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Exploring the tensions and incongruities of Internet governance in Africa

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ABSTRACT

Drawing on a series of in-depth interviews and statistical analysis of policy reports and documents, this paper examines how African nation states interact with Internet governance at the international level. There is a dominant paradigm at work that values the multistakeholder approach and encourages dialogue and equal representation. While, in principle, this model has developed for the good of all participating countries, we illuminate tensions and incongruities experienced by African nation states. We use three analytical frames that focus on the way countries are measured and ranked as ICT ready - what we refer to as accumulating evaluative value, the forms of resistance that emerge in order to counter the universalising values of Internet governance, and the way spatial geographies of Internet use and access are mapped out politically. We draw attention to a paradox of stakeholder participation arguing that African nations experience continual disempowerment and alienation in their compliance with international directives.

1. Introduction

> Although the performance of Africa's mobile networks over the past decade has been remarkable, the telecommunications sector in the rest of the world has also evolved rapidly. Many countries now regard broadband Internet as central to their long-term economic development strategies, and many companies realize that the use of ICT is the key to maintaining profitability. In Africa, however, the Internet is still in its infancy. In most countries, access is limited and slow. Where broadband is available, it is typically very expensive—far beyond the financial means of the majority of Africans. Ensuring that networks are capable of delivering broadband Internet access at affordable prices is the next major challenge on the horizon for policy (Williams, Mayer, & Minges, 2011, World Bank Report).

The World Bank, quoted above, promotes a universally held belief in information and communication technologies (ICTs) as central to the future prosperity of every society. ICTs are presented here as one of the driving forces of social transformation and economic growth, connecting communities across the globe and delivering goods and services with ever greater speed and efficiency. In realising the potential benefits of ICTs, the governance structure at the international level has adopted a participatory, multistakeholder model that seats representatives from business, government and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) around the table to form consensus about how the Internet should be run. This model and the entailed role of each stakeholder emerged from the 2005 World Summit on the Information Society (Hill, 2014) in order to assuage concerns about the United States' cultural and economic dominance over the Internet. While the international governance structure promotes a dialogic model emphasising representativeness and fairness, the costs of 'joining' and sustaining membership should not be underestimated, particularly for African countries hoping to develop their economies through ICT investment. In this paper we examine what this multistakeholder model means for seven African countries, which are Ethiopia, Ghana, Kenya, Liberia, Sierra Leone, Uganda and Zimbabwe.

The story of ICTs in Africa is about achieving sustainable economic growth and societal progress through the development and application of digital technologies. ICTs are positioned as a panacea to long-standing social problems and economic stagnation that have historically beset African societies. Technological innovation in mobile telephony in particular is already seen to have increased the speed and efficiency of financial transactions and communications, decreasing wait times, bureaucracy and the propensity for corruption (James, 2009). While advances can be seen in some areas, overwhelmingly the story is still one of a continent playing catch up. The opening quote expresses a widely held view that African countries suffer from deficits in ICT provision, access and use compared to the rest of the world. Furthermore, this lag is considered representative of the low economic status of African countries on the global stage and has come to be encapsulated in the concept of the digital divide that separates the connected North from the disconnected South (Norris, 2001). Limited attention is given to

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discussing the discursive influence of the concept of the digital divide in framing and configuring the role of ICTs in Africa. This extends to understanding and resolving in-country disparities between those that have access to ICTs and the mainly rural and urban poor that do not.

In this paper, we examine how African nation states are represented and participate in international Internet and ICT governance. One necessity that concerns us is the centralisation of government offices to accommodate ICT. Each of the countries studied had in recent years consolidated its ICT services under a single ministry. It is centralisation at the national level that supports international deliberation but paradoxically also binds Internet governance ever more tightly to state power. As Bekkers (in Boymal et al., 2007, p. 409) succinctly states, 'politics and technology have power as their central focus, and large technological innovation at a societal level is deeply interwoven with politics in modern societies.' In the countries studied, we illustrate how much of the promise of the Internet, in relation to bringing prosperity and promoting social development (Hargittai and Hsieh, 2013; United Nations Department of Social and Economic Affairs, 2014), is tied to the state's ability to unite ICT under the remit of a single ministry.

Throughout this paper, we triangulate policy and content analysis with a series of in depth interviews with ministers and ICT officials from the seven countries. Our findings reveal three emerging problems that inhabit the unfolding narrative of ICT provision and access in African countries. First, there is the problem of achieving fair representation and being heard at the international level. Secondly, there are subtle effects related to interoperability, such as those associated with the impact of accounting practices and audit cultures, which remain unacknowledged in much of the policy literature. Thirdly, there is the question of just what the state has remit over and the extent to which national policy is able to reflect and respond to local needs.

The paper is structured around three framing devices that, emerging from the data, address the problems outlined above. We use these framing devices to argue that ICT governance at the international level is interwoven with global inequalities that affect and shape the participation of African nation states. The first framing device concerns the accumulation of what we refer to as 'evaluative value'. This concept finds inspiration in the work of James Scott (1999), whose book *Seeing Like a State* explored the ways in which nation states have used particular methodologies in order to visualize their citizenry and the kinds of large scale programmes they have commissioned to intervene in and improve societal conditions. For our purposes, 'evaluative value' encapsulates the standardising methods and means by which states seek to visualize and measure their ICT activities in order for them to have meaning at the international level.

The second framing device concerns relations between the universalizing discourses of international fora and the conceptualisation of local need. The imperative to obtain evaluative value, to make ICT measurable, comparable and operable, consolidates what DeNardis (2014) has argued is a greater centralisation of Internet governance at the national level that promotes an outwards facing policy profile. We demonstrate how Internet governance is predicated on universalizing principles of need, access and beneficence that recapitulate development discourses. This puts African states in a paradoxical position because they are obliged to participate in international fora in the hopes of being seen as an equal player, however, they become subject to discourses that perpetuate global inequalities positioning them as either developing or underdeveloped. We identified emerging forms of resistance that augment state control over ICTs thus undermining the very ethos of the multistakeholder model of Internet governance.

Our final framing device looks at spatial difference with respect to the distinction in ICT policy between the urban and the rural. In centralising their ICT governance, we found that African nation states deploy a blanket policy in which the distinction between urban and rural is made, but only in order to treat them as the same. The rural and urban are conceived as being on the same pathway to development with the urban positioned further along. We draw attention to the tendency in these countries to impose verisimilitude on radically different geographical, political and cultural domains.

We conclude by commenting on the policy implications emerging from this study and we make a call for more empirical work to illustrate the plight of African countries and societies in the inevitable march towards universalised digitization.

2. Methodology

2.1. Country Selection

We set out to understand the current state of Internet governance in seven African countries. Through policy analysis[1] we identify three groups of countries based on the following interrelated criteria: the level of ICT advancement; the level of donor activity and collaborative partnerships in developing ICTs; and political culture and history. While we use these somewhat artificial criteria to group the countries, we recognise that it may not be representative of an 'African' experience of Internet governance. However, our aim is to highlight the range of experiences that many resource-strapped countries have in relation to this issue. The selected countries represent a broad range of historical and social contexts that affect how ICT policies are formulated and implemented.

Sierra Leone and Liberia have struggled to ignite their economies in the shadow of civil war. They both have received international aid and donor investment in building a nascent ICT infrastructure. Ghana, Kenya and Uganda represent eastern and western regions in Africa, but all three consider their ICT sectors as advanced in comparison to other African countries as they support educational training, industrial start-ups, and due to high levels of donor activity collaborative partnerships with international donors and institutions. These countries reflect on their progress as paving the way across the continent towards new models of African innovation. Zimbabwe represents southern Africa, but its political history has put it at odds with international policy processes. In East Africa, Ethiopia not only has a unique history of African independence, but also one of the lowest Internet penetration rates in the whole of Africa. The political cultures and histories of these latter two countries has meant that while they have retained political autonomy over their ICT policy strategies, they have struggled to embed a strong ICT sector. Consequently, we believe that these seven countries provide a useful starting point as a preliminary study in understanding the factors that underpin the implementation of Internet governance directives at the national level. The following Table 1 illustrates key comparable statistics profiling each of the countries studied with regard to their ICT development. We interviewed seven senior government officials and ministers overseeing ICT governance, one from each of the countries studied. In order to maintain confidentiality we have omitted their identifying details from this paper.

2.2. Methodological approach

Secondary empirical data was collected using a mixed methods approach triangulating policy analysis and interview data[2] with computer assisted text analysis to give a more complete understanding of how the three framing devices outlined above play out in the study. The content analysis uses a 1.1 million-word corpus from policy and policy-related

[1] Policy analysis refers to the discourse analysis employed on policy documents as distinct from content analysis which is a quantitative methodology.

[2] Interviewees were coded to indicate the country, the sector/role that the interviewee worked in/fulfilled and the interview number. In this paper, we draw on interviews conducted with the following officials and politicians, which form part of a larger body of ongoing research. For consistency and verification the abbreviated code is displayed in parenthesis: In Kenya, we interviewed the *Senior Officer Information and Communications Authority (ICTA)* (**K ICT 1**); in Ghana, the *Senior official National Information Technology Authority (NITA)* (**G ICT 1**); **Uganda,** *MP and Member of the Parliamentary Committee on ICT,* (**U MP 1**); Ethiopia, *Technical Adviser to the Ministry of Communication,* **(E ICT 1)**; Zimbabwe, *Deputy Minister of ICT* **(Z MP 1);** Liberia, *Deputy Minister of ICT* **(L MP 1);** Sierra Leone, *Deputy Minister of ICT* **(SL MP 1)**

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