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Ambivalence and Activism: Towards a Typology of the African Virtual Publics

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Introduction

While Africa remains still the least connected continent, with low information technology related penetration ratios, use of information and communication technologies (ICTs) is becoming pervasive in the continent. ICTs are becoming deeply embedded in social relations and in associational life. They are impacting on the way citizens live their lives and relate to both the state and other actors in the society. Cyber networking, which has been facilitated by access to ICTs has given rise to a mapping of a public space that is virtual. While the virtual public is not unique to Africa, its manifestation, organizing mode and concerns in Africa are informed by the African condition, both in terms of the specific issues that the virtual public space takes and the technical deficit that the continent faces.

How do we understand the virtual public in Africa? How does it relate to the state? How can we situate the virtual public within the context of globalization? What are its democratic or otherwise impulses? How does it relate to broad struggles and causes across the continent? Is a gendered reading of the virtual space possible?

It would seem that the virtual public space in Africa is a site of ambivalences. It is simultaneously a *we*, *us* and *them* space, depending on what the issues are. It is both globally and locally rooted. What are the circumstances that make this differentiation possible and in what situation do these different manifestations of sub-virtual publics arise?

Like the physical world, the virtual space is habituated by various cultures, sub-cultures and counter cultures. Cyber citizens are subject to contradictory impulses which pool them along specific social, economic, political and cultural engagements. How does a virtual public relates to a geospatial one? How can we theorize the virtual public in Africa?

A starting point for such theorization would be to unearth the manifestation of the virtual public sphere in Africa. This paper will attempt a topology of the virtual space in Africa both in terms of its concerns, mode of substantiation and its multiple levels of inclusions and exclusions. It will draw from existing cyber networks, examining the myriad ways they negotiate space and use of technology as a tool for social organizing as well as the kinds of politics that such negotiation and uses impose on the African virtual sphere. It would hopefully shade light on the impact and implication of ICTs on the public sphere in Africa.

The Public Sphere and ICTs

Central to the concept of the public sphere is the existence of a social space (not necessarily spatial) where citizens can engage in rational debate and discussion on social issues. This space, although subject to government policy making is independent of government. As a communicative realm, the size and reach of the public sphere is mediated by means of communication. Because debate and discussion pre-figure dialogue, the public sphere is best facilitated through interactivity. Yet in its drive for reach and inclusivity, it has to embrace non-interactive communication platforms. A tension therefore exists in the uptake of the media within the public sphere between interactive media such as the telephone and the mass media such as television and newspaper which while lacking in interactivity, have greater reach. The increasing dominance of the mass media over the interactive ones, along with its increasing subordination to the imperatives of profit is what some of the publics sphere theorists such as Habermas see as a trend towards undermining of the quality of the public sphere.

The convergence of interactive (one-on-one) and mass media, arising from the advent of the digital revolution, resulting in the spectrum that is now referred to as information and communication technologies (ICTs) has transformed the public sphere through a number of ways. First, although ICTs are part of the rubrics of media technologies, they have their own unique characteristics that make their engagement with citizens qualitatively different. They have greater speed of dissemination, have global reach and have no much cost of dissemination. As Patelis (2000) notes, "in the world of bits, there is no packaging, there is no distribution (they are automatic). Marginal costs are abolished, the consequence of which economic scale no longer yield a competitive advantage". This is largely true, although the case about the economy of scale is overstated, since the Internet itself tends to favour the very big.

Second, they have integrated older forms of media technologies, with new possibilities that were hitherto not possible. The Internet, which is the core of the ICTs, supports all forms of media content from text, video to audio and graphics. A website can engage in newspaper publishing and radio and television broadcasting simultaneously. In addition, the process of doing so has been de-mystified through the reduction of the skill content required on the part of the user. Non-professionals can today produce good quality programmes and other media products. ICTs have led to what called MacFarlene (1993) calls the "de-institutionalization of

the process of information dissemination", in that news production and dissemination are no longer the preserve of media organizations and professions.

Third, while traditional mass media technologies impose a dichotomy between producers and users, with ICTs, all users are producers simultaneously. Everyone can set up a website allowing him/her to disseminate information while receiving from others. Moreover, the cost of doing so is extremely low compared to setting up a traditional media outfit. Yet, this one-person media outfit has global reach, which the traditional forms of media technologies do not provide. Fourth, ICTs have allowed interactivity at a wide level in the use of the communication space. Even reading a mail on the internet involves the making of a new text of the mail. Users of the virtual spaces are therefore not just mere passive recipients of texts but are simultaneously involved in the process of producing and disseminating their own sub-texts. The interactivity of ICTs has unleashed a torrent of creativity on the part of their users.

Habermas conception of the public sphere places emphasis on three key issues, namely, participation is open to all (there is a principle of inclusivity), all participants are considered equal (social status or rank is disregarded), and any issue can be raised for rational debate. The cyberspace is potentially opened to all, even though in practice there are a number of barriers, but so it has always been with other forms of communication platforms. In so far as engaging the cyberspace is concerned, all are also potentially considered equal, again, practical exigencies put some limit to this. Theoretically, all forms of rational debate can take place in the cyberspace, and in practice even irrational ones do take place such as the case with race hate sites, for example, but censorship is also placing limits to debates that can take place, at least in some countries, if not globally.

How do we conceptualize the virtual public? Is it the same as the virtual space? Can it be reduced to online communities? Like the traditional public sphere, the virtual public sphere can only be imagined as a social space for citizens' engagements with socio-political issues. While the virtual space provides the context and contours for the emergence of the virtual space, the two cannot be conflated for the virtual space contains within it also private and government controlled spaces. In the same vein, online communities cannot be conflated with the virtual public sphere. There is governance online which is also part of the online communities. As communicative discursive phenomenon, the virtual space should be seen to be the articulation of online communicative discursive practice of citizens as they engage with

political and social issues. They should be platforms for citizens' articulation of issues and social problems, free from the exigency of profit and government control and direction. While they tend to mirror civil society, the virtual public spheres are not reduced to organized associational platforms.

In reality therefore, such virtual spaces that constitute the virtual public sphere should include portals that provide spaces for free public discourses, various discussion platforms, citizens' mailing lists, chat platforms, wikis, blogs and online open publications. Yet even in this, there is a problem: portal such as yahoo, google, etc that are set up and driven by profit motive are providing substantial spaces for citizens engagement in the virtual space, through for example, the many discussion groups, mailing lists, blogs and other online publications they host, and therefore cannot be dissociated with the virtual public spheres.

One implication of ICTs in the making of the virtual sphere is that they not only de-territorialized public sphere but also creates a variety of public spaces that are disconnected from the nation sphere, thus giving two specific features of the virtual sphere, which are that they cut both across countries and not do necessary organize on the basis of nationalities. The need for both interactivity and simultaneity, required for a public sphere, has been intensely facilitated by ICTs, especially through the internet with its global reach and instantaneous networking. The virtual public sphere that has emerged through the uptake of ICTs is centred around the use of internet based tools and resources. These include the sharing of views using emails, mail groups, blogging, chats rooms, other online publications and webcast.

Working with various cyber platforms and tools, there have emerged both national and global virtual public spheres, providing opportunity for citizens to network and articulate citizens' visions on different public issues. They have been exerting influence on many global issues. At the global level, many such virtual spheres have risen to contest dominant paradigms. The influence of cyber networking can be seen for example in the way citizens from diverse countries and continents, working with the internet mobilized for the now famous Seattle Protest against the WTO Ministerial of 2002. There has even been what is referred to as "cyber protest", with activists jamming the website of World Economic Summit during its 2002 summit, causing it to crush (Shatchtman, 2002, quoted in Wiltse, 2003).

There have been many others, though less dramatic, but nonetheless, important encounters of cyber mobilization to articulate and campaign for specific public issues. For example, O'Neill (1999) has documented how citizens and civil society organizations have utilized cyber networking to place corporate social responsibility on the spotlight. The World Social Forum (www.wsf.org), which has become the major platform for anti-globalization struggles, works largely online, with activists in different countries having only email contacts and interact through discussion groups and online publications spaces. Even in physical combat, the cultivation of a virtual public sphere is visible through using online tools by for instance such groups as Zapatistas and now Usama bn Laden and El-Qaeda. Ed Wiltse (2003) has also drawn attention to what he calls fandom, the rise of virtual communities of affection, that not only mobilize on specific social issues but also offer online solidarity and affection to each other across the globe on the basis of shared concerns and views.

Studying the Virtual Public in African: Methodological Problems
Unearthing the manifestation of the virtual public sphere in Africa is fraud with many methodological problems. For one, virtual publics are not continent specific. In fact the very nature of border porosity of ICTs (Ya'u, 2004) makes such locational virtual public difficult to see. Virtual networks are by their nature transcontinental. As argues by Guobin Yang (nd), online publics are less visible and less bound to physical locations and thus more deterritorialized. They elaborate discourse and practices whose consumption moves beyond national boundaries. In this sense speaking of an African virtual sphere as distinct from a generic (global) virtual public sphere may seem to be theorizing an unsubstantiated subject.
Secondly, most virtual networks are open-ended with no clear cut attributes for membership. Anyone sufficiently interested on any issues for which a group exist is free to join. Thus in a given cyber group it is possible to find both civil society organizations and government agencies, private individuals and government actors, African and non-Africans, etc. How is such a virtual public sphere to be named? What makes it African, if the label is to be attached? Is it because it is constituted predominantly by Africans or is it because of the issues it concerns itself with, or perhaps, even both? How can any of these be proved?

Third, virtual publics because they are virtual, they are difficult to substantially observe beyond what is reported or retrieved in the virtual places. But reporting/retrieving is time bound since cyber content is dynamic. Content keep changing by the minutes. Even with the best of archiving, it is difficult to keep track of online production. Add to this problem is the

fact that many sites are for a number of reasons not visible to common search engines, and are therefore likely to be missed out. This is becoming more serious with the attempt to commercialize search engines listings. There is also internet censor in which countries block access to specific sites for their citizens, usually for political reasons. There is even preemptive blocking of traffics from "suspect" countries such as from Nigeria by a number of international organizations, regarding in such communication from the country as suspect.

Fourth, how does one demarcate between the African Diaspora which operates on the basis of two publics (one of their departed continent, and second of where they have found themselves at the moment) and the locationally African virtual public spheres? Because of the better facilities in their Diasporic locations, Diaspora Africa attends to produce more online content and discourse about Africa than is produced locally on the continent. While such spaces would be available to Africans on mainland, they would most likely be listed as European or American spaces.

Fifth, many cyber discussion groups and many mailing lists in Africa are personalized, with many hosted by websites that are not visible to many of the search engines. Many create their personal mailing lists which facilitate discussion among the lists members on public issues but these lists would appear only as mail email traffics and not be registered as public discussion lists. There is also the fact that mailing list using gsm text messaging which is a very widespread phenomenon in Africa would not appear on listing on virtual public spaces.

While this paper does not intend to address these and many other methodological problems in studying the virtual public sphere in Africa and how such an African virtual sphere (and its subs) can be isolated and studied, it assumes, rather problematically, that the notion of African virtual sphere can be conceptualized and rationalized, and therefore subject to interrogation. Without specifically answering the many questions raised above, the paper assumes that the African virtual public sphere can be conceptualized as the way Africans and Africa appropriate and engage with ICTs to create spaces and discourses on issues and problems that may be local, national, continental or global. In creating and using these spaces and discourses, it must be admitted that they are opened to citizens of other continents just as Africans could engage with virtual spheres that purport to be specific to some other continents.

Finally, this paper does not seek to study specific instances of African virtual spheres, but hopes to draw generalizations from the specific manifestations of the African virtual sphere instances such that its contours, practices and substantiation can be outlined.

Towards a Typology of the Virtual Space in Africa

The African virtual public can be studied by locating several virtual spaces both as free discussion spaces as well as electronic/online publishing platforms that are devoted on social issues on Africa and its countries. These spaces would include for instance such portals that are devoted to African issues as Pambazuka (www.panbazuka.org), several discuss groups on the yahoo, Google and several other portals and the several mailing lists that have been set up by various organizations including both state and non-state actors. Most of these groups, electronic publications and mailing lists are open to the public and can be accessed by signing up for membership. Membership allows one the privilege to receive and make post to these spaces. The websites on the other hand have places for interactivity to articulate and share positions with other visitors.

The major tools that are used by African virtual public sphere are emails, chat rooms, yahoogroups, wikis, and limited online publications. There is also extensive use of mobile phone, especially through the use of short text messaging (stm) technology. Blogging by Africans within Africa is still at its infancy. This is largely related to both cost and the limitation of infrastructure. Table 1 gives the relative position of Africa with respect to the number of blogs from a blog listing survey. Blogs are opens spaces for people to share their views with the wide online public. They are, in a sense personal journals, maintained by individuals and groups. As can be seen from the table 1, Africa has the least number.

Table 1: Number of Blogs by Continent

Continent	Google
Africa	964
South America	1850
Australasia	2251
Asia	8065
Europe	12911
North America	38017

Source: , accessed last on 8th September, 2008

The small size of the African virtual space can also be seen by looking at statistics relating to online discussion groups. This is shown in table 2. While Europe and Asia have 31184 and 30124 google groups respectively Africa has only 3187, just about 10% of what Europe has. The situation is similar with the yahoo specialized groups. The implication id this is that there are few African online platforms that engages people in social discourse.

Table 2: Discussion Groups Distribution

Region	Google	Yahoo specialized groups
Europe	31184	1840
Asia	30124	6166
Latin America	12510	215
Middle East	3778	1279
Africa	3187	776

Source from http://www.globeofblogs.com/?x=location&region=1 and http://dir.groups.yahoo.com/dir/1600043921

In addition to portals, many African newspapers are now online. Some of them allow for online discussion while others keep blogs for their columnists only. This has created sub virtual spaces around them. The significance of this is that the newspapers have improved their reach and accessibly, since most of the online editions are accessible freely.

What the continent misses in terms of dense internet penetration, it seems to latch on the spread on the gsm technology. Africa is the fastest growing market of gsm technology. While its penetration is still to match that of the technologically advanced countries, on the basis of current growth rates, it is possible to bridge that gap in a few years. Access to gsm phones has spread a culture of text messaging that is used for social activism in three ways. First, it provides a social network and numerous public spheres for the sharing of ideas and the articulation of positions by citizens. Second, it is used as a means of organizational coordination by civil society organizations as well for general mobilization of citizens behind specific social causes. This particular use is best illustrated by the use of the gsm text

messaging by civil society during the build up to the September 2003 consumers' boycott of gsm phone services in Nigeria. People were mobilized using the text messaging, resulting in a fairly successful one day protest (Obadare, 2004). Thirdly, text messaging is also used as a tool for advocacy to lobby state actors to support a cause or protest their support of unpopular causes. Again to draw from a Nigerian context, during the recent advocacy to get the National Assembly to pass the Freedom of Information Bill, the Freedom of Information Coalition (FOI) initiated a text campaign in which members of the coalition sent text messages to members of the National Assembly urging them to support the passage of the bill. Similarly during the debate on the attempt to amend the constitution to allow the president a third term in 2006, civil society activists used text messaging to send protest messages to legislators who were known to be supporting the campaign for the third term.

The African virtual public articulates personal, local and international problems. It allows individuals and groups to work together towards a common public goal. It is also a mechanism for political mobilization, as different political actors use the cyberspace to mobilize for their agendas.

African virtual publics, like other virtual publics show diversity both in terms of the issues and their membership. This diversity is understandable as online subjects of interests of people tend to reflect their own traditional issues of concern. The issues range from human rights, good governance, unemployment, HIV/AIDS, and human trafficking. The diversity of issues can be seen by looking at the categories of the African discussion groups hosted by yahoo for example in table 3.

Table 3: subject distribution of African online discussion groups

Issue	Number
Society	576
Business and finance	382
Schools and universities	360
Recreation	298
Computers	284
People	236
Arts and entertainment	193
Science and Technology	184
News	147
Health	134
Others	96
Home	39

Source: http://dir.groups.yahoo.com/dir/1600043921

Because of this diversity, there is also segmentation, and even fragmentation as spaces could be national, sub-national, ethnic-based, etc. For example there is Naija group devoted to discussing politics in Nigeria just as there is an Igbo group devoted to the political engagements of the Pan Igbo cultural community. There are also cultural platforms such as www.yoruba.org. It is this fragmentation that reveals a tendency towards, a we, us and them framework of discourse. Sub-cultural and sub-national and ethnic groups tend to consider the we in terms of the specific sub-cultural or sub-religious or sub-ethnic spaces. A more inclusive framework takes the form of a *we* which is contrasted with the *them* of the outsiders. The ''them" is more clear when discourse borders on global issues such as imperialism, and western powers are seen as the "them". Such discourses also creaser sub-virtual public spheres that tend to frame their discourses through boundary makers such as ethno-regional communities or national space. In this sense, there would appear some correspondence between the virtual and physical public spheres. This correspondence is only notional since the participation in the space needs not be limited to citizens in a given geophysical space. Take the example of gamji for example (www.gamiji.com). Although it did not say so, this space is seen as the virtual space for articulation of political perspectives relating to northern Nigeria. Yet postings are not limited to either those from the north or even Nigeria.

Fragmentation and differentiation in the African virtual public are also informed by the historic experiences of different discourses around nationality, ethnicity, citizenship and territorial claims in different parts of continent. These experiences have only found additional outlets with the virtual sphere for articulation of what may appear to be unresolved nationhood problems.

There is also evidence of unevenness in both the size and engagements of the virtual public across the African countries. This unevenness is understandable as some countries have relatively higher indicators than others. This of course is not surprising given that access to ICTs is also uneven across the continent.

There is evidence of a number of virtual spaces for the articulation of gender discourses and the promotion of gender equality, equity and justice in Africa. Many online groups have emerged within Africa to promote spaces for gender discourses. The E-Network of National Gender Equality Monitoring in Africa (MGMnet-Africa Information Portal) of UNECA (http://www.uneca.org/daweca/gender_networks_in_africa.asp) provides a listing of some these spaces.

While there is yet no empirical mapping of the political impact of the African virtual sphere, there are indications that it exerts influence on politics and governance in the continent. It exerts influence on the political system in three complementary ways. First, it provides platforms for direct political mobilization. When civil society uses e-posting to canvass support for legislation or to protest a policy, it is mobilizing political opinion. Secondly, it provides avenues for civil society organizations to coordinate and work together on common public agenda. Third, it provides spaces for the articulation of new social issues and problems and insert them to local, national, regional and even global agenda. One of the successful utilization of cyber platforms to insert specific issues on policy making was the use of e-platforms by the African Youth Information and Communication Technologies for Development (ICT4D) Network (AYISN) that campaigned to represent youth voices in national, continental and global policy making in on ICT. Networking over poor ICT infrastructures in their respective countries, the youths have featured prominently in such development forums as NEPAD, the AU, the WSIS and the African Development Forum, the last of which focused on youths. This networking has thrown African youths into the centre stage of policy making discourse, especially within the African continent (Segan, 2004, Ya'u,

2004). Another sub-virtual public sphere that has exerted influenced is the online community cultivated by the Treatment Campaign in South Africa. It was able to use networking to mobilize public opinion around the issue of treatment for HIV patients in South Africa (Wasserman, 2005)

Fourth, government and government functionaries are directly reached via the public space and indirectly when traditional media appropriate the outcome of online deliberations. An example of how an online discussion can reach out to policy making through the reproduction of the online content is the discussion around the Africa for Obama dinner. A robust discussion on the issue was initiated by a list serve facilitated by Prof. Toyin Falola. Because some of the people on the list are journalists, they reproduced parts of the deliberations in the print media, which in turn further heated the debate nationally over the propriety of the Obama dinner. Soon the anti-corruption agency in Nigeria had to intervene and seized the money.

Judging from a survey, there is no one particular relationship between the state and the virtual spaces in Africa. This is partly the result of the open-ended nature of the virtual space and the fact that it is variegated. At one level, a virtual network would be intensely opposed to the state. This is most noticed where the issues at stake are human rights and democratization. For example some African online communities tend to oppose the Mugabe election in Zimbabwe, campaigned against the manipulation of the election in Kenya and have been very active in mobilizing support against the state sanctioned murders in Durfur, Sudan. On global issues such as WTO issues, there are instances in which state and opinions from some cyber platforms tend to reinforce each other. What can be said however is that most governments in Africa tend to fear the freedom virtual public sphere offers to citizens and their organizations to discuss and deliberate on virtually every issue.

The great majority of global cyber networks have their origins in the west. Few have their origins in Africa. This may have implication in that they may be conduits for euro-centric perspectives on global issues. But we have seen also counter hegemonic movement views spreading from the west as in the growing anti-globalization movement. In reality, the pluralism of the virtual publics in Africa informs its overall ambivalence toward issue of globalization and in its wider perspectives on politics. While some virtual spheres are created

to counter hegemonic discourses, others are there to reinforce these discourses. Still others approach the discourses from either religious or ethno-cultural standpoints.

Limitation of the virtual sphere in Africa:

While there are certain common limitations that the virtual publics in general, such as the increasing pressure for commercializing of the cyberspace, the phenomenon of information overload, and the growing globally trends to censorship by governments in the wake of the September 11 attacks, among other, there are specific limitations of the virtual spheres in Africa.

1. Limited access to ICTs, making the virtual sphere a small island of the privileged (cost, infrastructure). Using conventional tele-penetration indicators, we can see that in spite of the progress of the last few years, Africa still remains the most backward in terms of access to ICTs. While its share of world population is about 12%, its total share of internet subscribers is less than 2%. Similarly its share of internet users is just about 3.6% of global users. Table 4 gives the relevant internet penetration indicators for different countries and continents. Access is both a function of infrastructure as well as about the cost of access. Access to internet, like are access to other ICTs is more costly in Africa than in other continents.

Table 4: Internet Penetration figures for the year 2007

Continent/country	Internet subscribers (in 1000)	Subscribers density	Internet users (in 1000)	User density
Africa	9,674	1.15	49,682.3	5.19
Asia	265,761	6.85	569,798.0	14.34
Europe	137,446	20.71	331,799.4	41.22
USA	72,721.0	23.78	220,000.0	71.94
Canada	8,700.0	26.72	28,000.0	85.17

Source: From ITU website

2. The dominance of foreign languages which excludes majority of the African citizens. Much of discussion on the internet is carried in European languages such as English,

French and Portuguese as the languages of formal learning in most African countries. Indigenous African languages are only beginning establish their presence in the cyberspace. The use of foreign languages is not just about the general usage on the internet but also even among African virtual publics. This can seen be by studying the languages of discourse of the various African discussion groups. A count from yahoo shows that out of 34 African groups only one uses Swahili. All the rest use English, French and Portuguese.

3. Limited hosting capacity. Cyber networking is web-based. It means that the space has to be created for hosting. Most African countries have only rudimentary capacity for hosting websites. This means most African cyber platforms are hosted outside the continent at either some relative greater financial or social cost. In fact many African platforms are even cyber squatting. The reality is that without local hosting the necessary proliferation of platforms that will democratize access to these platforms cannot take place.

4. Every technology comes with its skills demand. The use of ICTs requires not functional literary but also digital literacy. Yet in many African countries, basic literacy is still an issue. For some of the countries, adult literacy is as low as 50%. For such countries, therefore the great vast of illiterate citizens are excluded from the use of most of ICTs. Skills and knowledge of the use of ICTs in the continent is not only unevenly distributed across the continent and countries but also extremely low in comparison to other continents. This along with other problems explains the low size of the African virtual spaces both in terms of their active participation as well as in terms of their potential reach. A survey from google as illustrated in Table 5 shows most of African discussion groups have membership size of less than 100 people. This however is not peculiar to African as the same trend can be observed for the other continents. One of the African discussion groups, NaijaPolitics (NaijaPolitics@yahoogroups.com, a group devoted to Nigerian politics, (started in 2006) has fairly large membership at 5525. On the other hand AfricaPolitics (founded in 2002) has 1311 members and AfricnaPerspectives (founded in 2000) even less, with just about 146. It seems for some of the groups, they hardly expand with time, or if they do, the growth is very small.

Table 5: Membership size of a sampled discussion groups

Continent	No member	1-9 members	10-99 member	100-999 members	1000-99999 members	10,000-99,999 and above members	100,000 and above members
Africa	3	1823	961	216	41	1	0
Asia	303	17309	9231	2189	292	33	2
Europe	1360	15501	9462	2328	212	17	1
USA (country)	38	18595	7170	1470	153	11	0

Source: http://groups.google.com/groups/dir?sel=region=61168

5. Slow speed of internet in the continent which makes participation in the virtual sphere to require considerable amount of time. While it is difficult to provide an empirical corroboration between the speed of internet access and its use, an indirect indicator can be formed by looking at how frequent people make postings to their discussion groups for example. About 2423 of the African groups on google did not make a single posting in a month, while about 376 had a posting of less than 10 messages per month. It indicates low participation. It also is an indication that many of the members of the groups are only recipients rather than both senders and recipients.

A slightly different measure is the last time a groups had a posting. As shown in table 6, the majority of the African groups had their last post in the interval between 100-9999 days that is for nearly three months, the groups appear inactive. That goes to show that some of the groups are barely active, given that some groups are intensely active, with several postings in a day.

Table 6: Days since last post

Continent	Zero day	1-9 days	10-99 days	100-999 days	1000 and above days
Africa	118	678	520	907	80
Asia	1080	7503	4204	9693	1561
Europe	1624	7635	6177	1703	0
USA (country)	681	12356	2613	6974	746

Source: http://groups.google.com/groups/dir?sel=region=61168

Tentative Conclusions

The virtual space has emerged in Africa but is limited in size and influence, especially in relation to issues within countries and the continent. It provides space for intense discussions among its privileged members on various social issues affecting individual countries and the continent as well as issues that are of global concern.

The African virtual public sphere is variegated both in terms of its concerns and composition. It includes and excludes depending on the issue at stake. Mechanisms of inclusion/exclusion include for example age (as in the youth networks), gender, religion, cultural markers, etc. Because it tends to be anonymous, state agents and non-state actors can occupy a particular virtual public and work on common issues only to confront themselves simultaneously as adversaries in other different virtual public spheres.

The African virtual public sphere is populated by elites due to obvious reasons. In this sense, it sits problematically with Habermas' concept of the public sphere which must be inclusive. For this reason, its actual utilization for political engagement and mobilization is limited. But it most be noted that often the cyberspace is used with traditional public space and thus the virtual sphere is an extension of, and not a distinct one, from the non-virtual public sphere.

Much of cyber networking in Africa is done by youth and professionals such as academics and journalists, civil society activists, development workers and government officials. This means that social status is critical to participation in the virtual space in Africa. This is contrary to the Habermas' conception of the public sphere. As a consequence of the occupation of the virtual space by youth in Africa, the African virtual sphere can be said to be

demystifying gerontocracy as youth who are more adept in the use of technology are getting more spaces for the articulation of their viewpoints and visions than the traditional public sphere could allow.

While in most African countries there has been no conscious attempt at censoring the internet, the fact remains that not all subjects can be freely discussed. Countries such as Zimbabwe, Egypt, Zambia, Tunisia and Algeria, among others have already attempted censorship of the internet. While Tunisia attempted censorship in the built up to the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS) and Algeria recently places a censor on facebook,). Access to the social networking website Facebook (http://www.facebook.com) has been blocked without explanation since 24 August 2008 in Tunisia, in a move that reinforces government censorship of the Internet. One of possible reasons for this action is the creation of personal webpages by dissidents on Facebook, launching debates about Tunisian society (Balancing Act, 2008). In fact many countries in Africa would have loved to censor the internet but for their lack of the technological capacity to do so. Censor is an attempt to control the virtual public sphere.

African virtual public sphere is small, but is expanding, and has great potential for the expansion and consolidation of democracy in the continent. Many civil society organizations, pro-democracy activists, journalists, etc are using the e-platform, reaching out to virtual communities, and mobilizing such communities in the struggles for democratization.

African virtual public sphere would tend to promote African integration, with online communities working together across countries, sharing experiences and learning from each other. The availability of instantaneous online language translation has been able to bridge part of the communication problem across publics in the African continent

But African virtual public sphere is also facing a number of challenges. Some of these challenges include:

- Technology Challenge: Africa is a technology importer continent. This means that access to ICTs will remain relatively costly and therefore constrained the speed of their diffusion. For the virtual space to expand quickly in the continent, Africa has to address the issue of building capacity for local technology production.

- Government policy making challenge: ICTs, and telecommunication network that is driven by the market in particular, goes to where profit is assured. This means it tends to concentrate where there is the potential for high traffic. Poor communities and rural areas are thus usually excluded from the cyberspace in Africa. Responses to this situation have usually been to create universal access policies that would create different levels of affordability, taking into account social socio-economic situation of the different communities. The challenge here is to make such universal programmes more effective so that poor and rural communities would be included in the cyberspace.

- Censorship challenge: the virtual space is increasingly become a site of struggle for democratization, promotion of human rights, good governance and accountability. Since September 11, USA in particular has been developing many new solutions not only for censoring but also for controlling the use of the internet. Such technologies are likely to spread across the world. Africa with its large share of unaccountable leaders would be a market for these solutions. Nitizens of the virtual space in African will have to rise up to the challenge of increasing possibility of cyber-censorship.

- The Challenge of Language: for the African virtual sphere to truly become inclusive, Africans have to rise to the challenge of inserting African languages in the cyberspace. This will create the condition for the participation of a wide number of people who are not literate in European languages to engage with the virtual public sphere.

- The challenge to increasing consolidation of knowledge divide (against the decrease in digital divide): in an unequal world grounded by market globalization, Africa faces the problem of increasing marginalization. The struggle against globalization is a struggle against re-colonization. This struggle is made more difficult by the fact of growing knowledge divide. It is important to draw a distinction between the digital divide which is seen in terms of differential in access to ICTs and the knowledge divide which is the differential that exists in terms of the production and use of knowledge. The information age, that is facilitated by the use of ICTs is knowledge driven and Africa has to overcome its deficit in the area of knowledge production, to make its participation in the global virtual sphere meaningful.

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