted with the case in Tanzania where Magufuli had just banned foreign travel for members of his cabinet. Commenting on the same story, Jchelagat tweeted "#Tanzania's President @MagufuliJP makes his first foreign trip to neighbouring #Rwanda by road. #Magufuli#WhatWouldMagufuliDo". She was criticising the Uhuru's habit of flying unnecessarily large delegations to foreign countries including neighbouring countries. Also

criticising one such trip by President Uhuru to Rwanda, @sirbasjoe tweeted: "Only going across the border not to Mars… Why the whole cabinet?!#WhatWouldMagufuliDo".

In Kenya where the most mundane public appearance by the President is turned into a spectacular political ritual and precisely the kind of excesses Magufuli seemed to abhor, @bonifacemwangi tweeted: "Why does the rebuilding of a road require a money wasting state ceremony". Similarly @martinnjugunamug tweeted: "…Shouldn't the construction and repair of roads be an ongoing development function, or is it such a rare spectacle that it deserves presidential attendance? Couldn't the money used to organize such an event be better utilised providing services to the people #IAmNotHating #JustWondering #WhatWouldMagufuliDo".

Repeatedly, many people used the hashtag to problematize the normalised predatory cultures of the state and a political class which seemed to have almost made redundant executive accountability. These "norms" were disrupted as the Magufuli hashtag provided a new framework for governance. The President and his cabinet were subjected to a new standard of accountability. When President Kenyatta travelled to an international meeting accompanied by his family, Mkufunzi @chaichungu on 30 November 2015 tweeted: "@UKenyatta could do with a #WhatWouldMagufuli Do moment. Travelling to #climatechange event with the whole family? Hope its not my tax cash!"

Even mainstream news organisations in Kenya linked their stories to the hashtag. It seemed to provide news organisations and journalists with a shorthand with which to make their point without appearing to editorialise their news stories. In one such example, the Kenya Television Network (KTN) tweeted on 14 May 2015 "Sports CS (Cabinet Secretary) Wario on fire over non-compliance http://bit.ly/1YrGRnm. In some countries not far from here the CS for sports would have been fired! #WhatWouldMagufuliDo?" This was when a financial scandal emerged at the Ministry of Sport and the public called for the resignation of

the Cabinet Secretary Julius Wario. Meanwhile, a much more assertive Cabinet Secretary who was instituting a number of reforms in the Ministry of Education, Fred Matian'gi, was nicknamed by KOT the "Magufuli of Education".

The Magufuli hashtag also found resonance with other twitter audiences across the continent. Twitter user Gladiator in Heels, @CatherineMakoni, presumably from Zimbabwe, on 17 April 2015 tweeted: "I dreamt Independence celebrations had been cancelled in solidarity with those who can't put food on the table. #whatwouldmagufulido #Zim@36". This was a reference to Magufuli's cancellation of independence celebrations in Tanzania. More importantly though was the implied spotlight on the vanity of such celebrations in a country where poverty was rife. A similar criticism of government excess, this time in South Africa was made by Sphelele @SpheDludla on 12 February, 2015 who criticised then President Jacob Zuma's "austerity" measures in his State of the Union Address (SONA). Using Magufuli as a point of reference, he tweeted: "#SONA2016 The SABC says Zuma's reducing of spending on catering and overseas trips is "radical". Have they heard of #WhatWouldMagufuliDo?".

This hashtag broadly provided a transcontinental political vocabulary with which governments and politicians were subjected to criticism and a new standard of accountability. These conversations were at once furious objections to the state of the nations and the continent and at another, humorous satirical accounts of the ugliness of power and its performance in Kenya and in other parts of the continent.

Some critics have questioned whether such interventions which tend to entertain even as they critique can be considered serious forms of political practice. Considering the use of memes in Kenyan political discourse, I would agree with Plevriti who argues that "although commonly dismissed as mundane and pointless, satirical memes are a pure form of bottom-up expression and an effective source of political criticism".[49] He notes that memes, "seem to

carry other implications for politics as well; due to their nature, they are easy to create, consume and spread. As a result, they provide entry points to the complex realm of politics, making it more inclusive, more accessible…."[50]

Within the context of Kenya, resorting to humour is both a strategic as well as a popular discursive practice. As noted above, humour has always been a form of political practice in the country and is a tradition that found particular relevance and prominence during the reign of Daniel Moi. In the more popular vein, it was especially made "mainstream" by the late Kenyan writer Wahome Mutahi, who through his then popular column, *Whispers*, published at various times by the country's two leading newspapers the *Sunday Nation* and *Sunday Standard*, poked fun at the state and its excesses through a humorous self-deprecating style that "told the truth laughingly".[51] Mutahi's newspaper column was a site of subversive social, cultural and political expressions, at a time when the freedom to such expression was highly constrained by the state. Mutahi echoed life in Kenya in all its banality but also in its distinctiveness, making legible the silent stories that mainstream media could not cover for fear of state repression and prosecution.[52] We see this tradition now adopted in several sites of public communication in the country and Kenyans on Twitter more generally as a way of "disciplining" power.

It is however worth noting that the ephemeral nature of online discussions and the fact that they focus on the immediate means that most of these discussions lack longevity. They are thus largely incapable of shaping processes. While it is true that the online discussions can trigger broader and more elaborate conversations within the relevant structures, there is still little evidence to suggest that the numerous important issues raised through Twitter and associated hashtags are followed up accordingly. Although online technologies "contribute toward greater fragmentation and pluralism in the structure of civic engagement," their

tendency to "deinstitutionalise politics and fragment communication…. may undermine the coherence of the public sphere".[53] This is not necessarily a progressive development.

The digital conundrum

While discussions of digital practices particularly in Africa are often tinged with fairly qualified enthusiasm, numerous questions still abound as to their true democratic potential and more particularly when we talk about platforms such as Twitter. Joel Stein demonstrates how the narratives characterising discussions on social media are getting grim[54]. He partly blames "the online disinhibition effect, in which factors like anonymity, invisibility, a lack of authority and not communicating in real time" he argues, "strip away the mores society spent millennia building". Drawing on examples from the United States where trolls have overrun some social media sites such as Reddit, he notes how "expressing socially unacceptable views was becoming more socially acceptable" and that voices of women, ethnic and religious minorities, LGBT persons - or anyone who might feel vulnerable were being drowned by the tyranny of the trolls.[55] He argues that rather than being an open public space that facilitates and encourages free expression, social media is forcing many to retreat into even more private groups, becoming much more atomized and diminishing the broader organizing power of digital media.

   In Kenya, complaints about ethnic chauvinism, misogyny and the abuse of minority groups such as LGBT groups is commonplace. This trend is increasingly emboldening the government to legislate online speech. The politicisation of this darker side of the online space is slowly making it less free as the government begins to erect boundaries on what is (politically) permissible and on the other hand trolls bully others into silence. According to the Bloggers Association of Kenya (BAKE) more than 60 bloggers were arrested in 2016 alone.[56] Meanwhile, the government has employed pro-state bloggers to neutralise anti-

government voices online. The Presidential Strategic Communication Unit (PSCU) has been particularly adept at countering criticism of the government online. For example, following a terrorist attack at Garissa University College in North Eastern Kenya in April 2015, a section of disgruntled Kenyans unhappy with the lethargic government response to the attack created a hashtag #2yearsofhopelessness on Twitter to demonstrate the Kenyatta government's poor performance in the two years that it had been in power. PSCU countered the hashtag with its own #2yearsofsuccess which went on to trend nationally. Other examples include the hashtags #MyPresidentMyChoice and #KenyaIsMe which were some of the most popular hashtags in November 2014 created by PSCU when the President came under severe criticism following his suggestion that "victims of terrorist attacks should do more to take care of their security".[57] Similarly, following the 2013 Westgate Mall terrorist attack, the government managed to contain public criticism of its ineffectual and confused response to the tragedy online through the strategically crafted hashtag #WeAreOne[58].

The PSCU has also been accused of resorting to covert operations in its attempt to counter oppositional online narratives relating to government performance through paid bloggers and bots. One PSCU official has in fact argued that all this is part of their online strategy describing social media as a "jungle" and that sometimes they need numbers to counter oppositional narratives.[59]

Other political interventions used in suppressing online voices are officially sanitized through initiatives by public institutions such as the National Cohesion and Integration Commission (NCIC) and Parliament. Freedom of expression is thus now constrained through for example, the criminalization of free speech often politicised as "hatespeech". The fact that the government has the capacity to appropriate and utilise social media to neuter, dismantle and even delegitimise political participation through a range of measures including legislating what is permissible on these platforms should be used speak quite clearly on their limitations.

The openness of social media is thus constrained by these often invisible yet fundamental realities.

Conclusion

The impact of digital technologies on daily life, on forms of social and political organization, and on expressive and popular cultures may now be considered irreversible . In Kenya, as in many other countries around the world, people are engaging with notions of the self, community and nation in radically new ways through a range of digital practices. These fragment, transcend but also reify older forms of such engagement.

This article has attempted to tease out such forms of engagement, underscoring the tensions between the affordances of digital technology and its materiality. These tensions fundamentally problematize commonly held positions on the role of social media in society more generally. While digital practices such as the use of social media are creating new narratives of popular engagement, such dominant and even fashionable positions can mask very real and problematic material conditions that render claims of popular inclusion and participation in these digital spaces tenuous. This article has thus noted that requisite skills such as digital literacy, class and (social) capital unavoidably exclude a great number of people from meaningfully engaging with the forms of participation the technologies enable. This has in turn created online hierarchies where class and power manifested in multiple forms silently but significantly shapes the digital narratives.

The structural barriers to popular participation online in Kenya are therefore significant. Indeed, the most active voices on KOT are generally those of younger, relatively well-off Kenyans based both locally and in the diaspora. But even as we acknowledge this, it is also necessary to point out the fluidity of class formations in the country. The middle class is not only fragmented but also continues to maintain very strong bonds of kinship with

alternative identities including but not limited to, for example, ethnic groups. Online discussions by KOT are therefore influenced and shaped by multiple factors and conditions irreducible to class interests.

But we have also seen that precisely because of this, digital communities such as KOT have developed narrative strategies such as the use of humour and memes, which are forms of expression that appropriate not only familiar "ways" of speech and knowing but also encourage popular participation. In addition, when dealing with the patently political, they are safe forms of censure which protect individuals from possible reprisal particularly from the government. Thematically, these strategies make it possible to borrow from global circuits powerful discourses which then lend legitimacy to local social and political practices.

Importantly, we have also noted that although self-expression enabled by social media is a form of exercising one's citizenship, we must be cautious. Scholars such as Fenton and Barassi rightly observe that such individual acts of self mass communication may just as well work against the collective and thus fragment the public sphere rather than expand it.

Endnotes

[1] See for example, Tully and Ekdale, "Sites of Playful Engagement: Twitter Hashtags as Spaces of Leisure and Development in Kenya", 67-82; Ndlela, "Social Media and Elections in Kenya", and Portland Communications, *How Africa Tweets*.
[2] Portland Communications, *How Africa Tweets*.
[3] Ibid.
[4] Bruns and Burgess, "Researching News Discussion on Twitter", 803.
[5] Ibid
[6] Fenton and Barassi, "Alternative media and social networking site", 181.
[7] Ibid.
[8] Plevrity, "Satirical user-generated memes," 50.
[9] Fenton and Barassi, "Alternative media and social networking site", 181.
[10] Stiegler, *Acting out*, 37.
[11] Stiegler, "Teleologics of the snail", 35.
[12] Stiegler, *Acting out*, 42.
[13] Fenton and Barassi, "Alternative media and social networking site", 182.

[14] Castells, *Communication Power*, 120.

[15] Fenton and Barassi, "Alternative media and social networking site", 183.

[16] Ibiet.

[17] Fenton and Barassi, "Alternative media and social networking site", 190.

[18] Ibid.

[19] Ibid.

[20] Ibid, citing Hindman, *The myth of digital democracy*.

[21] Simon *et al*, "Twitter in the Cross Fire- The Use of Social Media in the Westgate Mall Terror Attack in Kenya".
[22] Tully and Ekdale, 67
[23] Makinen and Kuira, "Social Media and Postelection Crisis in Kenya", 328-335
[24] See also Rotich and Goldstein, "Digitally Networked Technology in Kenya's 2007-2008 Post-Election Crisis", 1-10.
[25] Dugmore and Ligaga, "Citizen journalism in South Africa and Kenya: The quandary of quality and the prospects for growth" , 248-264.
[26] Ligaga, "Virtual Expressions: Alternative Online Spaces and the Staging of Kenyan Popular Cultures", 1
[27] Ibid
[28] See for example Bruns and Burgess, "Researching News Discussion on Twitter", 801-814; Munson *et al* "Sociotechnical challenges and progress in using social media for health".
[29] Taylor and Pagliari, "Mining social media data: How are research sponsors and researchers addressing the ethical challenges?", 3.
[30] Tully and Ekdale, 67-82.

[31] See Warner, "Publics and Counter Publics", 49-90, for a critical reading of 'publics'.

[32] The Standard, "This man Robert Alai"

[33] Ogola, "African Journalism," 236.

[34] Ibid.

[35] Agutu, "Police Use Teargas to Disperse Langata Pupils."

[36] Mwangi, "Occupyplayground: Police used teargas on our children but for now we celebrate".

[37] Mbembe, "Provisional Notes on the Postcolony", 8.
[38] Street, *Politics and Popular Culture*, 12
[39] Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts,* 19.
[40] Musila, "The 'Redykyulass Generation's' intellectual interventions in Kenyan public life", 279.
[41] Musila, "Laughing at the rainbow's cracks: Blackness, whiteness and the ambivalences of South African stand-up comedy",
[42] Ogola 2010, "'If you rattle a snake, be prepared to be bitten': Popular Culture, Politics and the Kenyan News Media", 173-200.
[43] Ligaga, "Virtual Expressions: Alternative Online Spaces and the Staging of Kenyan Popular Cultures", 1-16.
[44] Ruganda, 1.

[45] Milner, "Pop Polyvocality," 2359.

[46] Plevriti, "Satirical user-generated memes," 4.

[47] Shifman, *Memes in Digital Culture.*

[48] Portland Communications, *How Africa Tweets.*

[49] Plevriti, "Satirical user-generated memes," 60.

50 Ibid.

51 Ruganda, *Telling the Truth Laughingly: The Politics of Francis Imbuga's Drama,* 1.

52 See Ogola, "African Journalism."

53 Bimber, "The study of information technology," 323–333.

54 Stein, "Why we are losing the Internet to the culture of hate'
55 Ibid

56 *The Daily Nation*, "60 bloggers arrested in Kenya this year- report".

57 Ogola and Owuor, "Citizen Journalism in Kenya," 239.

58 Ogola and Owuor, 240.

59 Ibid.

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