



Social media and networks: what potential is there for policy engagement by citizens in West Africa?

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Abstract

As social media and networks loom large in the Internet space, we no longer question their utility in many areas. The public policy space is one area in which social media and networks have made a volcanic impact in North Africa, with the revolutions in Tunisia and Egypt. The question is whether anything like this could happen in West Africa.

To answer this question, it was important to know who was using the Internet, why they were using it, and to what extent. It was also necessary to sieve through to get to the use of social media networks, such as Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, and YouTube. The researcher needed to look for concrete case studies in Nigeria, Ghana, and Côte d'Ivoire and looked at different levels of citizens' engagement in public policy and how social media and networks are being used. Interviews, questions, consultations, discussions, and surveys were conducted, which led to the discovery that things are happening in strange places and that the potential of social media and networks in citizen policy engagement can only be likened to a pregnancy whose term is already here.

Keywords: social media; participation; citizen engagement; public policy; West Africa

The Internet: the revolution

The Internet has come a long way, and from current indications we can safely say that it still has a long way to go. From its early years in the 1960s to its vibrant and robust coverage today, we can say that it has grown greatly and may well be considered to be the greatest knowledge invention of mankind.

Having moved from its defence and military origins to a more people oriented use, the Internet has grown to be a valuable tool in most socio-economic activities. There is hardly a single human activity that does not use the Internet for communication, data transmission, document exchange, and professional collaboration.

Access to the Internet is also now globalised. It has gone beyond access through huge computers to desktops, laptops, notebooks, and tablets. The Wikipedia article on the history

of the Internet says it can now be 'accessed almost anywhere by numerous means, especially through mobile Internet devices, mobile phones, data cards, and cellular routers which all allow users to connect to the Internet from anywhere there is a wireless network supporting that device's technology' (Wikipedia, 2011a).

The state of the African Internet Union

The African continent has not been left aside in the digital revolution. As early as 1993, the African governments had already commissioned an experts group to work on what later became The Africa Information Society Initiative (AISII). The AISII has been Africa's policy driver and has been instrumental in the continent's engagement in the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS), its results and their implementation. Countries like Nigeria, Senegal, Mali,

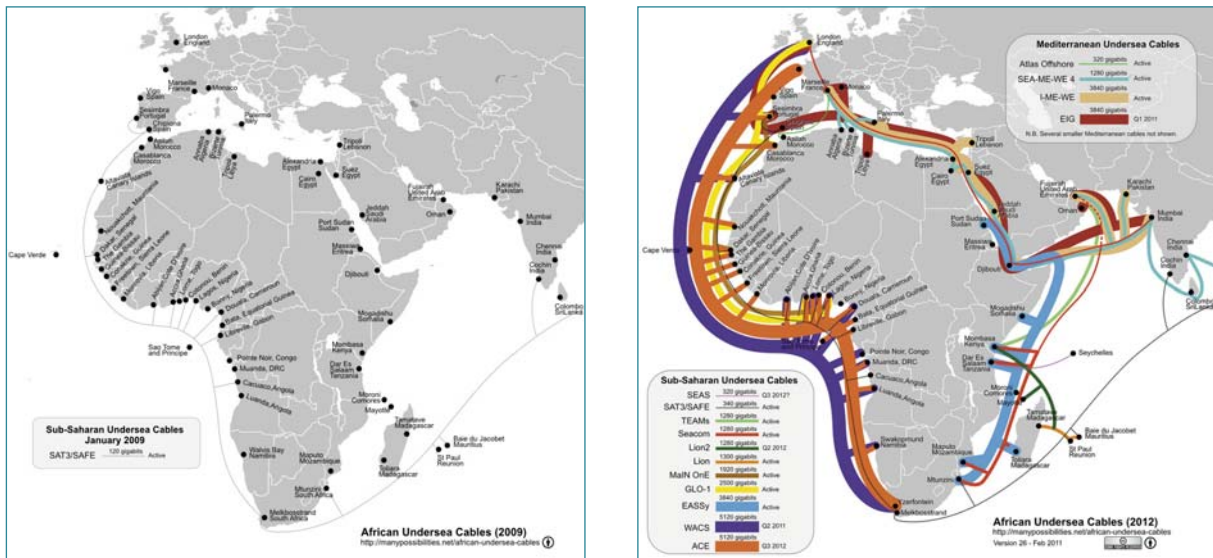


Figure 1. African Undersea Cables in January 2009 and in February 2011 (Song, 2011).

Cote d'Ivoire, and Egypt are implementing ministerial policies wholly dedicated to information and communication technologies (ICTs).

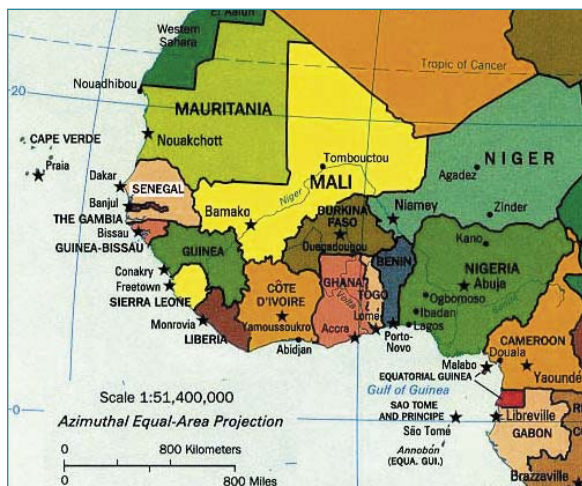
Access to the Internet, though not as widespread as in Europe and the USA, has seen a significant expansion in the last few years. The increase in fibre optics investment in the continent has registered unprecedented growth in the last two years. Undersea cables have increased from one active in January 2009 to over a dozen in February 2011 (Song, 2011).

West Africa – cultural diversity at the highest level

The region officially known as West Africa stretches from the Federal Republic of Nigeria in the East to the Cape Verde Islands in the

West. It is the most culturally diverse region of the continent, with hundreds of national and ethnic languages and three international languages spoken, English, French, and Portuguese. It comprises 16 independent nations, with the exception of Mauritania, that belong to the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS). Going by demographics reports and using 1996 figures, the region is home to over three hundred thousand of Africa's one billion population (Wikipedia, 2011b).

On Internet connection issues, the region was the first to welcome the continent's first undersea cable, the SAT3/SAFE. By the end of 2010, the region welcomed four more cables, MaIN OnE, Glo 1, WACS, and ACE. By the end of 2012, two very important undersea cables, WACS and ACE, both with 5120 gigabyte capacities, will be added to the existing Internet connectivity infrastructure in the region. West Africa is therefore looking forward to greater Internet access and more online presence.



Social networks: the friends, the followers, the connections and the viewers

One of the major uses of the Internet is social networking. The Internet offers users

Figure 2. (left) Map of West Africa. (Source: The Globe and Mail, 2009)

the freedom to communicate, share, and exchange information, and the social use of the Internet is beginning to rival its professional use. In a November 2010 blog post, Bruce Levick noted that, 'by the late 90s, Internet forums rapidly increased' (Levick, 2010).

There are hundreds of sites on the Internet that give their users the possibility of connecting with other users, sharing information, and updating on the same platform. The most popular of these sites, taken from a global perspective, is Facebook. Others include, MySpace, Twitter, LinkedIn, and YouTube. At the end of 2010, SocialBakers (2011) informs us that Facebook alone had recorded 600,000,000 users, which is about twice the total population size of West Africa and more than half the population of the entire continent.

In 2007, scholars Christine B. Williams and Girish Jeff Gulati of Bentley College started the first studies on the potential of social networks in the public policy arena. They concentrated their research in the USA and concluded it in *Social Networks in Political Campaigns: Facebook and the 2006 Midterm Elections*. Their findings, presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Political Science Association in Chicago, Illinois, 30 August – 2 September 2007 concluded that: 'Taken together, the evidence from our analyses provides a compelling case that Facebook played an important role in the 2006 congressional races and that social networking sites have the capability of affecting the electoral process' (Williams and Girish, 2007).

Why the research?

The year 2010 was one of many celebrations in Africa. Many of the countries were celebrating 50 years of independence. These were followed by elections. The need to take a look at African 'independence' was widespread in the academic sectors, and researchers took up several topics to that effect. For students of citizen engagement and policy processes, it was the right time to look at the future perspectives of policy in Africa. The urge to alloy the past and the present and connect both to the future has given rise to the present study.

In the area of citizen engagement in policy processes, some social networks are proving to be of increased influence. The first is Facebook, which allows for highly interactive processes on its platform and related applications. The second is Twitter, whose 140 character strokes and real-time dissemination are attracting citizens and policymakers alike. Others include YouTube and LinkedIn. This study, therefore, sought to look into these social media networks and their potentials for influencing policy processes in three countries in West Africa. It sought to understand the extent of their use, the reasons and the possible policy process gains that may be made, or the potentials that exist. This study addresses the entire policy cycle and notes current and future trends.

Literature overview

On the academic front, Carden (2009) has highlighted the issues that affect policy processes in the developing world and has also stressed the challenges for research, especially in policy. However, in six different case studies he has underlined the lessons learned from ICT policy processes in the developing world, and he signals the great role that ICT is playing. Swanson and Bhandwal (2009) have done impressive work on the role of social networks in policy-making. Though not tailored to the West African region in particular, it does throw ample light on the increasingly significant role of social networks.

The Miniwatts Marketing platforms group has made a wonderful compilation of both the data on African Internet users and Facebook users (Miniwatts Marketing Group, 2010). Though of capital importance, it does not include a lot of other social media networks and is not intended to serve as a social media network measurement tool. Carden challenges us to research more on other existing or possible potentials of ICT use. Swanson and Bhandwal encourage us to seek out information in West Africa that can be compared. The Facebook figures on global users of the site encourage us to seek out the same information for Twitter, YouTube, LinkedIn and, furthermore, to understand the potential of their use and the network capacities to actually influence policy in the region.

The Internet, social media and networks: the 2010 report

The most comprehensive qualitative data on the use of the Internet and the use of social media is culled from a very important article by Pingdom (2011). Here are key figures that concern our study, in increasing order:

- 35 – Hours of video uploaded to YouTube every minute.
- 20 million – The number of Facebook applications installed each day.
- 20 million – Videos uploaded to Facebook per month.
- 21.4 million – Added websites in 2010.
- 100 million – New accounts added on Twitter in 2010.
- **110.9 million – Internet users in Africa.**
- 175 million – People on Twitter as of September 2010.
- 250 million – New people on Facebook in 2010.
- 255 million – The number of websites as of December 2010.
- 1.97 billion – Internet users worldwide (June 2010) - 14% increase since the previous year.
- 2 billion – The number of videos watched per day on YouTube.

- 2+ billion – The number of videos watched per month on Facebook.
- 3+ billion – Photos uploaded per month to Facebook.
- 25 billion – Number of tweets sent on Twitter in 2010.
- 30 billion – Pieces of content (links, notes, photos, etc.) shared on Facebook per month.

These global figures show to what extent the use of social media on the Internet is on the rise. It also shows the quantity of data being uploaded, exchanged, and shared. Nonetheless, our study is not global but West Africa-specific. We therefore took a closer look at three countries, Nigeria, Ghana, and Côte d'Ivoire. We sought to understand some specific initiatives that are using social media and networks to engage citizens in the policy process.

Specific country cases

Nigeria – Africa's most populous country

The Federal Republic of Nigeria is Africa's most populous nation. The 'Fact Sheet on Nigeria' (2010) estimates population in 2009 at 154,729,000. It is home to half of the pop-

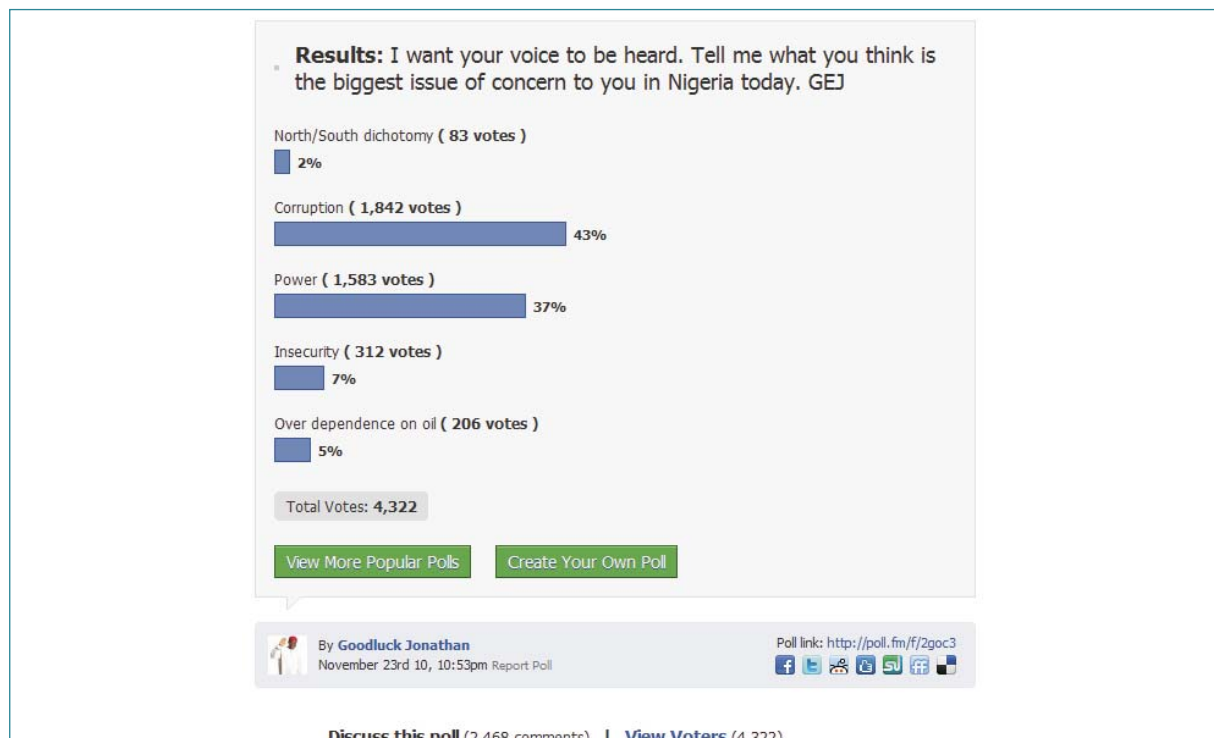


Figure 3. Screen shot of Goodluck Jonathan's poll on Facebook.

ulation of West Africa (Wikipedia, 2011b). Though there are not very recent census figures on the general population, the figures released by its national electoral commission and published by InfoStrides (2011) put the total number of persons who have registered for the 2011 presidential elections at 73,528,040. The country has known more military regimes than civilian ones. In 2010, its elected President, Shehu Musa Yar'Adua died of illness in office. There was widespread concern that the country may lapse into political chaos, but it pulled through and finally the Vice-President, Goodluck Ebele Jonathan, took over the Presidential seat.

President Goodluck Jonathan, championing a new era in citizen engagement

President Goodluck Jonathan is the Nigerian President with the most advanced university qualification of all the Presidents of the country since its independence. He holds a PhD. It is not clear whether his intellectual achievements are contributing factors, but the Nigerian President has made phenomenal use of social networking opportunities.

On his Facebook page, President Goodluck Jonathan has nearly 500 000 people who like and follow what he is doing. He has made enormous use of the Internet in several policy processes. He informs, consults, responds to questions, reports, evaluates, and even conducts polls. The average citizen feedback to his posts revolved around 2000. On 23 November 2010, he sent out a poll (Goodluck, 2010) (Figure 3).

Based on the results, we strongly believe that the consultations effectively lead to a decision as is evident from the President's Facebook post of 3 February 2011:

'We are making progress in the power sector and last Tuesday we hit 4,000MW, the first time in 10 years we've reached that level. But it's still not sufficient. While I don't want to set a benchmark, what I can say is that we'll insist on progress monthly. We are not where we need to be, but with the current investment in building the new Super Grid and new power stations we are definitely on the way there' (Goodluck, 2011a).

On Twitter. President Goodluck Jonathan uses @JGoodlucktweets as his handle. Though not as old as his Facebook page, he has acquired almost 7000 followers. His use of Twitter follows the *inform, consult, answer, and report* method of his Facebook page. In the early hours of January 13, 2011, he tweeted 'Join me today in supporting my bid to become the presidential candidate for PDP' and made sure to thank his followers for their support the next day.

It is not yet certain that Goodluck Jonathan will be re-elected in April, but we are certain that his engagement of Nigerians on the social media and networks has been phenomenal. We have also observed that an independent and not personally affiliated group was started on Facebook '10 Million Votes for Goodluck Ebele Jonathan Online'.

EiE: Enoughisenoughnigeria.com, where the youth decide

Two of the 22 Twitter accounts followed by President Goodluck Jonathan are @bubusn and @ebuka, which belong to Emeka Nwankpa and Ebuka Obi-Uchendu, two of the founders of the EnoughisEnough Initiative. EnoughisEnough Nigeria (EiE) is a coalition of individuals and youth organisations making considerable impact with the use of social networks (EnoughisEnough Nigeria, 2011). On its website, the group says its goal is to mobilise ten million young people, cutting across religious, ethnic, and socio-economic divides in the country, to be actively engaged in the electoral process by 2015. They maintain that 'there are currently 1.76 million Nigerians on Facebook, which is 15 times the reach of the most exaggerated number of Nigeria's most successful newspaper, so the use of technology provides ample access' (EiE, 2011). The group says it is committed to instituting a culture of good governance and public accountability in Nigeria through advocacy, activism, and the mobilisation of the youth population as responsible citizens. As they state on their web site:

'Our message is also very simple: Register, Select, Vote and Protect (RSVP). Once elections are over, we will shift gears and focus on accountability. For those in the Diaspora,

our campaign is Dial-A-Vote. Since Nigerians in the Diaspora can't vote, we are encouraging them to call family and friends in Nigeria and encourage them to RSVP' (EiE, 2011).

The group is using Facebook, where some 1300 members are advocating for issues, Twitter, where they have disseminated over 2200 messages and enjoy over 1300 followers, and YouTube, where they have uploaded some 17 videos to complement their website. Also, fixed telephone numbers and SMS services are available to support their cause. In an email interview conducted by the researcher in 2011, Gbenga Sesan, one of the co-founders of EiE, said they are deploying an 'EiE tech tool called ReVoDa¹ with both web and mobile apps'. In an interview with a member of EiE, the researcher was able to see firsthand a demonstration of the election reporting software, which allows for reports on all types of elections to be filed to a central server and disseminated online.

Ghana – West Africa's model democracy

Ghana is home to Kwame Nkrumah, one of the earliest pan-Africanists and independence activists. The country was the first of the colonies to achieve political independence on 6 March 1957. After a few decades of political instability, Ghana has been holding peaceful and globally-acclaimed transparent elections for the past two decades. By the end of 2010, the country's economy has been re-evaluated into middle income. Ghana is the first African country to receive a planned stay of the US Presidential family. It is generally believed that this visit was a celebration and an encouragement of democracy.

The Ghana police – national security everywhere

The Ghana police have earned an esteemed position in the West African region. Across the West Africa region, Ghana seems to be the only country where giant advert spaces are occupied by the police. On their Facebook page, the Ghana Police

are giving information out on public safety, new laws, directives that affect cities, and, of course, emergency numbers. They are also taking feedback from the general public on issues. The last announcement about recruitment in the police was very well received. At the moment, over 300 people are following the Facebook posts of the Ghana police on a permanent basis.

In early October 2010, the Ghana police joined YouTube, where it operates the Ghana Police Channel. In four months, the Ghana police has uploaded 31 videos. On Twitter, @Ghanapolic is following almost 600 users, while it is being followed by over 300.

It is not clear for now if particular successes have been recorded in the use of social media networks for the Ghana police. It is evident, however, that by synchronising their Twitter and Facebook accounts, and by adding leads to their YouTube and Twitter spaces from Facebook, the Ghana police are on their way to exploiting the full potentials of these media for professional and citizen engagement purposes.

The Constitution Review Commission (CRC) – making every Ghanaian voice count in nation-building

Ghana has appointed a Constitutional Review Commission (CRC) to consult with the citizens towards the review of its 1992 Fourth Republican Constitution. Apart from the traditional consultation channels, the Commission has set up Twitter and Facebook accounts. In an interview New Media Officer, Kobbina Graham, said the CRC has received phenomenal citizen engagement during the very crucial policy process.

The CRC is reporting over 85 000 submissions so far. These include, a review of the powers of the Executive President, process of tabling and passing of private members bill in Parliament, decoupling the position of Attorney General and Minister of Justice, election of metropolitan, municipal, and district chief executives.

Between the 1st and the 5th of March, the CRC organised a conference during which it presented the results of this first step of popular consul-

1 ReVoDa was developed by @EmekaOkoye, who can be followed on Twitter.



Figure 4. Screen shot of ongoing discussions on the CRC Facebook page.

tations to all stakeholders. The conference was opened by the President and closed by the Vice President. During the conference, all submissions received were broken into four thematic groups: national development planning, executive powers, legislative powers, and judiciary and legal sectors. All stakeholders worked in these four committees, each receiving a thematic brief and matrix. At the end of the five working days, initial tendencies of the population were emerging.

In an interview at the end of the conference, Dr Raymond Atuguba,² the CRC Executive

Secretary, on the future perspectives of the work of the CRC and the mainstreaming of social media networks in them said:

‘What we have done so far with new media – SMS, Facebook and Twitter – is only the beginning. The next step is to take back the proposal of the reviewed constitution to the population. We still need the new media in the education and sensitisation work that will follow before the nation is called to vote. So we are certainly using them for the decision-making process.’

The CRC’s success in consultation surpassed original expectations. The CRC planned for some 2000 participants to par-

2 On his official business card, the Executive Secretary of CRC has the Facebook and Twitter accounts clearly presented.

ticipate in the conference. On the first day, 2983 people were registered, and by day two, the number of participants exceeded 3540.

Côte d'Ivoire – So much promise, so much pain

Côte d'Ivoire is a unique country in West Africa. It is the mini West Africa of the region. The population is made up of at least 40% non-nationals. For the 30 years that followed its independence, it enjoyed steady economic growth under a one-party, one autocratic president regime. For the past 12 years, though, the country has seen steady decline.

The scheduled election of 2010 was heralded as the one that would raise the country and set it back on the right path to economic recovery. Three major presidential candidates were running, and the citizens were ready to engage. An epic debate was organised by the national television. It pitched the two second-round candidates, Allasane Dramane Ouattara and Laurent Koudou Gbagbo, and lasted three hours and ten minutes. Since the country's independence and the establishment of the national television, no other programme has registered so much viewer engagement.

Wonzomai – le témoin qui ne dort jamais

Wonzomai is drawn from the Bété language of the eastern part of the country. It means 'witness'. The term here refers to the *witness that never sleeps*. The Wonzomai project was borne out of the citizen engagement of the 2010 elections. It is a full platform that integrates the following:

- A crowd-sourcing platform, using Ushahidi technology
- An SMS gateway
- Facebook
- Twitter
- An interactive map
- A tweet aggregator

Citizens reported over 70 cases of different electoral issues (late opening, problems with ballot boxes, ink pad missing, police brutality, traf-

fic situation) on the web platform. Almost 600 users are permanently linked to the initiative on Facebook. Over 300 accounts are following the @wonzomai account on Twitter. On the platform, Wonzomai has an aggregator of all tweets with #wonzomai and #civ2010 tags and streams them live. In the days that preceded the second round of the presidential elections in the country, the Wonzomai platform proved to be a critical access point to information that was citizen-generated.

#CIV2010 – the other battle front

Perhaps the most accomplished citizen engagement platform using social media that the country has ever known is the #civ2010 hash tag on Twitter. The topic kicked off sometime in October 2010, in the early days of the presidential elections campaign. Individuals sending tweets using the #civ2010 were basically giving information, updates, and news. A few personal opinions were also expressed. Then came the double results, the double presidents, the double governments, and #civ2010 really became a boom. The author in her blog noted the surge in #civ2010 users (Nnenna, 2010), and so did the French television channel France24 (France 24, 2010). In the history of subject tags used in the French language, it is the longest subject that has remained in the top charts. At the end of February 2011, the topic still trends.

Methodology: groups and survey

These case studies showing the extent of social network use by citizens for election purposes,

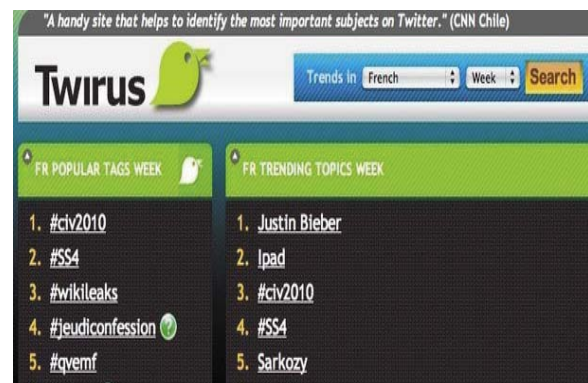


Figure 5. A screen shot showing data on #civ2010
Source: the blog of Archippe Yepmou (2010).

youths for governance and democracy mobilisation, and different public agencies, personalities, and committees gave the research added reason to investigate further. Three different focus group discussions were held with three different citizen engagement and policy actors. The first group was made up of Internet engineers and technicians at the Barcamp Bamako in Mali, in November 2010. The second group was comprised of members of the Ghana Blogging, in Accra, Ghana in December 2010, and the last group included media and human rights experts from West Africa meeting in Johannesburg, South Africa in February 2011.

Over the duration of the study, face-to-face interviews were held with individuals who are in a position to directly influence policy processes at different levels in the region. Greater effort, however, was made to an online survey, which sought to understand respondents' opinions on the subject. The researcher also physically attended the five day national constitutional review conference in Ghana and worked with the national development planning committee of the conference.

The survey on 'potentials of social media and networks in citizen policy engagement in West Africa' ran online for three weeks 11 February–3 March, in the French and English languages. A total of 110 people responded to the sixteen questions. Mostly men (78.18%), the survey recorded responses from each of the 16 West African countries, as well as from the West African diaspora. The age range was mostly between 31–50 years of age, 95.45% having earned at least a university degree, and only 8.18% considering themselves to be junior professionals.

In understanding the social media use of respondents, the survey found that only 4.55% were spending less than 11 hours a week on the Internet. At least 45.55% were spending at least 40 hours a week online, with at least 19.09% spending no less than 20 hours a week on social media and networking alone. More than half of respondents have been using social networks for the past three

years and at different levels have used social media and networks in policy processes.

The survey sought to understand the background of respondents, their Internet use habits, their social media and network engagement, and their current use of these media and networks for policy engagement. Here are the results of the responses from 110 respondents to the main question, what are the potentials of social media and networks in citizen policy engagement in West Africa?, They are summarised by the total number of individual responses per choice, as well as in a pie chart to show the percentages of these responses:

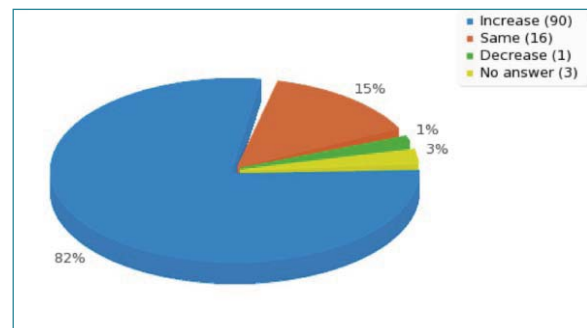


Figure 6. Potential in policy analysis. (information on issues and problems)

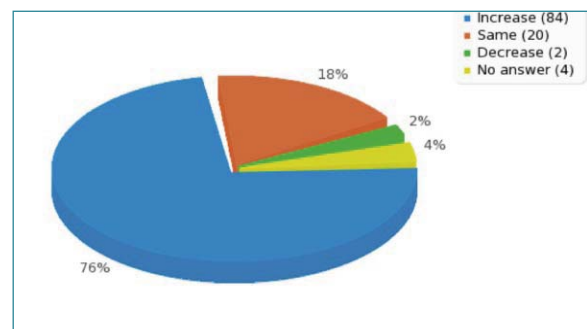


Figure 7. Potential in policy instruments. (information on possible solutions)

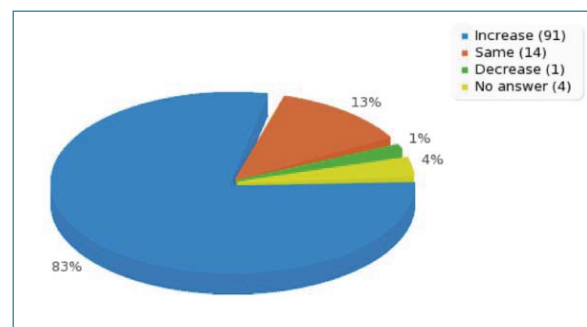


Figure 8. Potential in policy consultation.

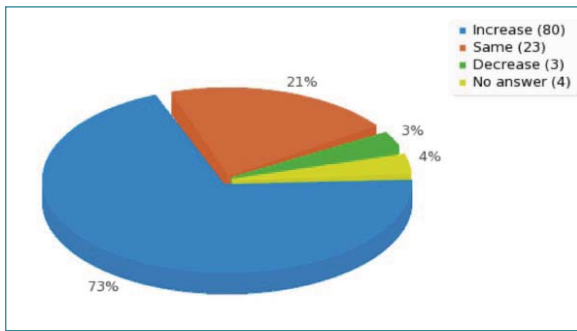


Figure 9. Potential in policy coordination.

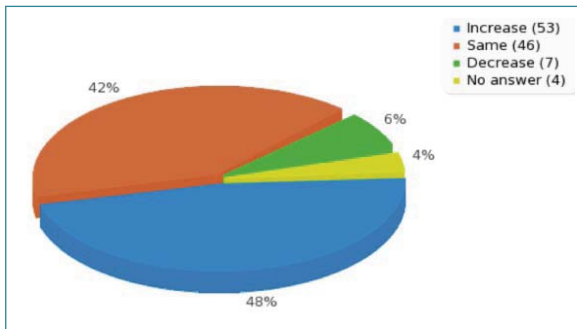


Figure 10. Potentials in policy decision.

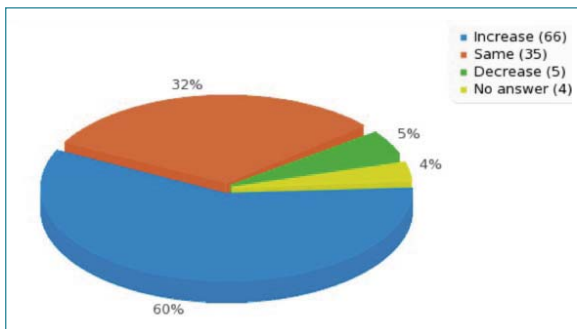


Figure 11. Potential in policy implementation.

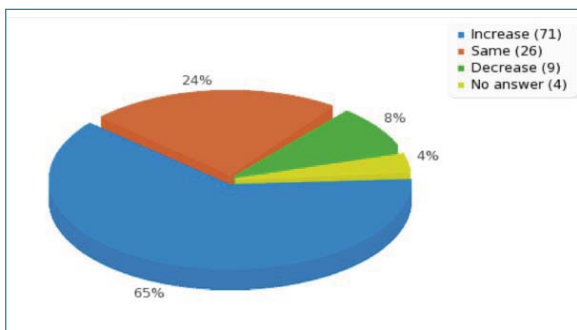


Figure 12. Potential in policy evaluation.

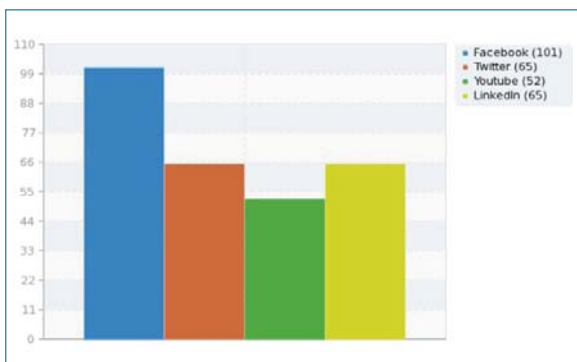


Figure 13. Respondents' use of networks.

Findings

There is a great tendency for people to trust their networks for information exchange. At least one out of every three survey respondents wants to be contacted again and receive the results of this study. Respondents volunteered information they believed would help the study and at least three respondents shared work that they or their organisations have done related to this on-going study. One respondent proposed having a social media platform network for everybody involved in the study.

The users of social networks are highly educated. The use of social networks is not circumscribed to the 'young and idle' anymore, as one responder put it. Our survey indicates that there is a huge percentage of university graduates on social networks, and 20% of respondents earned a doctorate degree. This means that the citizens using social media for policy engagement in West Africa are from the segment of society that has the capacity to do independent analysis of issues, form opinions, and influence others.

The use of social networks is no longer simply recreational but is slowly getting professional. Though one respondent noted that 'it's really scary to find that governments can be changed by the power of social networks', another one stated that 'they have started the failure of some systems in Africa.' As the responses prove, there is overwhelming evidence that people think that the potential of social media and networks in each of the policy process phases will increase.

Decision-makers in West Africa are sufficiently aware of citizens who use social networks. The cases in Nigeria, Ghana, and Côte d'Ivoire substantiate the fact that leaders in all economic domains – public, private and civil society – are aware that the targets of their activities – citizens, clients, communities, and stakeholders – are currently increasing their use of social networks. Many 'key' events are now being streamed online. The national television of Côte d'Ivoire is freely streaming online, as do many other media in the region. In their opening speeches at the Constitution Review Conference, both the Chair and the Executive Secretary, as well as the President of the Republic, in welcoming partic-

ipants, specifically mentioned 'those following on the Internet, on Twitter, and on Facebook'.

Citizens are also aware that decision-makers are cognisant of their presence and use of social networks. This in itself is an added reason for the greater deployment potential of the social networks. In Côte d'Ivoire, both ex-presidential candidates (now two presidents in dispute) were present on Facebook and Twitter and are now receiving direct messages from different stakeholders. In Nigeria, the Lagos State Governor and citizens are all engaged in issues ranging from road repairs and health care, to media releases. In Ghana, the @presidencyghana account has been set up on Twitter and is already being engaged. The most marked action may be the one that is being engaged by EiE. The group is now publicly calling for a presidential face-to-face debate on youth issues and is asking youth on social networks to choose their representatives to be invited, propose questions, and evaluate the debate. In preparation for the debate planned for the end of March 2011, a 'Twitter avatar' campaign is already underway.

There is overwhelming agreement that the potentials of social networks in citizen policy engagement in West Africa will definitely increase. In all seven areas of policy procedures in which respondents' opinions were solicited, this was evident. A female respondent said 'there is a huge potential that has not been tapped and needs to be explored.' A respondent from the Cape Verde Islands says that though social networks may not replace the normal camaraderie of party militants, social media is fast becoming the future of political propaganda, education, and opinion, and will definitely be decisive in all elections from now on. 'Of course that must happen with the spread of the Internet services to more people,' remarks another. Another respondent says it is 'global collaboration in a virtual world' and that there is no way we can go around it.

Future perspectives

Social networks are here to stay. In the course of this study, we have been informed of mini social networks that are now being created by training institutions. An increasing num-

ber of users are not only becoming active on social media and networks, but we also observe that many of the original websites are now adding the social media and network information of the entities.³ The shadow of Tunisia's and Egypt's citizen-induced changes, powered by social media, was heavily cast on the study.

Access to the Internet is increasingly being regarded as a human right. Though the countries of West Africa are far from going the Finnish way⁴, it is evident that submarine cables are increasing Internet access. Moreover, now access is given outside of the traditional ISPs. Originally, Internet access did not come with mobile cell phones in West Africa, but now almost all mobile phone operators are offering Internet access. In an interview taken by the researcher after a seminar at University of Witwatersrand, South Africa on February 2, 2011, Franck La Rue, United Nation's special Rapporteur on freedom of opinion and expression, noted that the Internet is a means for the free flow of information, and on that basis needs to be protected. Any institutional control, therefore, of access to the Internet, will be seen as a violation of human rights. According to Wikimedia (2010), 'access to Facebook' was, in some countries in 2010 like Iran, Syria, China, Vietnam and Bangladesh, the equivalent of access to the Internet. This implies that the use of social media and networks is now being considered the soul of Internet activities.

Official government policies are on the verge of changing in West Africa. The Nigerian President wrote a note on March 7, 2011 on his Facebook page titled, *Half a million reasons to listen to you*, in which he states that,

'When I created this profile on June 28th, 2010, I had the intention of bypassing the protocol that surrounds me and communicating directly with the Nigerian people. And I have dutifully done this consistently and this has been probably one of the most rewarding experiences in my life as a public servant.' (Goodluck, 2011b)

3 Kabissa, Wiser Earth, PDA Ghana, and Akandewa, (whose representatives participated in the research survey) now have their social networks visible on their sites.

4 The government of Finland has recognized access to broadband Internet connection as a right to all Finns.

Though governments have not taken bold steps to officialise social media and networks within administrations, the tendencies are changing. Franck La Rue (2011) says limiting the social media and networks is more dangerous than opening them. La Rue says that it is not the Internet that brings regimes down as such, it only serves for the mobilisation of citizens. He opines that most governmental Internet regulations are for the protection of political interests. This study, though, found that there are still limitations. For now, we know that the Presidents of Nigeria, Benin, Sierra Leone, Togo, Ghana, and the Ivory Coast, all have Facebook accounts. The awareness of the benefits that ICT offers is growing, and is worthy of study in the next few years.

Citizen engagement in policy through social networks will heavily bear on governance. Complaints are now made more easily by directing them to institutions' Facebook accounts and by mentioning them on Twitter. With more applications being developed by individuals and groups to make social media even more interactive, far-reaching, and viral, and online coalitions like #opengov and #gov20 on Twitter, it is expected that governance transparency will rise. If the Nigerian EiE project of mobilising millions not only to register and vote, but also to protect their votes by monitoring policy decisions, the next administrations will need to work harder to remain at the same corruption level.

Public policy institutions need to build new citizen engagement capacities in West Africa. In our interviews, the most striking reasons for stakeholders not utilising the full potentials of social media are not only difficulty in accessing the Internet, as well as time and security issues, but also that stakeholders do not know the best way to use the media available and how to best leverage its use. The Ghana CRC hired new media staff, #civ2010 is highly influenced by the Ivorian diaspora, and EiE Nigeria is thriving because capable youths are leading it. It is therefore important for governments, businesses, and NGOs to build and strengthen their citizen engagement capacities.

Looking forward

According to one BBC reader, whose username is insurmountable (2011),

'Thanks to technology, Africa is emerging from darkness to light. Even in the smallest and remote villages in Africa, town criers are no longer needed to make loud noises to gather people under palava huts for political discussions. Since the introduction of cell phones and other medium of communication, people can now connect with families, friends, and neighbors to talk about issues affecting their lives.'

Though the use of social media and networks is not as widespread as citizens would like it to be, access to the Internet, as well as the use of social media and networks in West Africa are on the rise. This study concludes that although social media and networks may not be in a position to replace traditional policy processes in West Africa, they have proved beyond doubt that they effectively contribute to meaningful citizen motivation, sensitisation, education, mobilisation, and, ultimately, influence.

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Appendix 1: Abbreviations

ACE	Africa Coast to Europe
AISI	The Africa Information Society Initiative
BarCamp	Community-engineered technology un-conference, inspired by open source ideology
CIV2010	Cote d'Ivoire in 2010, specifically adopted for citizen Twitter engagement on the elections of that year
CRC	The Constitution Review Commission of Ghana
EASSy	East Africa Submarin Cable System
ECOWAS	The Economic Community of West Africa States
EiE	“Enough is Enough” Nigeria Initiative
EIG	Europe India Gateway
GLO 1	Globalcom 1 Submarine cable.
I-ME-WE	India-Middle East-Western Europe
ICT	Information and Communication Technology
LION	Lower Indian Ocean Network
MaIN OnE	Main One Cable, run by Main Street Technologies
PDP	People’s Democratic Party of Nigeria
PhD	Doctor of Philosophy
ReVoDa	Elections Reporting Mobile Application
RSVP	Register, Select, Vote, and Protect
SAT3/SAFE	South Atlantic 3/West Africa Submarine Cable/South Africa Far East
SEA-ME-WE-4	South East Asia–Middle East–Western Europe 4
SEAs	<i>Seychelles East African Submarine</i>
TEAMs	The East African Marine System
WACS	West African Cable System
WSIS	World Summit on the Information Society