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**New Media in Africa:
Tools for Liberation or Means of Subjugation?**

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New Media in Africa: Tools for Liberation or Means of Subjugation?¹

Firoze Manji, Alex Free and Cassandra Mark²

The potentials opened up by the development of the internet, mobile telephony, and other new media technologies since the last years of the 20th century has understandably gripped the imagination of many. 'We are living,' writes Clay Shirky, 'in the middle of a remarkable increase in our ability to share, to cooperate with one another, and to take collective action ... Most of the barriers to group action have collapsed, and without those barriers, we are free to explore new ways of gathering together and getting things done ... These changes will transform the world everywhere groups of people come together to accomplish something, which is to say everywhere' (Shirky 2008, pp. 23–4).

The excitement created by the potentials of the new technologies also led to substantial investments by aid agencies, the World Bank, a host of international NGOs and academic institutions into 'ICTs for Development' – ICT4D – with the idea that these technologies were the key solution to 'development', with many going so far as to claim that these would bring about a reduction in poverty and with technology as a fix for poverty even incorporated as one of the Millennium Development Goals (Target 8F).

Today, technology has taken on a leading role in discussions about development in Africa. 'Technology', asserts a leading scholar of international development, 'can cut across historical barriers and help connect the poor' (Heeks 2010, p. 22). The adornment of technology with human ability – 'connecting', 'empowering', 'enabling' – only serves to obscure the marginal role that it has played in actual cases of collective action. Through all this glorification it becomes easy to forget that it is not the technology itself but ordinary citizens who have taken advantage of new media to drive forward development on the continent.

Attention directed towards the potentially socially transformative role of new media should not be taken for granted. Rather, it calls for critical reflection on the structure, limits, power and interests behind the spread of digital infrastructure and technology. While the ability to share information, blog, organise via text-message campaigns and develop online space for debate undoubtedly represents an important sphere of political engagement, any claims to new media's apparently 'revolutionary' or 'democratising' potential needs to be viewed through critical eyes. More specifically, the social effects of technological developments need to be understood in the actual context in which they occur.

Far from being a 'rolling pin' serving to flatten out social disparities and automatically lead to 'development', the spread and control of technology and new media in a hierarchical, class society tends not only to reflect its

¹ The paper was presented by Firoze Manji at the New Media | Alternative Politics Conference organised with the support of the Centre for Research in the Arts, Social Sciences and Humanities (CRASSH) and the Centre of Governance and Human Rights (CGHR), 14-16 October 2010.

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disparities, but also to exacerbate and amplify them (Pfohl 2007). And if that is true within a given society, the effect is, we would suggest, magnified through the lens of globalisation in which the advanced capitalist countries exercise ever greater control over the peripheries – the ‘global South’ (Amin 2010a).

Technology is, in the final analysis, but a manifestation of the underlying social relations of production, reflecting the power of those who own it, control it and seek to exercise power through it; the balance of power between those who own the principal means of production and those who have no such access is never static. The point we wish to make here is that new media technologies are not intrinsically progressive or democratising. There is precious little evidence that these technologies lead to ‘development’ and certainly no evidence that it results in or contributes to the eradication of poverty, as is often claimed by technological determinists (Heeks 2010; Friedman 2007). Out of those few studies that do exist, most would debunk the ‘technology first’ stance taken by development agencies. In the case of the internet, ‘[p]rior economic and political liberalization facilitated [its] diffusion more than technological diffusion generated political liberalization’ (Wilson and Wong 2007, p. 15).

The modern ‘gizmo’ culture in the North and among the middle classes of the global South nurtures the ‘fetishisation of technologies’, embodying these inanimate objects with some kind of social, if not magical power. The issue here may appear to be a trivial one; it is not technologies that have social effects, but rather the effects are propagated by those who own, control or use them. Technologies, whether those that underpin new media or old print presses, are not neutral. And in capitalist societies, their spread and development are strongly influenced and determined by the drive for maximising the rate of profit – either through the production and sale of technological commodities (cameras, phones, computers and a host of other gizmos) or through the extraction of monopoly rent to obtain access to the means of communications (telephone and internet networks etc).

That is of course not to say that these tools cannot also be used to organise opposition to capital, to enable movements for justice to expand their freedoms – just as the old print technologies have long been used by social movements for centuries. But the romanticism that is frequently associated with the development of new media technologies needs a heavy dose of cold water thrown at it: vast sections of the population in Africa do not have access to these technologies, or do so to a very limited extent. This unequal access to new media technologies is unlikely to change without the reversal of the recent trends towards the erosion of the capacity of citizens to determine their own destinies.

The capacity of citizens to bring about greater self-determination will be a function of their capacity to organise and develop a political programme. Social transformation will be, as it has always been, the outcome of collective actions, not the outcome of the availability of new media technologies.

The context into which new media technologies emerged in Africa

The emergence of the microtechnological revolution coincided with a number of major world events: the spiralling worldwide recession of the 1970s; the defeat of the US in Vietnam; the de-linking of the dollar from the gold standard

and floating of currencies; the emergence of OPEC which enabled oil-producing states to control the world price of oil, with the result of a glut of capital flooding the market seeking new avenues for profits; the rise of the debt-crisis of countries in the global South as their currencies became devalued; and the establishment of the hegemony of the New Right and its neoliberal policies under the tutelage of Margaret Thatcher in the UK and Ronald Reagan in the USA in the 1980s.

Almost without exception, the same set of social and economic policies were implemented under pressure from the IFIs (international financial institutions) across the African continent – the so-called structural adjustment programmes (later rebranded as Poverty Reduction Strategy Programmes), all ostensibly to enable African countries to repay the growing debt. But the real agenda was arguably that of creating extreme privatisation aimed at opening up new avenues for capital expansion. The state was declared 'inefficient' (despite its considerable achievements in the short period since independence), and public services were first run down before being sold off to the oligopolies for a song. The state was prohibited in investing in social infrastructure, from subsidising agricultural production, with prohibitions on capital investment in health, education, transport and telecommunications, until eventually public goods were taken over by the 'private' (read oligopoly) sector. Tariff barriers to goods from the advanced capitalist countries were removed; access to natural resources opened up for pillaging; tax regimes relaxed; and 'export processing zones' established to enable raw exploitation of labour without any regulations from the state or trade unions. Over time, privatisation was extended to agriculture, land, food production. Landlessness, unemployment, increases in child, infant and maternal mortality rates, decline in life expectancy rates, impoverishment on an unprecedented scale came to be the lot of the majority of citizens, while a minority accumulated and enriched themselves through their alliance with international corporations (Manji 1998). Countries that only two decades ago were characterised as having more than 80 per cent of their populations being rural, were transformed so that today the UN Habitat estimates that some 50 per cent live in the periurban slums with no rights of abode, tenure or any other form of security. Deregulation of all constraints on capital was the mantra of the day, supposedly the precondition for encouraging foreign 'investment' (Habitat 2010).

The net effect was to reduce the state to having no role in economic affairs, and precious little in the development of social infrastructure, its role being primarily to ensure an 'enabling environment' for international capital and to policing the repayment of debt to international finance institutions (Amin 2010b). But the most serious consequence of these policies was not only to reverse the many gains of independence, but especially the erosion of the ability of citizens to control their own destiny. Self-determination, originally such a powerful motor force for mobilisation in the anti-colonial movement, was gradually lost. Economic policies were no longer determined by citizens and their representatives in government, but by technocrats from the international finance institutions and the World Bank, with hefty support provided by the international aid agencies. As the state was forced to retreat from the provision of social services, the space was avidly occupied by the development NGOs (non-governmental organisations). What citizens once had a right to expect by virtue of the gains of independence was replaced by charitable acts of agencies whose work was now supported by international aid.

The 1980s and 1990s were also periods of significant repression. Political opposition in most countries was discouraged or suppressed; opponents of government were locked up or disappeared. And where progressive developments occurred – as in Burkina Faso under Thomas Sankara – assassinations, support for military coups and economic isolation were some of the weapons used to prevent citizens having the audacity to construct alternatives to the crass policies of neoliberalism. And with the collapse of the Berlin Wall and the collapse of Stalinist socialism in Eastern Europe, the credibility of alternatives to capitalist ideologies collapsed too. Without a coherent alternative to the dominant ideologies of capitalism, Thatcher's famous claim of TINA (there is no alternative) became a reality.

Over time, one of the consequences of neoliberal economic policies was to gradually transform citizens into consumers. Those with the resources could exercise choice on where they bought their services, education, healthcare. Power and influence over social policy was increasingly determined by wealth. But those who had no means to participate in consumer society – the pauperised, the landless, the jobless, the never-employed – those unable to consume, were left effectively disenfranchised. And those that were able to find employment were forced to accept poor working conditions and low wages. Attempts to organise or protest were discouraged by the knowledge that outside stood a reserve army of labour ever hungry to take jobs from those fortunate enough to have them.

The scale of looting that was opened up as a result of neoliberal policies is well-known. Third World repayments of US\$340 billion each year flow northwards to service a US\$2.2 trillion debt, more than five times the G8's development aid budget (Dembele 2005). At more than US\$10 billion a year since the early 1970s, collectively the citizens of Nigeria, Ivory Coast, the DRC (Democratic Republic of Congo), Angola and Zambia have been especially vulnerable to the overseas drain of their national wealth. As Brussels-based debt campaigner Eric Toussaint concludes, 'Since 1980, over 50 Marshall Plans worth over \$4.6 trillion have been sent by the peoples of the Periphery to their creditors in the Centre' (Bond 2005).

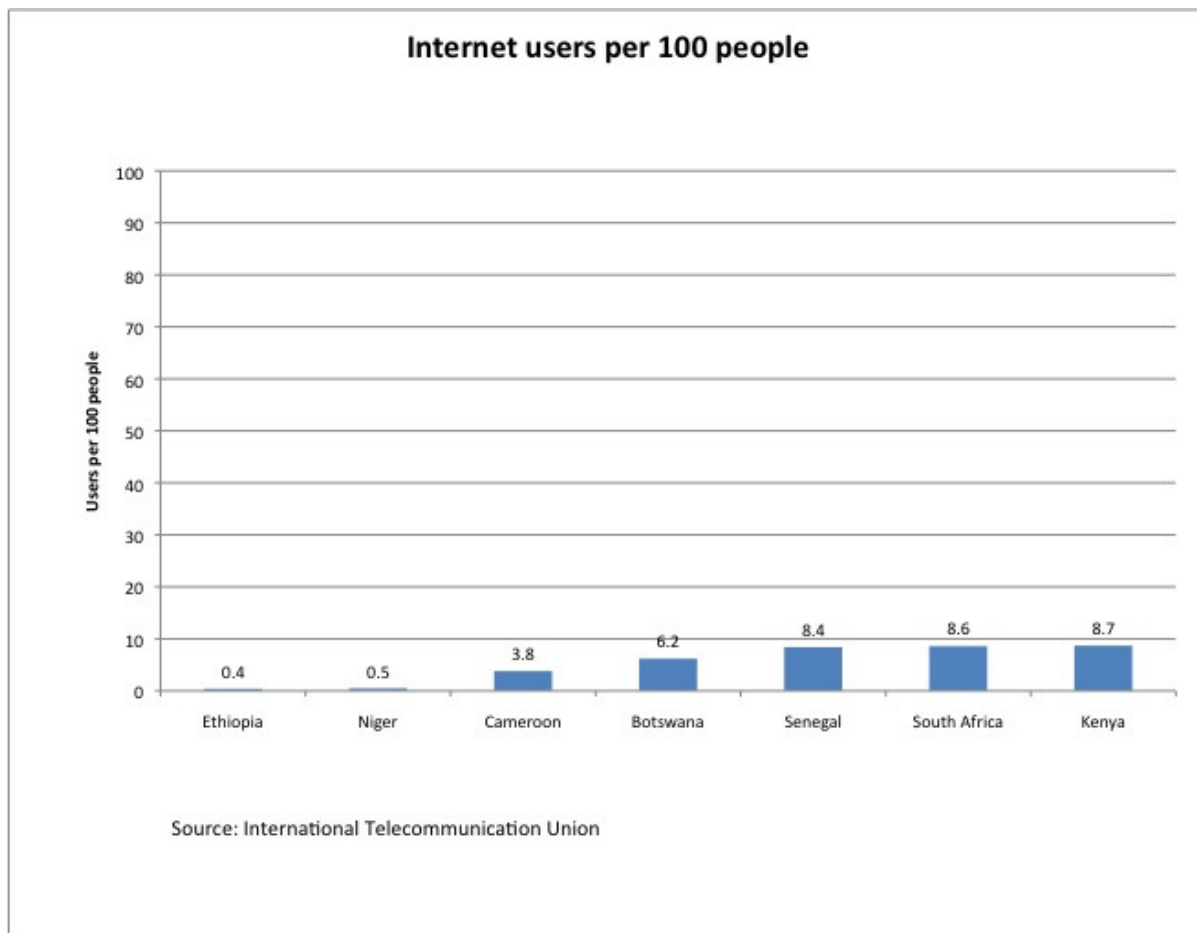
Research by the Tax Justice Network (TJN) estimates that a staggering US\$11.5 trillion has been siphoned 'offshore' by wealthy individuals, held in tax havens where they are shielded from contributing to government revenues. 'Around 30% of sub-Saharan Africa's GDP is moved offshore', writes John Christensen (2006) of TJN: 'As several studies have suggested, this rate of capital flight means that Africa - a continent we are continually told is irrevocably indebted - may actually be a net creditor to the rest of the world.'

This then was the objective circumstances in which the access to the products of the microtechnological revolution emerged in Africa. New media technologies entered as commodities to be purchased by those who could pay, and served as a medium through which monopoly rent could be extracted (in terms of charges for access). A set of technologies that could conceivably have become universally accessible as forms of socialised communications was born instead into a distorted market that celebrated the privatisation of the commons, giving privilege to the few.

Access to the internet

That technology amplifies social differentiation is today manifest in the way in which the internet is distributed in Africa. Internet penetration continent-wide stands at approximately 10.9 per cent of the population (Internet World Stats 2010). The east and southern African region has historically been largely reliant on satellite-based internet access and commands just 0.07 per cent of the world's international bandwidth (African Economic Outlook 2009).

Indeed, this penetration and usage is itself dominated by a limited set of countries; Algeria, Egypt, Morocco, Nigeria and South Africa between them represent some 73.5 per cent of internet usage Africa-wide (Internet World Stats 2010). Niger and Ethiopia have a mere 0.5 and 0.4 internet users per 100 people respectively, while even relatively well-connected African countries such as Kenya (8.7 per 100), Senegal (8.4) and South Africa (8.6) pale in comparison to the countries of western Europe, the United States and Japan (World Bank 2009) which have more than 90 per cent penetration rates.



As the following table indicates, there is a direct correlation between GDP and the extent of internet penetration: the greater the GDP, the greater the access to the internet.

2008 internet penetration against GDP (gross domestic product) per capita

Country	Internet penetration (% population)	GDP per capita (US\$)
United States	73.2%	\$47,000
Japan	73.8 %	\$34,200
South Africa	10.5 %	\$10,000
Botswana	5.1%	\$13,300
Cameroon	2.0%	\$2,300
Guinea	0.5%	\$1,100
Niger	0.3%	\$700

Source: Internet World Stats

The placement of new media technologies tends to correspond to the degree of capitalist penetration already existing in a given region. Hence, countries like South Africa, Egypt, Tunisia and Morocco are the ones receiving much investor attention. This handful of locations, for example, accounts for 90 per cent of all broadband subscriptions in Africa. In the meantime, Niger and Burkina Faso remain markets unspoken for. Similar patterns emerge when one compares connectivity in urban versus rural areas. While new media certainly offers social movements and civil society points of online resistance, the technology itself is not driven by any need to alter the conditions underlying inequality. Indeed, in increasing the global proximity between weak and strong through the medium of the internet, it may even aggravate them. Like the railways of the twentieth century, new media is being disbursed in those regions where its maximum extractive potential can be realised. A further point that needs investigating is where in the world the bulk of accumulated capital is being reinvested. It seems much as if history were repeating itself.

In economies in which populations are among the economically worst-off around the world, the cost of functional-speed internet access can be enormous. Data accumulated from the African Development Bank, the OECD Development Centre and the United Nations Economic Commission for Africa indicates that high prices relate directly to a lack of high-capacity networks within the continent but also to the extent of monopoly control of the infrastructure. 'There is currently only one submarine fibre optic cable off the West Africa coast, SAT-3, that provides a high quality international service and access is limited to members of the consortium which built the link in 2002' (African Economic Outlook 2010).

'Africa relies on satellites and Very Small Aperture Terminal (VSAT) earth stations for most of its connectivity. This results in high prices — though tariffs often of USD 3 000 – USD 5 000 are often lower than SAT-3 — and the applications are slow compared to other technologies. A web page request can take up to 16 seconds to complete... Moves are being made in west, east and southern Africa to increase the international networks. But for now, East and Southern Africa relies on satellites and has just 0.07 per cent of the world's international bandwidth capacity' (African Economic Outlook 2010).

In the absence of other options for Africa, operators have taken advantage by demanding exorbitant prices (monopoly rent) far above the cost of inputs needed to provide the service. UNCTAD calculates that monthly access to broadband services for a single household costs an average of US\$1,300 in Burkina Faso, the Central African Republic and Swaziland (UNCTAD 2009a).

'According to International Telecommunication Union (ITU) and World Bank estimates, the average price of a broadband connection in Sub-Saharan Africa is about USD 110 for 100 kilobit per second. In Europe and Central Asia the price was USD 20 while in Latin America and the Caribbean it was USD 7. Middle East and North African countries also pay below USD 30' (African Economic Outlook 2010). And as is the rational nature of business, the higher costs of expanding infrastructure and agglomeration are being passed on to the consumer. And, in this case, price is not matching up to quality.

Even in the face of progressively greater enthusiasm for 'bridging the digital divide' via ambitious infrastructural projects backed by international donors (UNCTAD 2009b, p.xi), there is little to suggest that a faster connection to the global economy will ultimately enable communications technologies to effect transformative socio-political change. If the Kenyan government seeks to enhance its country's connection through linking with the United Arab Emirates (UAE) via the East African Marine System (TEAMS) cable, it does so first and foremost in the interests of servicing its business class rather than out of any profound faith in the ability of a faster internet connection to improve the livelihoods of the people it represents. In serving the interests of capital, improved connections and data transfer centre on a business class's greater connection to a global economy. This means that any claims that upgrading a country's infrastructure will automatically enable a greater slice of a population greater access should be treated sceptically. If projects like SEACOM enhance countries' general connection speeds, such gains are naturally primarily of benefit to those with the greatest economic clout domestically, just as the internet's international structure and development reflects established concentrations of capital and power.

Mobile telephony

Africa has been celebrated as the fastest growing mobile phone market in the world since 2004. However, 'it is seen that by the end of 2006, mobile penetration in Africa was at 22 subscribers per 100 inhabitants while Asia had 29.3, the Americas 61.9, Oceania 72.7 and Europe a penetration rate of 94.3' (Avila 2009, 138). The actual number of users may be even smaller, given the widespread possession among the middle classes in the cities of more than

one phone. And the majority of such phones are purely for telephone and text messaging. They have no internet connection and data transfer is limited to SMS.

It is instructive, therefore, to look at the penetration of mobile *data subscriptions*. According to ITU estimates in 2007, only 0.2 per cent of Africans had mobile broadband subscriptions (ITU 2007). These numbers do not even take into account the extensive number of users with multiple subscriptions. This indicates that while there may be many mobile phones in Africa, rather few of them have the capacity to access data via the internet.

Much is made in the media – both academic and popular – of the widespread penetration of mobile phones in Africa. What is rarely pointed out is the charging structures that have evolved - and to some extent justified by the prevailing neoliberal ideologies. The vast majority of mobile phone users in Africa are people with no bank accounts. They are unable, therefore, to take advantage of the lower-cost monthly subscriptions offered by most providers, but have to use, instead, the more expensive pay-as-you-go system. Put the other way around, those who can least afford to pay high rates for mobile phones end up paying a higher rate per kilobyte than their more affluent counterparts, who can set of direct debits from their bank accounts. This system is similar to the introduction of water and electricity meters in poor households where the equivalent pay-as-you-go charges are much higher than for those who pay by monthly direct debit. The net effect of such a system is that the rich are in effect subsidised by the poor, a perfect example of neoliberal economic practices. As 2009 data on the number of minutes of mobile talk time available on countries' minimum wage illustrates, the cost of talking on the average African phone is prohibitively high for the majority of Africans. Algeria's daily minimum wage translates into 57.42 minutes of mobile talk time, while the minimum wage in Malawi, Nigeria and Tanzania commands a mere 3.52, 6.76 and 6.96 minutes respectively (Song 2009).

Access to mobile phone communications is frequently cited as an example of their contribution to development in cases where farmers, for example, are able to use mobile phones to decide where to sell their products in the market place, and especially being able to obtain information on world prices of their produce. Indeed, this is often presented as the means of enabling 'fair trade'. But in reality, what is happening is that small farmers get drawn into the direct influence of the speculators at stock exchanges of Wall Street, London or Tokyo who set the world prices of most of the primary commodities produced by farmers in Africa. This is what euphemistically is called 'integration' into the world economy. But this is a meeting of unequal partners – those who produce and have no way of controlling the world price of commodities, and those who speculate on a large scale.

Activists' use of new media

But while a case can be made for viewing technology as a tool for reinforcing existing social relations rather than a means of challenging them, to argue that there has been no innovative, successful use of new media among political activists and civil society in Africa would plainly be incorrect. New media technologies undoubtedly create potential for new, effective spheres of protest, mobilisation and resistance, and to stress that an existing configuration of political forces remains entirely set in stone would be ahistorical and misplaced.

The diffusion and evolution of new media technology in Africa have enabled activists and civil society groups to organise, campaign and engage in political struggles in new ways. Whether through SMS campaigns, mobile phone-based crowdsourcing, blogging, video clips or internet radio, these tools offer opportunities for keeping local groups informed, compiling location data during times of crisis and facilitating linkages of significant geographic scope between civil society actors. In a now famous example in the wake of Kenya's 2007–08 post-election crisis, a group of Kenyan bloggers put together a mash-up and created Ushahidi ('testimony' in Kiswahili), the result of which was a site for people to send SMS messages or email reports of acts of violence directly. In a broadly similar example, in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) the Youth for Integrated Development – Kalundu Child Soldier project (AJEDI-Ka/PES) has used mobile phones to collect data on violations of children's rights in the country's east. In South Africa's KwaZulu-Natal, the UmNyango project has developed an SMS-based information service on human rights for rural women and simple reporting mechanism for incidents of domestic violence.

In Zimbabwe, as independent newspapers have been shut down, freedom of the press increasingly under threat and journalists routinely harassed, Kubatana has worked to challenge state bias and propaganda in newspaper and radio reporting. An aggregator of civil society content, Kubatana shares information via SMS, email, the internet and print, and is driven by a community of activists organised for socio-political change in a country locked in economic crisis and repression.

Equally, leading blogs such as Sokari Ekine's Black Looks, Dibussi Tande's Scribbles from the Den and the pan-African social justice newsletter and website Pambazuka News represent progressive digital spaces for African political debate, argument and reflection. And in response to the severe bandwidth limitations and greater ease of use that email holds for many African internet users, services like Kubatana and Pambazuka aim to prioritise plain-text emails as a means of communicating with subscribers.

Nonetheless, the success of using new media in campaigning has at times had more to do with the novelty value of using technology in innovative ways than the inherent power of the technology itself. In 2004 and at a time at which only one African country had ratified the African Union's Protocol on the Rights of Women in Africa, the Solidarity for African Women's Rights (SOAWR) coalition utilised an SMS signature campaign through which mobile users could show their support for the protocol by sending a text message. Though this petition ultimately received a limited number of signatures via SMS and revealed a marginal number of people able to use the technology in support, the 'news value' and resulting attention the campaign received amplified its power and influence (Manji 2008), popularising the protocol and playing a key role in its ratification by some 17 countries by the end of 2005.

And just as much of the success of the SOAWR's SMS campaign can be attributed to a large slice of news value, it must be stressed that new media's power is essentially as a complement to the work of existing civil society and social movements, rather than an indispensable engine catalysing social change. In addition to having access to the technology in the first place, activists in Africa who have been able to make greatest use of new media are commonly already involved in strong movements and are able to incorporate emerging tools into existing campaigns – across everything from SMS-based information sharing to generating widespread attention online via content-rich websites.

In South Africa, the shackdwellers' movement Abahlali baseMjondolo (itself a part of the country's Poor People's Alliance) maintains a commanding online presence on the strength of written, videographic and photographic documentation, discussion and sharing of its formidable array of campaigning work. Likewise, Kenya's Bunge la Mwananchi (the people's parliament) is a strong grassroots movement which aims to work with Kenyan people to organise, hold their leaders to account, and champion the ideas, voices and position of the country's economically disadvantaged majority. Much like Abahlali – though perhaps currently to a slightly lesser degree – it harnesses its website as a repository for opinion articles, important legislative information (such as on the draft constitution) and space for forum discussions, as well as producing 'Bunge Radio' programmes hosted online. These movements use new media, however, as a complement to their mobilisation; technology is far from a *sine qua non* and without it activists would and do draw upon other means to organise.

While there have been many examples of how social movements, activists and other civil society organisations use the internet and new media technologies, their reach – especially within the continent – remains relatively small. In part this is the result of the limited bandwidth that makes access to the internet so frustratingly slow – and expensive – in much of Africa. But critically, with only around less than 11 per cent of the population having access to the internet, this technology is nowhere near anything we could describe as a mass form of communication. Similarly, even if one accepts the sometime optimistic claims of the mobile phone companies about the penetration of mobile phones in Africa, the fact remains that the cost of phone calls and SMS tend to be such a disproportionately large part of the daily income of the majority that it seems unlikely at present to consider mobile phones being used on a mass scale in struggles for social justice.

Conclusion

In this paper, we have sought to temper the over-enthusiasm that is frequently expressed about the potentials of new media technologies to contribute to social change. It is not difficult, of course, to appreciate the enormous social potential of these developments. But concretely, the development and use of new media technologies has to be understood against the background of the political economy of Africa today, especially in the context of the stronghold of neoliberal hegemony at an ideological as well as material level. We have to caution against fetishisation of technologies and against technological determinism. Critically, and old-fashioned though it may sound, social change will be wrought by the collective action of the disenfranchised and pauperised of Africa. While the new media technologies have extraordinary *potential* for contributing to that movement, in reality, the constraints to their full development under the conditions of capitalism in the peripheries is frustratingly limited. Sure we should dream of the possibilities. But we should not be held hostage to those dreams.

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