Mobile Activism In African Elections

A Comparative Case Study

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Introduction

The proliferation of mobile phones in Africa is transforming the political and social landscape of the developing world, empowering people to source and share their own information and to have a greater say in what comes to international attention. The purpose of this research is to compare the use and impact of mobile technology in three recent African elections: Nigeria, Sierra Leone and Kenya.

In Nigeria's April 2007 presidential election, a local civil society organization used free software to collect over 10,000 text message reports from voters around the country, boosting citizen participation in a political process many Nigerians doubted. In Sierra Leone's August-September 2007 elections, trained local monitors used mobile phones to collect data from designated polling sites, enabling the independent National Election Watch to compile and release an accurate, comprehensive analysis of the election almost two weeks before the official report. And in Kenya's December 2007 election, a group of local digital activists developed and implemented a citizen reporting platform to allow Kenyans to report and track post-election violence during a month-long media blackout, collecting and publishing a comprehensive account of riots, displacement and human rights abuses that serves as one of the best available records of the crisis.

NIGERIA: APRIL 2007

The April 2007 Nigerian presidential elections were the first time that mobile phones were used formally to monitor an African election. They also marked the first democratic transfer of power since the country's independence in 1960 (Ibrahim 2007, online). Though the Nigerian Senate had rejected an attempt by the incumbent president to amend the constitution to allow him to seek a third term, voters still expressed worries that the elections would be "just a procedure," citing Nigeria's history of electoral fraud (Timberg 2006a, online). The months prior to the election were marked by violence that claimed the lives of over 70 Nigerians, and the Nigerian police ordered 40,000 automatic weapons in anticipation of election-related riots (Human Rights Watch 2007, online; Miller 2007, online).

Two months before the elections, the Human Emancipation Lead Project (HELP) Foundation, a non-profit group of Nigerian young professionals, began looking for ways to increase citizen participation in the electoral process. Their search took them to Ken Banks, founder of FrontlineSMS (www.frontlinesms.com). Originally developed to connect African national parks to local communities, FrontlineSMS lets anyone with a computer and a mobile phone use text

messages to interact with large groups of people. HELP asked Banks to help them devise an SMS-based crowdsourcing system to monitor the upcoming elections, which they implemented under the newly created Network of Mobile Election Monitors (NMEM) (Banks 2007, online).

NMEM had two main goals: to bolster official election monitoring efforts, which are often limited by time and geography, and to engage Nigerian citizens in the political process as evaluators as well as voters. After a successful test run during the April 14 state government elections, NMEM opened the system to volunteers nationwide for the presidential election on April 21. Registered NMEM associates in each of Nigeria's 36 states recruited additional volunteers and forwarded mass reminders about the program on the morning of the elections. Multiple messages from the same polling site were crosschecked for accuracy, and over 10,000 messages, describing both orderly voting experiences and widespread fraud, were received in all. NMEM concluded that, despite some polling places where voting ran smoothly, the elections were marked by an number of violations of electoral policy, an assessment that was echoed by both domestic and international observers (NMEM 2007, online).

SAMPLE TEXT MESSAGES FROM THE NMEM SYSTEM

"…There is a huge irregularity of voting at Gwande Karfa ward. In Bokkos LGC. TAKE NOTE…."

"I want to commend the efforts of INEC and for making this election come to pass in the face of every challenge."

"EVERYWHERE IS CALM VOTING IS ON. MOVEMENT IS RESTRICTED FOR EFFECTIVENESS OF THE ELECTION PROCESS."

(Network of Mobile Election Monitors 2007, online)

Two days after the elections, as the results were still being disputed by a group of Nigerian judges charged with determining whether the outcome of the election would stand, NMEM polled all those who had participated in the SMS monitoring system, asking whether they thought the election should be re-held (Connors 2008, online). Eighty percent of respondents voted to accept the results, a decision that was eventually upheld by the Nigerian court (NMEM 2007, online).

SIERRA LEONE: AUGUST-SEPTEMBER 2007

Sierra Leone's 2007 presidential elections were the second to take place in the country since the end of a decades-long civil war (S Leone 2007, online). Election preparations began almost immediately after the 2005 completion of the UN peacekeeping mission, and the newly restructured National Electoral Commission succeeded in registering 2.6 million voters, just over 90% of the country's eligible population (Ohman 2008, online). The BBC reported scattered acts of politically motivated violence and several election-related arrests in the months preceding the

election, but the UN declared the preparations a "remarkable success" overall (Q&A 2007, online; United Nations 2007, online). Still, five different organizations, including the U.S.-based National Democratic Institute (NDI) and the National Election Watch (NEW), a coalition of Sierra Leonean civil society organizations, were in place to monitor the elections (Q&A 2007, online).

A near-crippling lack of infrastructure and a mobile phone penetration rate of just 12 percent precluded social technology from serving as a widespread counterpart to official election monitoring in Sierra Leone, but digital media still played a crucial role (CIA 2008, online; Schuler 2008, online). Writes NDI's Ian Schuler, "SMS was not the ideal solution for moving information in Sierra Leone, but there was no ideal solution. When asked about the fastest, most reliable way to move information, NEW leaders and organizers always included text messaging as part of the solution" (Schuler 2008, online).

SMS in Sierra Leone was utilized by trained, official election observers rather than self-selected volunteers. Of the 150,000 observers NEW trained, 500 were chosen to participate in the SMS project (Verclas 2007, online). These participants were given mobile phones and a list of codes to use to report on ten "critical issues." They were then stationed at randomly selected polling places and tasked with sending a text message to a central hub at the end of the day that covered each critical issue and reported the election results from that polling place. Reports were confirmed through automated text message responses to the observers, and intermittent texts between observers and the central hub were used to alert election authorities of any violations of the electoral process (Schuler 2008, online). The SMS system allowed NEW to compile and release nationwide results and analysis within 24 hours, 11 days before than the official tallies were announced (CNN 2007, online). The system was also cheaper and more accurate than previous methods using hand-recorded data (Hansen-Tangen 2008, online). Despite irregularities, including the finding of manufactured ballots at nearly 500 polling places, the 2007 elections were declared by both NEW and other observers to have been largely free and fair (Ross 2007, online).

KENYA: DECEMBER 2007

Early local media reports portrayed Kenya's 2007 election as generally free and fair, with voters patiently enduring long lines at the polls (Reporters Without Borders 2008, online). However, while initial tallies placed opposition candidate Raila Odinga more than one million votes ahead of incumbent President Mwai Kibaki, the official count, released three days after the election, gave Kibaki the lead (Human Rights Watch 2008, online). Journalists were refused access to the

counting site, fueling suspicion that the Kenyan Election Commission had altered the results (BBC World Trust 2008, online).

Violence began less than an hour after the results were announced and lasted for six weeks, claiming more than 1000 lives and displacing as many as 500,000 Kenyans (BBC World Trust 2008, online). Government response was to impose an immediate live news blackout, as officials feared that radio broadcasts might be used (as they were in Rwanda in 1994) to spread messages of ethnic hate (Goldstein/Rotich 2008, online). Desperate for information, both Kenyans and the international community turned to Kenya's bloggers, who posted near-daily updates on the situation. Mainstream media rebroadcast mobile phone videos of the violence, and local radio stations began reading blog posts on the air, expanding new media's reach to nearly 95% of Kenyans (Textually.org 2008, online; Goldstein/Rotich 2008, online).

On January 3, a Kenyan blogger asked if there were "any techies out there willing to do a mashup of where the violence and destruction is occurring using Google Maps" (Okolloh 2008, online). Within days, Kenya's digital community responded with Ushahidi (www.ushahidi.com), a web site that collected reports of violence via SMS or online. Over 200 incidents were reported, then verified through non-governmental organizations and posted to an interactive calendar and map (Boyd 2008, online). Mobile phone-based crowdsourcing also went beyond Ushahidi: several of Kenya's bloggers allowed readers to comment on their posts via SMS, and the BBC received nearly 4000 text messages from Kenyans after asking for updates on the situation (Goldstein 2008, online). Local media also used mobile technology to conduct surveys on campaign issues, broadcasting poll questions on television and radio and encouraging listeners to respond via SMS (Hersman 2007, online).

While many Kenyans used digital media to share information about the election and the ensuing crisis, others used it to provoke more hatred. In the days after the election, text messages flew around the country, becoming increasingly "meaner, nastier and more propaganda-filled" (BBC World Trust 2008, online). Some urged Kenyans to "deal with them [Kibaki's tribe, the Kikuyu] the way they understand…violence." Messages in response called on the Kikuyu to "slaughter them [Odinga's tribe, the Luo] right here in the capital city" (Quist-Arcton 2008, online). Government officials approached Safaricom, Kenya's leading mobile phone service provider, about temporarily shutting down SMS capabilities, but the company resisted, fearing mass panic (BBC World Trust 2008, online). Safaricom instead sent out messages urging Kenyans to remain calm and warned them of possible prosecution were they to send "any SMS that may cause public unrest" (Ramey 2008, online).

Conclusion

By allowing voters to become reporters and evaluators In Nigeria and Sierra Leone, mobile phones encouraged citizen participation and a greater sense of ownership in the political process. Crowdsourced information proved to be more comprehensive and more timely than reports gathered through traditional methods; it was also reasonably accurate, due to the verification processes each system had in place. Mobile monitoring is too informal to replace international monitoring missions, but the ability of cell-phone equipped observers to collect and disseminate accurate election results to the public quickly and cheaply helped ease tensions that may have otherwise lead to conflict. In Kenya, a combination of digital media and radio helped fill an information void during the post-election crisis. Though some Kenyans used cell phones to spread hate, this should not be seen as a detriment to mobile technology; the experience of Rwanda in 1994 shows that the use of mass media to provoke violence is not a new phenomenon (Internews 2006, online).

Though concerns about government transparency and politically motivated arrests surrounded all three elections, those involved in citizen monitoring were not generally targeted by authorities, making mobile technology an attractive option for African activists who want to be more involved in the political process. Whether this will remain the case is uncertain; after the Kenyan election authorities considered both shutting down mobile phone communications and requiring users to register their phones with a central database (Cellular News 2008, online). Infrastructure-related network outages caused difficulties in Sierra Leone, negating the real-time quality of mobile phone monitoring that is its greatest asset (Verclas 2007, online); a government-enforced outage would similarly prevent mobile monitors from doing their work. Furthermore, the potential exists for governments to utilize seemingly appropriate security measures as steps toward surveillance and censorship, a serious concern in countries that already lack government transparency. A major question in the future will be how to control possible abuses of new media while still allowing for innovation and reasonably free use.

Still, the experiences of Kenya, Nigeria and Sierra Leone in 2007 show that digital media can empower and inform citizens in ways as yet unmatched by any other method, and the demand for participatory technology in Africa is high. Since its original installation in Kenya, Ushahidi has been used to monitor the mid-2008 xenophobic violence in South Africa and to track the conflict in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, and similar technology was used by a group of Zimbabwean bloggers to map the election conditions in Zimbabwe (see unitedforafrica.co.za, drc.ushahidi.com and www.sokwanele.com). NMEM is in the process of developing a way for

Nigerians to share their recommendations for good governance, which it will then share with the current administration (NMEM 2007, online). Though mobile technology is not without its problems, its success in these three elections has laid the groundwork for future citizen involvement in African politics, and concerns about misuse should not prevent further exploration of mobile activism in the continent.

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