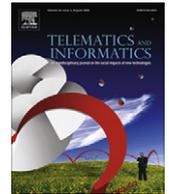


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## Influences of media on social movements: Problematizing hyperbolic inferences about impacts

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### ABSTRACT

Pronouncements about the value of information and communication technology (ICT) (hereafter traditional, new, and social media) to social movements – hyperbolic in popular media references to new and social media (e.g., Facebook revolution, Twitter revolution, etc.) – invite scholarly inquiries that critically assess the implications of these assumptions for African countries. Sensing the tendency toward technological determinism, a position which Castells warns is fraught with failure to recognize complex interactions between society and technology; authors examined popular press vis-à-vis scholarly assumptions about the value of media during social movements. Questions that critically analyze the roles and power of old versus new media in social movements should be posed particularly about 21st century iterations with citizens increasingly doubling as creators and disseminators of news and information. For example: to what extent do various media comparatively facilitate or constrain activists in social movements? How have new ICTs assisted citizen activists in circumventing the power and reach of traditional media? How have the roles of traditional versus new media in social movements been framed in the popular press and academic journals? What contextual factors (e.g., communal networks; third-party- and foreign-interventions, digital divide, etc.) may be accountable for the take-off and successes of social movements? In a continent fraught with cultural, political, and socio-economic divisions of historic proportions, authors critically assessed cases across Africa of variegated employment of old (i.e., radio, newspaper, television) and new media platforms (i.e., Facebook, Twitter, mobile telephone text messaging) by four social movements spanning 35 years. Assessments underscore citizen empowerment and multiplier capabilities of new media but affirm the value of contextual factors that minimize hyperbolic assumptions about the contribution of new media to the formation and progression of social movements.

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### 1. Introduction

In recent months, vigorous discussions and debates about the employment of mobile telephones and other forms of new information and communication technologies (ICTs) (e.g., Facebook, Twitter, blogs, etc.) escalated and commanded the attention of pundits across sectors of society in ‘developing’ and ‘developed’ nations. Discussants are representatives of governments, non-governmental agencies, the private sector, civil society, the mass media and the academy. There have been fewer issues (e.g., the new world information and communication order debate) that have brought disparate stakeholders’ focus on one central issue – the relationships between ICTs and society. Some of those conversations have coalesced into

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groups examining the notion called ‘information communication technology for development (ICT4D)’ or have become central components of international agendas, namely within the ‘millennium development goals (MDGs)’. In the academy and particularly in the fields related to communications, several interest groups, conferences, special issues of journals and book volumes have focused on one goal – how to make sense of the growing advancement of new ICTs into multifarious dimensions of society.

Recent developments such as the 2009 Iranian ‘Green Movement’ and in the Middle East and North African (MENA) region and especially the 2011 Egyptian social movement, which involved employment of new ICTs introduced media coinages such as ‘Twitter Revolution’ and ‘Facebook Revolution’ into popular discourse. Some academicians who have studied and chronicled these events in scholarly journals have been confounded by such exaggerated ‘utopian fantasy’ (see e.g., [Aouragh and Alexander, 2011, p. 1345](#)). A raging debate is a good way to describe the attempt to make academic sense of the exponential and multi-directional growth, reach, and accessibility of new ICTs as well as the extent of their impacts, especially in such political and social movements coined the ‘Arab spring’. Academic explorations have especially been compounded by varied theoretical and methodological approaches and by the diverse scope of user engagements examined. This latter complexity has created a bifurcation of researchers into camps similar to those formed around the argument about media effects in the 20th century (see [Klapper, 1960](#)).

Current division amongst academics has led some (see e.g., [Dahlberg, 2007](#); [Yzer and Southwell, 2008](#); [Carty, 2010](#)) to propose re-examination and possible redefinitions of such concepts as ‘new media’; ‘participation’; ‘public sphere’; ‘social movement’; ‘social networks’ and so on. Given that the 20th century debates – notwithstanding ferment of the field – were never quite resolved, we doubt that the ongoing version will be either. Nonetheless, one of our goals in this paper was to join preliminary academic conversations motivated by recent social movements across the African continent. In particular, media-coined phrases such as ‘Twitter revolution’ and ‘Facebook revolution’ which have made it into social and academic discourse motivated us to critically assess the implications of these assumptions in which we sensed the tendency toward technological determinism – a position which [Castells \(1996\)](#) warned is fraught with failure to recognize complex interactions between society and technology. In addition, we suspected that foregoing exaggerations were inconsistent with metrics, including statistical evidence about Internet subscriptions and demographic distribution, of usage in referent countries.

As a consequence, we sought to examine popular press’ assumptions vis-à-vis scholarly research evaluations of the roles of ICTs in recent social movements. Our sense of history also led us to further contextually ground the issue by critically examining the roles and power of old media versus ICTs in the initiation, mobilization, and achievement (or otherwise) of historic and recent social movements’ goals.

We drew from inferences put forth by segments of the popular press and the scholarly community in our attempt to appraise current understanding of how the role of media in social movements changed with the introduction of interactive ICTs. Furthermore, we attempted to contextualize these assumptions by providing case study accounts of the use of old and new media in four social movements spanning 35 years across Africa. In a continent fraught with cultural, political, and social divisions of historic proportions, we critically assessed the variegated employment of old (i.e., radio, newspaper, television) and new media platforms (i.e., Facebook, Twitter, mobile telephone text messaging) by multiple social movements.

Another goal of our paper was to identify consistencies and inconsistencies that may exist between popular media representation, academic understanding, and case study summaries of the employment of media (old and new) in social movements located in Africa. In particular and following [Castells \(1996\)](#), we sought to problematize grandiose assumptions of technological determinism in the modest attempt to contribute to a better understanding of an ever-evolving dynamic between social movements and old and new media that they employ. By so doing we hoped to highlight the complex interactions between society and media and, in the process, identify multiple vectors of importance in the take-off, successes, and failures of social movements. Driving forces behind our approach were multiple. One is the time-tested inequity in the progression and penetration of new media between the global North and the South. A second is the opportunity, also provided by recent events in North Africa, to bring the African dimension to the raging academic debate; not so as to further muddle the pot but as a way of seeking clarity on contentious assumptions about the role of ICTs. It is also not trite to note that recent escalation in the desire by academicians to appraise the role of ICTs in social and political movements were atypically motivated by events located in Africa.

## 2. Process of identifying emerging discourses

This paper employed three techniques to identify and contextualize the discourse surrounding the use of media in social movements. First, we drew on Western media representation of the role of Twitter and Facebook in the 2011 Egyptian social movement. Second, we surveyed peer-reviewed journal articles, which focused on the role of new media in social movements so as to identify the trajectories of scholarly discourse on the subject matter. In this way, our review of literature was essentially data collection. Third, we attempted to contextualize popular press and academic discourse by examining cases in which traditional and new media were employed by social movements across four geographically dispersed African countries: South Africa, Rwanda, Kenya and Egypt. This approach enabled us to comprehensively identify consistencies and inconsistencies between popular media representation, academic understanding, and case study accounts of the use of media in social movements.

### 3. Emerging discourses: popular press and scholarly debates

Our objective in this segment is to answer the following question: how have the roles of old versus new media in social movements been framed in the popular press and by contributors to academic journals? To guide our cross-sectional review, we organized emergent discourse into two categories: attributes and limitations of the use of new media by social movements. To increase accessibility, we focused our report on the overarching themes that emerged from the categories. We end the segment by drawing readers' attention to scholars' dilemma over ICT-motivated needs either for conceptual redefinitions or full-scale theoretical re-conceptualizations.

#### 3.1. Popular press

To capture a snapshot of how the use of new ICTs in social movements has been framed in Western media, we drew from the findings of a preliminary study in which co-author examined the role of social media in the 2011 Egyptian social movement (see Martin, 2012). The study analyzed three US-based national and high-circulation newspapers: *The New York Times*, *USA Today*, and *The Washington Post*. Selected articles spanned a 3-month period from January 1 to March 1, 2011 as the time frame encompassed the first protest and the resignation of Egypt's President Hosni Mubarak.<sup>1</sup>

Of the 38 articles reviewed, 33 presented the use of new ICTs in the Egyptian social movement as integral to the social movement's initiation and success. Quotes that follow are representative. An article referencing the use of Facebook in the 2011 Egyptian social movement stated the following: "Anticipation is building around what has been billed as a 'Revolution of Iraqi Rage' on February 25, a month after the Facebook-organized 'Day of Rage' in Egypt that led to the toppling of President Hosni Mubarak" (Sly and Qeis, 2011). Another article credited the social media platform with providing avenue for the recruitment of activists: "Following the successful expulsion in Tunis of the dictator Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali, the call arose on Facebook for an Egyptian social movement, to begin on Jan. 25" (Ez-Eldin, 2011). Another article highlighted the leveraging role of social media for unskilled activists: "Unlike those Facebook-enabled youth rebellions [in Egypt], the insurrection here... has been led by people who are more mature and who have been actively opposing the government for some time" (Fahim and Kirkpatrick, 2011).

Additional statements appeared in the news articles underscoring the ability of Facebook and Twitter to increase the efficiency and success of social movements, to spread democracy and to allow for worldwide participation of others (including non-citizens) in social movements. Statements included: "[It was] an online rallying cry for a show of opposition to tyranny, corruption and torture that... unexpectedly vault[ed] the online youth movement to the forefront as the most effective independent political force in Egypt" (Kirkpatrick and Slackman, 2011). An additional article highlighted the replicable impact of social media on democratization across cultural and social boundaries claiming that "(s)ites like Twitter and Facebook, [were] integral to the democracy movements in Tunisia and Egypt" (Johnson, 2011). The following quotes from two articles indicate roles of social media as facilitators of global awareness and enablers of others' participation in a global public sphere. The first quote predicted that "Facebook, Twitter, laptops and smartphones could empower his [President Hosni Mubarak] opponents, expose his weakness to the world and topple his regime" (Shane, 2011). The second, written by Stuever (2011), emphasized the ability for worldwide participation in social movements. "It's now a given that we all have a basic human right to have our revolutions televised" and "we also have the right to plug in and participate, even if it's not technically our revolution or technically anywhere near us".

Drawing from the discourse provided in foregoing news articles and sample quotes, the representation of the role of Facebook and Twitter were oversimplified and technologically deterministic in nature. For example, the news articles emphasized that social movements were 'born', 'organized', 'created', or 'originated' on Facebook or Twitter. The exaggeration of the values of Facebook and Twitter as democratizing technologies provides little or no reference to offline activities of citizens on the ground whose physical presence made the revolution. Also invisible were assessments of contextual social, political, class, and technical inequalities associated with employment of and access to ICTs. In addition, the popular press coverage omitted the potentially adverse impacts of the employment of new ICTs for socially destabilizing purposes.

We now turn to scholarly research in the attempt to identify whether scholars fill this gap by providing a more nuanced and balanced understanding of the impacts of employment of new ICTs by social movement organizations (SMOs).

#### 3.2. Scholarly research

So as to better understand the scholarly discourse surrounding the role of media in contemporary social movements, we surveyed peer-reviewed academic journal articles. To help narrow number and scope of journal articles reviewed, we employed ProQuest and EBSCOhost in our search for articles that included either the terms 'social movements' and 'new media' or 'social movements' and the 'Internet'. While foregoing databases may not be exhaustive, we were certain that journal

<sup>1</sup> The individual article was the unit of analysis. The selection of news stories was achieved by using the LexisNexis database. The following key words were used to identify relevant articles: Egypt, Revolution, Facebook, Twitter. In addition, articles were chosen if either the key terms Egypt, Revolution, and Facebook or Egypt, Revolution, and Twitter appeared within the same paragraph. These key terms ensured that the major focus of the story was the use of social media in the revolution. Based on these criteria, 38 articles were found. Each article was read multiple times and comments were made in the margins in order to better reveal repetitive underlying themes.

articles pulled would be sufficient to answer the overarching research questions posed. As such, in the conduct of our survey of extant literature, we retained the following questions as guide: to what extent do various new media comparatively facilitate or constrain participation of actors in social movements? How have new media circumvented the power of old media platforms to mobilize citizen activists? How have the roles of old versus new media in social movements been framed in academic journals?

Our survey uncovered a raging debate among scholars about the extent of the impact of new ICTs on social movements and about the broader spectrum of public deliberation. While some scholars see inadequate evidence of ICTs' influence to warrant re-conceptualizing pertinent concepts and theories, others suggest and indeed propose new nomenclature and in one case a radicalization of the perception of the public sphere.

### 3.3. Attributes of new media technologies

In his appraisal of their influences, Downing (2008) put forth general attributes of new media technologies including the ability of individuals located in the Diaspora to construct new social and political relationships, the capability of marginalized groups to influence mainstream media coverage of their causes by strategically using new media and the ability to enable open citizen-created journalism that, through participatory and communally-constructed means, could encourage democratic activity (see also Srinivasan and Fish, 2009).

Cottle (2008) underscored the role of the Internet as an alternative platform to mainstream and traditional media. In this way, the Internet, in comparison with traditional media, allows for the disruption of vertical, top-down mass media depictions of social movements by presenting local realities built collectively from horizontal communicative networks. As such, social movement organizations move beyond mere circumvention to a place where they are empowered to set the agenda and self-frame public perception of their activism.

New ICTs have also been credited with providing a platform accessible to a greater spectrum of citizens due largely to a reduction in geographical distance and the economic and physical costs of political participation. Fahmi (2009) asserted that new ICTs have "created new geographies of protest" and have "shifted their [activists'] campaigns and resources to alternative virtual venues" (p. 90). Instead of traveling to participate in social movement activities, online platforms allow for the creation of virtual spaces within which citizens can engage in debate and demonstrations. While studying the 2009 'Green Movement' in Iran, Sohrabi-Haghighat (2010) referred to the *boomerang effect* defined by Keck and Sikkink (1998) to detail the ability of social movements to reach out to international allies in order to place external pressure on government. According to Sohrabi-Haghighat (2010), the ability of social media to reach transnational audiences and to circumvent traditional top-down political hierarchies has increased capacity of dissidents to frame their movements and mobilize citizens in local and Diaspora domains. In our estimation, the expansion of the horizon of information and activity and the ability to engage persons at multiple locations with minimal difficulty – that is through the ability to defy geography, circumvent contextual political and corporate owner constraints – are perhaps the most important attributes that new media and the Internet bring to increasing the operational efficiencies of SMOs.

In Fahmi's (2009) study of the use of new ICTs by Egyptians who participated in the 2006 protests in Tahrir Square, Cairo, the author asserted that the Internet allowed social movements to transcend monitoring and control due to a lack of hierarchies and centralization of power. The author emphasized the role of political restrictions in the formation of online spaces for expression. As a result of a governmental restriction on distribution of protest-related paraphernalia, Egyptians turned to online environments where "citizen journalism" has grown, flourished and shaped public opinion and real-world political participation as well as engagement in social movements (Fahmi, 2009, pp. 92–93; see also Anduiza et al., 2009; Kim and Kim, 2009). Citizens and social movement organizations driven out of the 'colonized' public sphere by restrictive state policies found havens in online locations. In these 'safe houses' the reach of and counter-insurgency attempts by the agencies of the state may either be curtailed by inadequate technological facilities or by the amorphous structures and multiple locations of dissenters. Fahmi's (2009) evidence joined others that have underscored geography-defying capabilities enabled by the Internet and other new media technologies as a strong advantage.

In addition, Carty (2010) explored the influence of the Internet on activism, recruitment, and network building in political participation. The author's findings revealed that new ICTs allowed for "new modes of communication, forms of collective identity and solidarity, and grassroots mobilization to resist forms of domination and in particular the colonization of the public sphere and public opinion" (Carty, 2010, p. 169) by the irritable state. The author challenged the assumption that online political participation will circumvent traditional face-to-face political dialogue asserting that online and offline political participation and activism are mutually-reinforcing. Anduiza et al. (2009) agreed with the latter position and suggested that a study of the influence of the Internet on political participation must include appraisal of its influence in three categories: (1) activities that can be executed efficiently both on and offline, (2) activities that can be carried out only online, and (3) activities that can only be executed offline. Making these distinctions should provide a clearer conceptual understanding of the influences of the Internet on political participation.

### 3.4. Limitations of new media technologies

Other scholars caution that the Internet may have a limited role in the creation and mobilization of social movements. While asserting that the Internet is a tool capable of providing citizens locally and in the Diaspora with technical and moral

support that may encourage mobilization, Aouragh (2008) stressed that online tactics must be coupled with other (offline) techniques – the use of posters, distribution of underground pamphlets and engagement in street activism – to achieve local mobilization. Masmura (2008), in a study of the use of the Internet to achieve awareness and participation in Arab–Israeli peace activities, concluded that while the Internet is able to mobilize efforts and increase awareness about social issues, it is weak in its ability to circumvent ideological strongholds and to influence state policies. Fisher and Boekkooi (2010) found that if the Internet is the only means by which an individual learns of a social movement, that individual is much less likely than individuals who were informed through face-to-face communication or personal social links to participate in ‘on-the-ground’ social movement activities and in the recruitment of additional social movement participants.

Furthermore, scholars (see Gillan, 2009; Fenton, 2008) cautioned that while the Internet does provide an alternative platform capable of accommodating a multitude of voices and sound political debate, activists using the Internet may reach a level of selectivity and create “informational cocoons” (Gillan, 2009, p. 31). Fenton (2008) argued that online platforms may offer citizens the capacity to organize, campaign, and increase political participation, but ensuring that these platforms do not fall victim to civic privatism resulting in dispersed and fragmented groups unlikely to muster enough power to influence the changes they seek remains a substantial challenge. In addition, social media and other forms of interactive Web sites pose the risk of circumventing an SMO’s control over its messages and tactics by allowing a multitude of voices to contribute and possibly re-mold the tone, mission, and tactics of the organization (Gillan, 2009).

Other scholars (see e.g., Benkler, 2006; Bimber et al., 2005; Earl and Schussman, 2003) have argued that the low cost of online political platforms has reduced fundraising efforts for offline social movements thus reducing their strength and the frequency with which they engage in activism. In addition, Anduiza et al. (2009) cautioned that while new ICTs have the potential to reduce cost of participation, their effective use depends on the participants’ online skill sets and on Internet access. Lerner (2010) on the contrary warned that the high cost of accessing new ICTs could exclude use by marginalized and poorly funded groups.

### 3.5. Scholars’ dilemma: is there need for theoretical re-conceptualization?

On the bases of foregoing division amongst scholars about the impacts of ICTs on social movements, opinions varied about the need for theoretical re-conceptualizations. In their seminal article, Earl et al. (2010) took on the challenge of sorting academic research into authors’ assessments of the attributes and limitations that the Internet and other information communications technologies have on social activism. Their premise is that disparate findings about the impact of the Internet on social activism – whether it simply accentuates activism or changes activism in some fundamental way – is motivated by methodological focus on divergent types of Internet activism. As such and

(f)or instance, the large number of scholars finding simple accentuation effects tend to study uses of the web that support offline mobilizations, while minority of scholars finding more fundamental changes have tended to study online mobilizations (p. 426).

The authors provided additional insights about the equivocation that results from this multi-directional focus of the scholarly community but leave many questions unanswered. For instance, they argued that in cases where Internet use in social mobilization is perceived by scholars to be of minimal impact, the inference was typically that there was no need to tweak current theoretical approaches to the study of social mobilizations.

Earl et al. further adjudged that authors who claim significant impact/effect are of the view that some uses of the Internet may fundamentally change the dynamics of activism. Those authors implicitly claimed that existent social movement explanations and theories, though robust, do not adequately explain the dynamics of Internet activism and that there is urgent need, for a new social movement theory.

Earl et al. also deposed that many scholars sit on the fence of the timeliness of theory re-conceptualization. Those from the ambivalent school of thought believe that the Internet has simply “super-sized” activism without fundamentally changing its nature (the “food is the same but larger in quantity”). In other words, the influence of the Internet is only scale-related – “thought to simply accentuate or accelerate well-known processes driving activism and protest”. As such, “SMOs [social movement organizations] can reach much wider audiences more quickly and less expensively with the Internet” (p. 428). This school agrees with the minimal impact school in its conclusion that the fundamental processes driving activism as enunciated in theories have not been fundamentally altered by the “super-sized” influence of the Internet. In sum and although the Internet allows (a) quick information, (b) reduced cost of online information communication, (c) groups to self-empower by creating/representing broad online coalitions, and (d) larger “mesomobilization” (see Earl et al., 2010, p. 428), activism is fundamentally the same.

#### 3.5.1. Argument for re-conceptualization

Carty (2010) is of the view that new ICTs brought sufficient impact to the processes of social movements to warrant a re-conceptualization of what it means to engage in, organize and use social movements to expand the public sphere. Relying on Habermas’ (1981, 1989, 1993) perception of the public sphere and on critical theory, Carty employed MoveOn.org as: (1) a case with which to determine what the organization brings to the table and how its activities in serving as a clearinghouse for many social movement organizations has broadened scope of awareness about the role of new media and (2) to assist

determination of the need for re-conceptualization of social movements and correlate concepts (e.g., public opinion and public sphere). Carty (2010, p. 158) reiterated Habermas' view as follows:

With the rise of late capitalism, the culture industries, and the power of corporations in public life citizens are susceptible to becoming passive consumers of goods, services, political administration, and spectacle and the result is a decline in democracy, individuality and freedom. Public opinion (Habermas argued) is now to a certain extent administered by political, economic and media elites which mediate public opinion as a part of social control. A dangerous repercussion of this is that public opinion may shift from debate, discussion, and reflection (what he referred to as communicative action) to the manufactured opinion of polls or media experts and political consulting agencies.

Foregoing is useful as a basis for the examination of the ways in which new media can assist in the defense and restoration of the public sphere which, in its colonized state, has ceased to be efficient. Carty, like Castells (2007), understood the capacity of new media to move society back to a place where participatory democracy was predicated upon resistance to "state regulation, reducing a state's capacity for repression by hindering its ability to control the flow of information and political communication" (p. 159). In that systemically unencumbered condition, the Internet can: (a) "enhance political mobilization and increase awareness of important social issues outside the control of dominant media corporations; (b) democratize processes of collective action and political organizing by flattening bureaucratic structures and making boundaries porous. . . lower[ing] obstacles to grass-roots mobilization and organization, and speed[ing] the flow of politics" (Carty, 2010, p. 159).

Carty (2010), like others (see e.g., Fenton, 2008; Anduiza et al., 2009; Gillan, 2009), recognized that in spite of the espoused virtues of the Internet, it does have limitations. One limitation is that "virtual social relations in cyberspace are not a substitute for more traditional forms of community, protest, and collective identity due to a lack of interpersonal ties. . ." Another is that "many discussion groups and listserves discourage challenges to the information and conclusions drawn by members because they tend to be composed of like-minded people who are often predisposed to issues that draw Internet users to various sites" (p. 160).

Yet and in spite of the cons of new media, Carty concluded, "there is ample evidence that the Internet has resulted in a significant shift in communication capacity and potential for political organizing. The proliferation of mass-media and ICT communications have dramatically changed the way information is sent, received, and accessed, and this has at least compromised the ability of the media, cultural, and political institutions to ensure hegemony" (p. 160). In her own assessment of MoveOn, Carty found that the organization illustrated the way in which an SMO can provide a forum for grass-root mobilization, collective identity and action. MoveOn also illustrated that "online political participation and activism are [not] phasing out face-to-face contacts" and as such underscored the reality that "online and offline activism tend to reinforce each other" (p. 170). Aouragh and Alexander (2011) agree. Notwithstanding her own conclusion that MoveOn illustrated the complementary and symbiotic relationship between new media and offline activities of social movements as they were traditionally organized and executed, Carty demanded a re-conceptualization of "participatory democracy, the public sphere, and public discourse in light of new technologies and forms of media that allow for new forms of collective identity, networks, and communicative action" (2010, p. 170).

### 3.5.2. *Argument against re-conceptualization*

In their own contribution to this debate, Yzer and Southwell (2008) remind that the terminology 'new media' should not easily become synonymous with the "staggering number of new devices that can mediate information in ways that would have been deemed science fiction. . . 20 years ago" (p. 8). The co-authors asked that readers ponder the following questions: is there an excessive search for new theoretical constructs? Could preoccupation with search for new theoretical constructs lead to missed opportunity to better understand old ideas about the relationship between information flows and human interaction? Though these new technologies influence and/or expand the parameters of human interaction, "they do not fundamentally alter human needs and desires. . . and thus do not make existing theories of behavior obsolete" (p. 8). Yzer and Southwell (2008) offered that

it is more useful to emphasize the defining attribute that all these new technologies share, namely, the ability to exchange information between individuals and groups (as opposed to broadcast appliances); such a move eliminates the importunate divisions between interpersonal and mass communication (pp. 9–10).

In their considered opinion, de-marginalizing the communicative aspect of new media/communication technologies (contrary to focusing centrally on the physical medium)

moves away from a technological determinism approach to new media effects, or from an interpretation of new media as simply the next mass medium. . . A communication perspective indeed highlights what is perhaps most interesting about new media technologies: the extent to which they reinforce and shed light on the possibilities for connection among and between audience members (p. 10).

It is so that "emphasis on modality and a focus on communication" will be evident that Yzer and Southwell (2008) suggested "new communication technologies" as nomenclature to replace "new media". Their argument for the centralization of communication as the core purpose of technologies that have changed our interaction is strong and convincing.

Though there might be varying rationale for the need for or needlessness of re-conceptualization, both sides of the debate converged at a location where one representative (Carty, 2010) suggested radicalization and/or redefinition of the public sphere and the other (Yzer and Southwell, 2008) a new but conceptually-informed nomenclature. Is there a major or minor need for re-conceptualization? Can the field get away with a meta-theoretical approach to understanding the trajectories and inter-relationships between society and new ICTs? These are questions that scholars interested in these issues will continue to contend with in the foreseeable future.

#### 4. Comparative case study examples across Africa

Assessments of and projections about the roles of ICTs in social movements as carried in the popular press and as published in academic journals – all in the global North – lead us to seek a more nuanced understanding of ICT deployment in social movements across African contexts. Given overt references to shortcomings of traditional media (e.g., newspapers and radio especially) when compared to new forms of ICTs (e.g., Facebook, Internet, Twitter) we sought to unpack relative employment of traditional versus “new” ICTs in historical and contemporary social movements on the African continent. For this purpose, we identified four countries that played host to historical and contemporary social movements in which traditional media and ICTs either aided the initiation and mobilization of large-scale social movements or provided coverage of the events. The cases we compared include: South Africa’s Soweto Uprising (1976), Rwanda’s genocidal ethnic imbroglio involving the Hutus and Tutsis (1994), Kenya’s post-election protest (2007/08), and Egypt’s more recent (2011) social movement against President Mubarak.

Selected cases offered in situ and comparative evaluation. Dion (1998, p. 127) informed that such evaluation enables the gathering and determination of “what characteristics the occurrences have in common”. The same approach should also enable us to appraise differentiations. In part, our goal was to compare evidence provided by the African cases against assessments and projections about traditional and new media in the global North so as to better understand African experiences. Consistencies and inconsistencies between assessments and projections of the value of new ICTs to social movements’ activities vis-à-vis the African experiences should provide bases for more holistic assessment. In doing so, our findings will join the debate about need for re-conceptualization of theories pertinent to ICTs’ role in social and political life.

##### 4.1. South Africa (Soweto Uprising, 1976)

The uprising in Soweto – a Black ghetto located in the Southwestern corridor of Johannesburg – began in June 1976 as a ‘peaceful protest’ against attempt by the Afrikaner-led apartheid regime to introduce Afrikaans as a language of instruction in segregated and predominantly Black schools. When tear gas and gun smoke subsided, a watershed and phenomenal race relations event that became one of many subtexts of South Africa’s struggle with apartheid had been born. Protesters were youths of school-age who did not appreciate having to learn Afrikaans alongside English, which had been the language of instruction since British colonization. The ‘peaceful protest’ soon attracted the attention of law enforcement agents in the State Police and Military who employed tear gas and guns with live ammunition in their attempt to quell the “insurrection” by the majority against the minority government. Official and unofficial estimates of the dead ranged between 600 and 1000, respectively (Hachten and Giffard, 1984, pp. 4–5).

White reporters and photographers could not access Soweto to cover the events. Coverage was anchored by Black journalists who worked in private enterprise print media – especially those owned by the English language press – and had easier access to Soweto. Among reporters who covered Soweto were those employed by opposition newspapers such as *Rand Daily Mail* and the Black-oriented *World*. Their reports underscored earlier warnings about cumulative impacts of apartheid policies on the majority Black population in South Africa.

With the backing of the operative Terrorism Act,<sup>2</sup> police and military officers cracked down on Black journalists and photographers – some were beaten and others were arrested and detained for months without charge. Many others disappeared and could not be accounted for as either dead or alive by families and editors. Though the toll remained controversial, journalists were among persons killed during the riots.

It was typical in the context of apartheid for government and its agents to blame the opposition media for “fomenting the riots and exacerbating an already dangerous situation” (Hachten and Giffard, 1984, p. 4). On the contrary Benjamin Pogrund, deputy editor of the *Rand Daily Mail*, reported that “[w]ithout the courage and determination of the black journalists, the world would never have known what really happened in the Soweto Riots”, (see Hachten and Giffard, 1984, p. 4). Pogrund’s account should be qualified as his reference was to black journalists in the opposition media.

It is public record that the state broadcaster, South African Broadcasting Corporation (SABC), willfully underplayed the enormity of the events in Soweto. While South Africans who watched the evening news on television were left with the impression that Soweto was under control, local opposition newspapers posted contrary reports that, “all hell had broken loose the night before” (Hachten and Giffard, 1984, p. 5). Foreign broadcast media with presence in South Africa were equally

<sup>2</sup> This references the 1967 Terrorism Act, one of many with which the South African government repressed activities of individuals and groups who expressed dissent with the apartheid regime.

barred from covering a story in which a global audience became interested. The SABC manipulated its account of the Soweto protest before packaging it for worldwide circulation.

#### 4.2. Rwanda (*Rwandan Genocide, 1994*)

On April 7, 1994 majority Hutu extremists began to massacre their minority Tutsi countrymen and women in a debacle that quickly assumed genocidal proportions. Mobilization of participants for the human decimation that ensued occurred almost equally in face-to-face dimension and through the airwaves with the active deployment and participation of partisan radio networks. The Hutu-operated Radio-Télévision Libre des Mille Collines (RTLM) – incited racial hatreds instigated more than half a million murders, and sang the death march of more than two million Tutsis on Rwandan airwaves (see Olorunnisola, 1996). It was significant that round-the-clock announcements were transmitted while using government-owned Radio Rwanda's equipment. One such announcement was a speech given by Leon Mugesera. Though given earlier, the speech was frequently repeated by RTLM and was recorded by the BBC Monitoring Service in Nairobi, Kenya. In a message to Hutus that incited the “extermination” of Tutsis while invoking religious authority, Mugesera stated as follows:

We ourselves will take care of massacring these gangs of thugs. You know, it says in the Gospel that the snake comes to bite you and, if you let it stay, you are the one who will perish. . . the mistake we made in 1959. . . is that we let you get out safe and sound. . . your country is Ethiopia and, soon, we will send you to your home, via Nyabarongo [river in Rwanda], on an express trip (BBC, February 8, 1995).

It is also public record that dead bodies of Tutsis were indeed deposited into the Nyabarongo River as the genocide progressed (Article 19, 1994).

In a comparatively weak counter-insurgency via Rwandan airwaves, Radio Muhubura, which served as the voice of the minority Tutsi-led Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF), carried anti-government messages in which it accused the Rwandan government of attacks against Rwandan youths, mostly of Tutsi ethnicity. As genocidal attacks escalated in 1994, Radio Muhubura was credited with announcing unfolding events to listeners in Rwandan (where its reach to the population was not as extensive) and to the rest of the world via BBC Monitoring Service in Nairobi, Kenya. By so doing, Radio Muhubura positioned itself in two ways: first as a voice of the opposition RPF and second as an alternative voice over airwaves dominated by the state broadcaster whose equipments were at the service of anti-Tutsi RTLM.

Government-owned Radio Rwanda-enabled RTLM to play upon deep-rooted ethnic fears to create a situation in which extreme measures – genocide – were seen to be the only solution. Roles were partially reversed in the aftermath of the genocide when the RPF took over the reigns of government, forcing the managers of Radio Rwanda to shift ideological gears. The RPF government pushed for the shutdown of RTLM. While the roles of Radio Rwanda, RTLM and Radio Muhubura were complementary and counteractive, it is safe to suggest that the use of radio and the airwaves were as potent as the use of ammunitions. Article 19 (1994) reported usage of RTLM as an intelligence unit helping to track the movement of members of the killing squads and their victims. While RTLM employed the airwaves, the killing squads that were mobilized waged a ground war on the Tutsi minority.

#### 4.3. Kenya (*post-election violence, 2007–2008*)

Following the 2007 announcement of the highly contested presidential re-election of Mwai Kibaki, privately owned radio stations were accused of fueling ethnic-targeted violence. Stations were either accused of airing hate speech concerning the president's tribe, the Kikuyus, or the tribes that aligned with the opposition party, the Kalenjin, Luo, and Luhya (see Chege, 2008). Referencing the employment of radio to incite anger and ethnic-targeted killings in Rwanda's 1994 genocide, the Kenyan government justified banning all live broadcasts as necessary to weaken social tensions (RWB, 2009; Wanjiku, 2009).

As the government closed traditional forms of mass communication, mobile telephone short messages service (SMS) and Internet applications such as Facebook, Twitter, Ushahidi (a Web site that allows users to announce and geographically map crisis situations by submitting online posts or SMS updates) and Mashada (a blogging Web site), became sources of information on the location and nature of riots throughout Kenya (Makinen and Kuira, 2008). Ushahidi and Mashada were used to voice positive and negative social discourse concerning the contested presidential election (Goldstein and Rotich, 2010). Concurrently with use of blogs, citizens began using mobile telephone SMS to spread hate speech urging recipients to express their frustrations with the election results and to unleash violence on other ethnic groups (Goldstein and Rotich, 2010). Hate speech distributed via SMS from pro- and anti-government protesters included the following two examples: (see NPR, 2008):

We say no more innocent Kikuyu blood will be shed. We will slaughter them right here in the capital city. For justice, compile a list of Luos and Kalus you know at work or in your estates, or elsewhere in Nairobi, plus where and how their children go to school. We will give you numbers to text this information.

Fellow Kenyans, the Kikuyus have stolen our children's future. Hope of removing them through the ballot has been stolen. We must deal with them the way they understand, violence. We must dominate them.

After identifying the use of SMS to spread hate speech and mobilize citizens, the government attempted to have Kenya's largest mobile telephone provider, Safaricom, disable citizens' ability to distribute SMS (Goldstein and Rotich, 2010).

However, Safaricom refused to disable service and instead distributed its own ‘messages of peace’ to all customers. The SMS message that follows is an example:

In the interest of peace, we appeal to Kenyans to embrace each other in the spirit of patriotism and exercise strength to restore calm to our nation. Prevent trouble; choose peace (NPR, 2008).

The use of SMS to spread hate speech during the post-election violence has been credited with fueling the violence and killing of approximately 1500 Kenyans (Goldstein and Rotich, 2010). Recently, the Kenyan government is attempting to register all mobile telephone users’ Subscriber Identity Module (SIM) cards and addresses on the grounds of ensuring national security (Kadida, 2010).

#### 4.4. Egypt (*Egyptian social movement, 2011*)

The spring 2011 resignation of Egypt’s President Hosni Mubarak called global attention to the role of new ICTs in the dissemination of dissenting viewpoints (Kirkpatrick, 2011; Sharp, 2011). The role of new ICTs in the escalating protest increased in profile after the Egyptian government revoked Al Jazeera Network’s license to broadcast and six of Al Jazeera’s correspondents were arrested (Al Jazeera, 2011; Pompeo, 2011). In the interim, Nile Television and Akhbar Egypt, the state-owned broadcasters, ran pro-Mubarak news and showcased pro-Mubarak rallies (Abouzeid, 2011).

While only traditional media that showcased pro-Mubarak content were allowed to report events, new ICTs including mobile telephones and social network Web sites (e.g., Facebook and Twitter) were credited with increasing the ability of Egyptians to quickly and efficiently mobilize in Tahrir Square, Cairo and to raise awareness of the movement to a global audience (Dreyfuss, 2011; Radsch, 2011). Additionally, mobile telephone SMS was reported to have aided the dissemination of information and co-ordination of activists’ operations (Ibrahim, 2011).

The counter-movements were able to gain significant local and global awareness of their issues by using online platforms. For example, one Facebook group that posted daily updates on protests amassed 56,000 followers within 24 hours of its creation (Radsch, 2011). In addition, an approximate 15,000 Egyptians were using Twitter to send messages concerning the nature and location of protests (O’Dell, 2011). Examples of citizen-distributed SMS included the following:

Tahrir protesters are massing in 1000s, but word being passed that the BIG demo is at 3 pm (BBC, 2011a).

More protesters are back in the streets shouting: down with Mubarak. They are on the Corniche (BBC, 2011b).

The Egyptian government shut down the Internet and SMS within the first two days of rioting to restrict citizens’ ability to use these platforms for mobilization (CNN, 2011).

Justified by the emergency powers provision provided in Egypt’s Telecommunications Act of 2003, government required Vodafone, Mobinil, and Etisalat to comply with its request to disable customer use and enable government access to the SMS networks (AP, 2011; RWB, 2011). The government restricted citizens’ use and distributed pro-Mubarak SMS. Government-distributed SMS identified the location of pro-Mubarak rallies (Satter, 2011). Pro-Mubarak government-distributed SMS included the following:

Egyptian youth beware of rumors and listen to the voice of reason. Egypt is above everyone so protect it (Vodafone, 2011).  
Massive demonstration to start at noon this Wednesday from Mustafa Mahmoud Square, in support of President Mubarak (Presstv, 2011).

While the government attempted to thwart citizens’ ability to mobilize through the use of new ICTs, traditional landline telecommunications and mobile voice communications remained active. Circumventive techniques included using dial-up Internet modems, connecting to Internet Service Providers (ISPs) outside of Egypt, employing the ‘Speak 2 Tweet’<sup>3</sup> Twitter function and connecting to the ISP, *Noor Group*, which was still online as it served the country’s Stock Exchange and provided service to many large multinational corporations (BBC, 2011c).

#### 4.5. Cross-national assessment

Traditional media (newspapers, radio and television) employed in Soweto were part of the institutionalized and duoplistic structure of media in South Africa. Their roles were limited to the coverage of events associated with a peaceful protest that escalated into a riot when armed forces sought to maintain ‘public order’. Locally, the accounts provided by private and liberal press conflicted with that of the conservative state broadcaster. The state-run SABC manipulated information about the protest released to international media and their audiences. In this case, the minority government engaged in a counter-movement against citizens in the racial majority by deploying state media, whereas protestors in 1976 South Africa had zero access to 21st century personalized media. Instead, alternative media voiced the plight of Sowelans to the world.

<sup>3</sup> Google, Twitter, and SayNow created the ‘Speak 2 Tweet’ service during the Egyptian blackout to allow anti-government protesters to call a specified telephone number that would record the caller’s statement and post a link to the voice recording on Twitter (O’Dell, 2011).

In Rwanda, radio was employed by two contesting ethnic groups – in one instance to mobilize Hutus to kill Tutsis and in the other to mount comparatively weak pro-Tutsi counter-insurgency. Compared to use of television in the case of Soweto, radio in Rwanda played more than the role of coverage – its deployment was as ammunition providing airwaves (and intelligence) support for Hutus engaged in a ground war that decimated millions of Tutsis. Here again Rwandans had no access to personalized media.

In Kenya, the battle over the airwaves was between private radio owners who disseminated hate speech and mobilized ethnic violence in a post-election protest and state-owned radio which was used as counter-insurgency. The government banned live broadcasts in order to weaken dissenting voices. As traditional media closed, hate speech moved to a new terrain when protesters employed mobile telephone SMS, Facebook, Twitter and blogs. This time, attempt by the state to shut down citizens' access were rebuffed by Safaricom which took the initiative to disseminate its own peace messages. Hate speech SMS via mobile telephones have been attributed to fueling widespread violence and the death of 1500 Kenyans. Though the reference is morbid the comparative body count between Kenya and Rwanda made mobile phones look less potent than radio; but contextual factors (e.g., size of country, population density, pent-up ethnic rivalry, etc.) varied. Nonetheless it is telling that mobile phones in the hands of citizens could be as life-threatening as radio in the hands of the murderous state.

In Egypt, shutdown of alternative and institutionalized media vis-à-vis protection of state-run outlets gave rise to expression of dissent via new ICTs (e.g., mobile telephone SMS, Facebook, Twitter). In this case, mobile telephone SMS were used to quickly disseminate information about protest-related developments, to mobilize protesters and to coordinate activists' off-line operations. Additionally, Facebook accounts raised awareness of the struggle in Egypt to a global community.

In response, government moved counter-insurgency to a new terrain when it sought to disable citizens' SMS access. However, protesters' creativity (e.g., use of dial-up Internet connections and use of ISPs located outside Egypt) coupled with third-party technological assistance combined to limit government's attempt to restrict citizens' dissenting voices.

Kenya and Egypt are similar to Soweto and Rwanda but progressions of the former movements underscore citizens' employment of personalized media after state termination of access to institutionalized media. The latter scenario leads us to question: are personalized media the new 'alternative' media – new platforms for citizens' expression of dissent and empowerment – similar to the resistance press framework of yesteryears (see e.g., Switzer and Adhikari, 2000)?<sup>4</sup> Kenya and Egypt – with struggles that began with use of traditional media but ended with deployment of new ICTs – showcased the innate capability of new ICTs to stretch the ability of government to clamp down on opposition voices to its geographical and technological limits. This same capability can enable others (e.g., citizens in the Diaspora and concerned third parties at individual, institutional and governmental levels) outside of the context of movements to participate. This latter point highlights one of the main differences between new ICTs and traditional media. The retroactive nature of institutionalized media made instant awareness and inclusion impossible. For instance, others could not participate in the movements in Soweto and Rwanda or express disenchantment until well after the uprising and decimation of human lives, respectively. The relative immediacy of communication through SMS, Twitter, Facebook and blogs were evident in Kenya and Egypt.

Assumed transition of social movements' tactics from usage of offline techniques and traditional media to increased employment of new ICTs calls for extreme caution as penetration levels of new ICTs varies extremely. This is particularly necessary when the operative context is in Africa where adoption rates and access are internally unequal and trail adoption trends in advanced countries (see Table 1). Statistics show comparatively low access to the Internet and contrastingly higher access to mobile telephones. If access to the Internet is as low as statistics depict, who is using Facebook or Twitter, what are they saying, to whom and with what impacts? Who is crafting mobile telephone SMS to whom and in what language? While foregoing questions are pertinent to ask when considering the African terrain, they have and likely will increasingly become unnecessary in the global North where none-usage of new ICTs is largely an individual preference that is neither driven by infrastructural incapability nor by affordability of the services.

Recent empirical work examining the 2011 Egyptian social movement provides clarification on this issue. Wilson and Dunn (2011) compiled 1056 questionnaires completed by on-the-ground protest participants in Egypt. Their findings revealed that social media were not considered by local protesters to be integral to their mobilization efforts. While the Twitter #jan25 hashtag was considered the largest with 675,713 tweets and 106,563 unique users, the majority of the individuals who used the #jan25 hashtag were outside of Egypt. Approximately 75% of tweets originated from North America and Europe. In addition, English was the primary language employed by participants from all countries including Egypt as it was used in 96% of the tweets in the #jan25 tweet set. The authors' findings clarify that majority of the citizens who participated in the social movement in Egypt did not use social media. The researchers were emphatic that Twitter was used by an "infinitesimal percentage of the Egyptian population" (Wilson and Dunn, 2011, p. 1252). Further, Wilson and Dunn (2011) confirmed that approximately .001% of the Egyptian population had a Twitter account and that account holders were primarily "young, urban, [and] relatively well educated" (see also, Howard et al., 2011, p. 3). Approximately 5% of the population had a Facebook account and the majority of these users, 78%, were between the ages of 15 and 29 (ASMR, 2011).

<sup>4</sup> Elsewhere alternative media were defined "as non-commercial, non-mainstream and traditional or old media – that is newspapers, newsmagazines and radio (clandestine and otherwise) – whose content were produced to challenge power structures or induce social change. Lately, usage of alternative media has witnessed an expansion in scope and horizon with the employment of platforms that now broadly include new information and communication technologies (ICTs) such as the Internet and mobile telephones", (see Martin and Olorunnisola, 2011; see also, Armstrong, 1981; Atton, 2002; Downing, 2003, 2008; Atkinson and Cooley, 2010).

**Table 1**

Number of mobile telephone and Internet subscriptions in Egypt, Kenya, Rwanda, South Africa, United States, United Kingdom, and France.

Country name	Mobile telephone subscribers per 100 people (2009)	Internet users per 100 people (2009)	Gross National Income per capita (PPP) in USD (2010)
Egypt	69.4	20.9	\$6160
Kenya	49.1	10.1	\$1630
Rwanda	23.6	4.4	\$1150
South Africa	94.2	8.9	\$10,280
France	92.2	69.1	\$34,440
United Kingdom	130.1 <sup>a</sup>	83.2	\$36,590
United States	97.2	78.1	\$47,120

Source: World Bank (2011).

<sup>a</sup> The figure for the United Kingdom is greater than 100 because people have more than one mobile telephone handset.

Addressing usage patterns, Wilson and Dunn (2011) informed that respondents used social media as a “key resource for getting information to the outside world” and not necessarily to coordinate local mobilization (see also, Aouragh and Alexander, 2011). Their interviews uncovered that the primary roles of Facebook and Twitter were to provide words of encouragement and motivational content across national boundaries. In addition, Facebook’s primary purpose was to provide a platform for the development of the movement’s identity during the months and years prior to the spring 2011 protest.

Notably, Aouragh and Alexander (2011) affirmed that the use of Facebook as a platform for developing a movement’s identity is not new in the region. For example, the *April 6 Youth Movement* created Facebook groups and pages calling for a strike on April 6, 2008. The campaign drew attention to their issues but it was an unsuccessful effort. Nonetheless, interviewees credited social actors in offline environments, not online social network interactions, with facilitating the progression and success of social movements. One interviewee deposed as follows:

What we call a social network is not actually a social network; these are social tools. Twitter and Facebook are not the social networks; we are the social network. And we have personal relations with each other. And to prove that, when the social networks were gone, they were filtered or blocked, during the high days of the revolution in Egypt a couple of weeks ago, we still operated. ... The social network is us. We use whatever tools we have. They may be Internet tools, they may be phone lines, [and] they may be paper-based communications. Turning off the technology doesn’t turn off the social network, because it is about people, not about technology (Aouragh and Alexander, 2011, p. 1351).

Evidently, while it was the young, urban elites who used social media to transcend transnational boundaries and to foster the development of the movement’s identity prior to the start of the occupation of Tahrir Square, the true social network progressed by “chanting and intervening through face-to-face discussions” which was “like an advancing army... taking one square after the other, clashing with the police” (Aouragh and Alexander, 2011, p. 1354).

## 5. Equivocal discourse: a discussion and conclusion

Our survey of discourse in the popular press about the penetration of new ICTs into society with direct reference to their use in social movements revealed unequivocal certainty about the value of one to the other. Excerpts from the popular press underscored the general impression that new ICTs have enhanced the capabilities of social movements in such African countries as Egypt. The popular press gave the impression that new forms of media are superior to traditional forms in their support of social movement activities. Implicitly, new ICTs made and were the revolutions.

Research-driven academic discourse was uncertain, as scholars were unsure about the extent and scope of the impact of new ICTs on social movements. Scholars (see Aouragh and Alexander, 2011; Morozov, 2010; Masmura, 2008) reaffirmed the inability of media, whether traditional or new, to empower all social groups—including those that liberate and those that oppress. Further, “not all social capital created by the Internet is bound to produce ‘social goods’; ‘social bads’ are inevitable as well” (Morozov, 2010).

Our survey also uncovered attributes and limitations in the interactions between old and new ICTs and social movements. This division is evident in the split vote on the need for a re-conceptualization of theoretical assumptions that have underpinned appraisals of social movements and connected concepts such as collective action in the *public sphere* for decades. It is, however, noteworthy that scholars reviewed in this study were unanimous in their expression of the view that online and offline activities of social movements reinforce each other (see e.g., Aouragh, 2008; Carty, 2010; Earl et al., 2010; Fisher and Boekkooi, 2010). Our survey findings do not invalidate the body of extant literature on collective action (see e.g., Olson, 1965; Granovetter, 1978; Marwell et al., 1988). As mass communication tools progress so does utilization of these platforms by social movement actors. Social movement actors evolve their mobilization techniques to include current mass communication tools. In sum, media technologies are neutral tools that can be employed to fulfill whatever mission the employer deems appropriate. Therefore, the intricacies and potential interdependence of online and offline social action should be addressed in future research.

Our review of selected cases in African countries that showcase employment of traditional media and new ICTs in the initiation, coverage and prosecution of activities of social movements (and counter-movements) further underscore need for continued research. The African cases examined depict settings that provide variegated access to the Internet and to such prerequisite technologies as electricity, affordable computers and ISPs' services. In addition, we uncovered willingness of government (e.g., Egypt) to appropriate access to all media when faced with opposition voices. The state was at the head of counter-movements across the board of all four pre- and post-Internet cases that we examined justifying the notion of *digital dictatorship* as espoused by Howard (2010). Many of these impediments were recognized but understated by scholars (see e.g., Aouragh, 2008; Masmura, 2008; Fenton, 2008; Gillan, 2009; Fisher and Boekkooi, 2010).

Further, we can extrapolate that the penetration of radio in selected African countries likely surpasses that of the Internet.<sup>5</sup> For Kenya and Egypt, the cases in which the Internet was considered an integral platform, its penetration falls below one-fourth of the population. As of 2009, ~10% of Kenya's population and ~20% of Egypt's population had Internet subscription (World Bank, 2011). The mobile telephone is possibly the only new communication technology whose penetration comes close to radio. Nearly 50% of Kenya's population and nearly 70% of Egypt's population (see Table 1) have mobile telephone subscriptions (World Bank, 2011). It is, therefore, too early to claim ubiquitous use of the Internet in the African countries examined. If the Internet is the electronically-enabled *public sphere*, we can infer from statistics that its current level of penetration further disenfranchises many Africans from participation.

Academic research findings and cases reviewed in this paper bring to fore the likely over-generalized assumptions about the interpenetrating roles of traditional media, new ICTs and social actors in the activities of SMOs. Foregoing leads us to ponder the following question: can African activists as yet limit arena of social intervention to the Internet? We doubt the effectiveness in the African context of online activism that is not complemented by offline action by SMOs. For now it is reasonable to infer that new ICTs at best complement activities of social movements in sampled African countries. As such, online and new ICT capabilities have to be managed only as part of a wholesome accoutrement of resources available to help move the agenda of social movements toward levels of measurable success.<sup>6</sup> Therefore, the notion that they are employable in isolation on the African continent is fraught with challenges. Some of those challenges include unequal accessibility reinforced by perennial socio-economic, political and infrastructural problems. Consequently, what level of new ICT usage can justify the displacement of human beings as central actors in social movements?

Trajectory of old media penetration into society shows that the real scale of the impact of new ICTs on society will always vary (see Olorunnisola, 2009). Digital divide will by implication ensure that there is bifurcation of impacts. In sum, all tipping points of this bifurcation should be carefully examined and understood.

When the realities of the African condition are added to complications evident in scholars' equivocal assessment of the role of ICTs in social movements, the question that follows becomes more cogent: when do existent theories deserve re-conceptualization? Littlejohn (1999, pp. 28–29), suggested growth of theories by *extension, intension and revolution*. We find Littlejohn's suggestion apropos. To further competently address the question of re-conceptualization, about which scholars are divided, stakeholders need to broaden the horizon of research to include samples from places in the global South where contextual factors may offer evidence that counter that which is available in the global North. One way to do so is to actively pursue collaborations across continents and to value localized realities. Another approach is for reputable journals to purposely expand the horizon of conversation – such that authors in the global South can bring the realities of their contexts to the same publication outlets as scholars in the global North. Scholars in the global South should in turn join the conversation by contesting theoretical assumptions and findings posed by scholars in the North. In the emergent co-examination of the broader spectrum of phenomena pertinent to communications, the field is better able to ponder all pertinent questions and the paradoxes that are bound to exist.

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<sup>5</sup> When it comes to media in Africa, radio is still king. Other forms of media continue to evolve dramatically, but there is little disagreement that radio is still the dominant mass-medium (see Thompson (2009), cited in [http://web.idrc.ca/en/ev-139447-201-1-DO\\_TOPIC.html](http://web.idrc.ca/en/ev-139447-201-1-DO_TOPIC.html)). Site retrieved on October 28, 2011.

<sup>6</sup> The Internet is not an independent (disconnected from real world) medium or arena of activism. This is notwithstanding that the Internet may have provided space for organizing and coordinating offline protests or for advertising the events or for mobilizing and sustaining global support for activities such as the 1999 WTO protest in Seattle (see Smith, 2001), the 2007 protest against war in Iraq (see Ruane and Kunkle, 2007), and the 1994 Zapatista protest (see Harvey, 1998).

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