Research Article

Sites of Playful Engagement: Twitter Hashtags as Spaces of Leisure and Development in Kenya

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Abstract

Through an analysis of popular Kenyan hashtags on Twitter, we argue that everyday leisure and entertainment practices interact with development and civic engagement in Kenya. This research draws from participation in the Kenyan Twittersphere, analysis of spaces created by hashtags, and fieldwork conducted in Nairobi between 2009 and 2012. Through hashtags, Kenyans on Twitter unite against perceived government corruption, respond to media misrepresentations of their country, share jokes, and participate in global conversations. We argue that sites emerge through the interaction of playful and serious content and that these sites should be examined within ICTD research. Playful activities should not be dismissed as irrelevant to development, as everyday use of Twitter is often imbued with topics tied to social, political, and economic development.

The multidisciplinary field of information and communication technologies for development (ICTD) explores the application of digital technologies to a wide range of development issues. In Africa, ICT study has focused heavily on lack of access to technology and how to overcome that barrier (i.e., the digital divide) and the relationship of ICT to economic development and democratization (Conradie, Morris, & Jacobs, 2003; Obijiofor, 2009; Ott & Rosser, 2000). Increasingly more researchers and practitioners consider technology as only one small part of ICTD. There is a general trend away from focusing primarily on the technology and how people *should* use ICT for development toward focusing on people and contexts and how people actually use ICT for a broad range of utilitarian and social purposes (Burrell & Toyama, 2009; Heeks, 2012). Considering seemingly non-instrumental uses of ICT, uses that are both playful and serious, can broaden our understanding of digital media use in developing contexts (Arora, 2012; Arora & Rangaswamy, 2013).

The current research is consistent with such calls for expanding the scope of ICTD research. However, we propose that a wider range of activities, behaviors, people, and technologies be considered under the ICTD umbrella to better understand how development, civic engagement, play, and daily activities intersect online. This research examines Twitter hashtags used for leisure and development in Kenya. Our research draws from our participation in the Kenyan Twittersphere, analysis of popular hashtags, and fieldwork conducted in Nairobi between 2009 and 2012. We investigate how Kenyans on Twitter create spaces for both entertainment and serious social and political discussion through their use of hashtags. These hashtags serve as *sites of playful engagement,* where Kenyans demonstrate that development processes can thrive in spaces and through activities that often fall outside the scope of traditional ICTD research. The current research is influenced by the capabilities approach to development (Kleine, 2013; Sen, 2000). As such, we view development "in a holistic way, and put people at the center, stressing their choices" (Kleine, 2013, p. 4). This approach is more open

than definitions of development that focus primarily on economic growth. We consider a range of activities that "link the personal, social, economic, and political spheres" (Kleine, 2013, p. 4). Relatedly, we consider participation and empowerment as central to development (Kleine, 2013; Unwin, 2009). Thus, we see civic engagement as an important facet of development. Discussing social, political, and economic issues online and seeking solutions to problems that concern Kenyans are part of larger civic and development processes (Bennett, 2008). Further, our research aligns with the social shaping of technology perspective, which proposes that technologies' effects on society are shaped by the interactions between the affordances of each technology and the anticipated and unanticipated uses of that technology by active agents (Baym, 2010).

Hashtagged Spaces, Participatory Culture, and Development

As Arora (2011) and others have noted, the language of physical space is often employed in discussions of ICT, as in cyber*space,* web*sites,* chat*rooms,* home*pages, and the information super*highway.* Such reliance on spatial terms and metaphors reflects the human tendency to situate new phenomena within old ways of thinking, but it also represents the recognition that common physical geography is not a prerequisite for shared space. Although early critics of the Internet dismissed interactions in the "virtual world" as less authentic than the "real world" because of its immateriality (e.g., Kraut et al., 1998; Nie, 2001), years of research on communication technologies have shown that physical co-presence is not required for meaningful communication and community building (Hampton & Wellman, 2001; Haythornthwaite, 2005). It is useful to consider the potential for both material and immaterial spaces to serve as meaningful sites of interaction, enjoyment, and political expression. As such, our interest here is in online spaces where individuals participate in playful activities that are also expressions of civic engagement. We call these spaces *sites of playful engagement.*

The affordances of certain technologies are more inviting than others for enabling users to participate in both playful and political activities. One tool that affords political engagement is Twitter, a microblogging service that allows users to send and receive messages of up to 140 characters. Social media sites such as Twitter have been adopted by journalists, celebrities, politicians, protestors, and the public to connect, inform, persuade, and entertain others with messages both banal and profound in everyday life and during times of crisis and unrest (Mark et al., 2012; Marwick & boyd, 2011; Murthy, 2013; Starbird & Palen, 2012; Thorson et al., 2013; Tully, 2013). As Murthy (2013) argues, Twitter represents "a collection of communities of knowledge, ad hoc groups where individual voices are aggregated into flows of dialog and information" (p. xi). Hashtags, metadata text consisting of a hash symbol (#) followed by a word or contiguous phrase, are particularly useful in creating such "ad hoc groups," as hashtags form spaces in which users can coalesce around topics. Hashtags operate as markers of conversations, bringing disparate comments and commenters together in an interactive space dedicated to the topic of interest. For example, in the context of "Black Twitter," Brock (2012) argues that, "the signifyin' hashtag invites an audience, even more so than the publication of a Tweet to one's followers, by setting the parameters of the discourse to follow" (p. 539). Meraz and Papacharissi (2013) note that hashtags can materialize through community consensus or through a more diffused and emergent process in which multiple hashtags initiated by diverse publics compete for traction among engaged users. As with other online conversations, prominent figures play an important role in shaping Twitter discussions and promoting hashtags that are adopted by participants (Marwick & boyd, 2011; Meraz & Papacharissi, 2013; Tully, 2013). Meraz and Papacharissi (2013) describe the process of coalescing around hashtags as "networked framing" because the content of adopted hashtags can frame discussions that take place in the resulting spaces by making salient certain issues and features. At the same time, it is important to remember that dominant and even officially endorsed hashtags are open to interpretation and contestation. Thus, hashtags serve as gathering points for the latest news, trends, protests, and memes and, in doing so, can serve as sites of playful engagement.

Jenkins (2006) argues that digital technologies that afford relatively easy and inexpensive production of media content have helped facilitate the rise of participatory culture in which the lines between audience and producer are blurred. In participatory culture, audiences are active participants in the creation and spread of media content that reflects their viewpoints and interests (Jenkins, Ford, & Green, 2013). As others have

pointed out, playfulness is central to the ethos of participatory culture. From text-based artwork (Danet, 2001) to alternative reality games (Booth, 2010) to online memes (Ekdale & Tully, 2014; Shifman, 2014), Internet users play within and around the affordances of online technologies and the controls set by outside forces. Although participatory play may be enjoyable, it is not necessarily apolitical. As we argue elsewhere, "partici-patory play can be subtly and blatantly political . . . playful activities can represent the political expression of a text's creator and the broader participatory community" (Ekdale & Tully, 2014, p. 286). While some claim the "work as play" ethos of digital culture masks the exploitation of user-generated content (Terranova, 2000), we argue that playful engagement describes a form of civic engagement that is simultaneously serious, insightful, and amusing for participants, akin to Arora's (2014, p. 8) notion of "creative/playful protest."

Throughout the world, young people are actively using social media for leisure and entertainment, as well as for civic and social engagement (Burrell, 2012; Iwilade, 2013; Obijiofor, 2011). For instance, Lugg (2013) argues that Chinese Internet users employ spoof videos and puns as tools of resistance online, while Pearce and Hajizada (2014) note that political memes have become a mode of humorous dissent in Azerbaijan. Partic-ipatory media are part of a community's popular culture landscape and, as with other forms of popular culture, represent "sites of struggle, a place for the negotiation of race, gender, nation, and other identities and for the play of power" (Dolby, 2006, p. 33). Discussing African popular media, Barber (1997) notes that "they are the work of local cultural producers speaking to local audiences about pressing concerns, experiences and struggles they share" (p. 2). Relatedly, the non-elite youth in urban Ghana, in Burrell's (2012) study of Internet cafés in Accra, use the Internet to communicate locally and globally, negotiating identities that are shaped by these interactions. Engagement among audiences with shared interests and community happens online as people participate in meaning-making activities through serious and playful interactions.

Recent ICTD scholarship has argued that just as popular media can be used in service of development, projects designed to support development have been appropriated for leisure purposes. For example, Rangaswamy and Cutrell (2013) found that youth living in an Indian slum used mobile Internet primarily for entertainment, not instrumental purposes. Traditional approaches to development might have written off this behavior as irrelevant to development. The authors, however, argue that development goals heralded by pro-ponents of ICTD, such as acquiring greater language proficiency, "are a consequence, not the premise of engagements with the mobile Internet" for these youth (p. 62). Arora (2012) claims that ICTD research has wrongly treated Internet users in development contexts as a distinct type of user, yet:

> if we are to genuinely examine what people in "Third World" countries are doing with ICTs, we need to look at them as *typical* users and not the exotic and virtuous recipients of new technologies they are often made out to be. (p. 94)

Such an approach, she argues, would reveal that the poor, marginalized, and disconnected use ICT for enter-tainment, play, and seemingly trivial activities—the same as users with greater wealth, power, and connectiv-ity. Thus, our analysis attempts to examine the varied activities of Kenyans on Twitter. Using this approach we are interested in revealing how everyday use of new media technologies can reveal meaningful expressions of civic engagement without relying on a "development initiative" as the starting point for analysis. Rather than comparing Kenyans' activities online to a normative framework for how Kenyans *should* or *could* use technol-ogy for development, we explore how Kenyan Twitter use that could easily be dismissed as leisure or mundane should be considered under a broader conceptualization of development research. As Heeks (2012) notes, defining ICTD through the lens of initiatives created with specific development goals in mind inhibits scholars from capturing the range of activities that could be deemed ICTD. Instead, he suggests that we examine actual development impacts of technology use. Pushing the boundaries of what is considered ICTD opens up oppor-tunities to explore technology uses and sites that may have previously been ignored by ICTD researchers.

Further, this research attempts to understand the everyday practice of Twitter beyond large-scale revolu-tions, crises, and social movements (e.g., Arab Spring, the Occupy Movement, the Green Revolution) that often garner researchers' attention. Answering the call from Arora and Rangaswamy (2013) "to question, dis-cuss and modify some of the basic premises of technology use in development contexts" (p. 904), our analysis focuses on more typical uses of social media that can be understood as playful engagement. We acknowledge

that the activities of Kenyan Twitter users resemble those of users around the world—and that is precisely the point. We do not view Kenyans as atypical users, yet we suggest that their playful engagement through Twitter hashtags should be examined under the umbrella of ICTD as users infuse development agendas in their comments, actions, and interactions. We also recognize that ICTD research historically focuses on low-income and otherwise marginalized populations—often building technology "solutions" for these groups—yet our research acknowledges that spaces like Twitter hashtags already exist in which people of different economic, social, and cultural standing interact and develop together.

Methods and Context

In recent years Kenya has sought to position itself as the major technology hub of sub-Saharan Africa, and with good reason. Ushahidi, a popular crowdsourcing and mapping software, was launched in Kenya when members of the Kenyan blogosphere created a reporting tool to track instances of violence during the 2007 post-election period (Tully, 2011); several global technology firms, including Google, IBM, Intel, and Microsoft, selected Nairobi as the site of their African or regional headquarters; and the Kenyan government has started construction on Konza, a technology city nicknamed "Silicon Savannah," that is built with digital infrastructure from the ground up (Steadman, 2013). More broadly, Kenyans' Internet use has grown rapidly since the completion of fiber optic lines in 2009. The fiber increased Internet availability and speeds and decreased prices, making the Internet not only more accessible but also more user-friendly. Internet-enabled mobile phones have become a staple of daily life for many and the means by which many Kenyans go online. However, quality Internet access remains a mostly urban phenomenon, with Nairobi boasting the best Internet connections in the country. Other urban areas are well connected, but in more rural areas the Internet is not as reliable or prevalent. Mobile Internet connections are improving access throughout the country, although the growth continues to favor urban centers (Mengo, 2012). Nairobi is also a major global hub for nongovernmental organizations (Taylor, 2004). According to Taylor, Nairobi is the "the number one NGO connectivity city" in the world (p. 272). As such, Nairobians operate in a world imbued with technology and development agendas that often intersect.

Such an emphasis on ICT infrastructure and innovation has resulted in the creation of a number of tech spaces in Kenya such as the iHub and Nailab and the proliferation of Kenya-specific Twitter hashtags where users gather to discuss local and global issues. Twitter has become a popular meeting place for Kenyans, particularly young urban Kenyans, in part because the exchange of short text- and image-based tweets is well suited for those using mobile phones to access the Internet. In fact, a 2014 study found that Kenya boasts the third most tweets per volume in Africa, trailing only South Africa and Egypt (Portland, 2014). Several of these Kenya-specific hashtags have served as spaces for Kenyans to express themselves politically, exchange alternative viewpoints, and share humorous takes on contemporary issues.

This study is informed by the authors' fieldwork in Nairobi between 2009 and 2012 and by participant observation in the Kenyan Twittersphere. Both authors have research experience interacting with urban, tech-savvy Nairobians, many of whom were early adopters of Twitter in Kenya and continue to be actively engaged in the Kenyan Twittersphere. The data in this study are tweets tagged with civically minded hashtags that were popular or trending in Kenya. The hashtags discussed here were identified based on our participation in the Kenyan Twittersphere, news coverage of Twitter use in Kenya, and reports on the most popular Kenyan hashtags (e.g., Hebblethwaite, 2013; Mina, 2013; Portland, 2014; Zoom, 2014). It is worth noting that these hashtags represent a small sample of the popular hashtags in Kenya. We do not intend to suggest that our list is exhaustive; however, it is representative of the types of commentary and behavior common in sites of playful engagement. Hashtagged discussions were acquired via the Twitter archive and the social media search engine Tospy. Through Tospy we were able to determine the earliest instances of each hashtag and the amount of interaction (e.g., retweets, replies) generated by individual tweets, which allowed us to identify prominent figures and active participants in each hashtagged space. After collecting the data, the authors performed a close reading of individual tweets for themes within hashtagged discussions. The tweets included below are representative of prominent and active participants in each space and the major themes derived from our

Table 1. Sites of Playful Engagement.

Hashtag	Description
#KenyansonTwitter and #KOT	Both hashtags are used as a broad discussion thread for users interested in speaking to and with a Kenyan audience. #KOT refers to Kenyans on Twitter.
#SomeoneTellCNN	Originated in 2012 after CNN reported on a terrorist grenade attack in Nairobi as "Violence in Kenya." Reemerged in 2013 in advance of the presidential election after CNN ran a dubious story about a militia group.
#PicturesforStuart	Originated on election day in 2013 after France 24's Stuart Norval tweeted that he had "dramatic" pictures of the voting process.
#TweetLikeaForeignJournalist	Originated on election day in 2013 as Kenyans mocked foreign journalists poised to frame the election as dramatic and violent.
#MPigs	Used to express disgust at MP greed and incompetence. Incorporated in the #OccupyParliament protests.
#OccupyParliament	Used to rally support for and document a May 2013 public demonstration protesting a proposed salary raise for MPs.
#KenyaAt50	Used to reflect on the nation in the context of the 50th anniversary of Kenya's independence.
#SickAt50	Used to discuss a healthcare worker strike that began shortly before the 50th anniversary celebrations.
#WhyObamaWillSkipKenya	Originated after the U.S. White House announced President Obama's 2013 Africa visit would not include a stop in Kenya.

analysis. All the comments in this study come from public Twitter accounts. Most of these users have large Twitter followings, and others were mentioned in news coverage of the hashtags discussed. Thus, we consider their contributions open for public discussion. Tweets appear as they were written; we have made no changes to the original spelling or grammar.

#PlayfulEngagement

Twitter hashtags create online spaces for discussion and expression situated at the intersection of leisure and development. Although hashtags can be used to centralize conversation around a variety of mundane and inconsequential topics, Kenyans, like other Twitter users around the world, regularly use hashtags to discuss issues concerning politics, social change, and development (Meraz & Papacharissi, 2013; Murthy, 2013). In short, Twitter affords users the opportunity to engage in wide-ranging discussions. In the hashtagged spaces analyzed below, participants engage in serious discussions about social, political, and economic issues facing Kenya and offer playful, often satirical commentary. This type of playful engagement should be considered under development and ICTD rubrics concerned with understanding the problems people face and how they respond to those problems. Although development issues are pressing, how people engage with these issues ranges from the serious to the absurd. It is the interaction in the hashtagged spaces—the sites of playful engagement—that we see as fruitful exploration for ICTD research.

In the following sections, we briefly discuss the #KenyansonTwitter and #KOT hashtags to provide context for our examination of issue-specific hashtags that emerged as Kenyans engaged with social, political, and economic issues facing their country. Table 1 summarizes the hashtags included in our analysis.

#KOT: Engaging Kenyans

Shortly after Kenyans started joining Twitter, local users developed a way to demarcate content geared toward Kenyans using Twitter, the #KenyansonTwitter hashtag. Over time, this marker shortened to #KOT and became less of a commentary about Kenyans using Twitter and, instead, grew into a space for discussing issues related to the nation. The #KOT thread lacks the thematic coherence of ad hoc or issue-based hashtags, yet it provides

a centralized space for discussion about and among Kenyans. It also helped create a vibrant Kenyan Twittersphere. While not all tweets relevant to Kenya are tagged with #KOT, the community that developed around this hashtag still participates in the network it helped form. The hashtag is also used by global news organizations such as CNN and Al Jazeera to mark content relevant to Kenyan audiences. More important, #KOT represents an assemblage of users engaged in individual expression while also connecting with a broader discussion about Kenya and its people. Despite the disparate nature of this community, #KOT still affords its participants opportunities for meaningful connections. For example, in the midst of a personal crisis, Kinyanjui Kombani tweeted:

> #KOT I need help. My wife is in Aga Khan Hospital ICU & they need to replace 16 units of blood. Any blood. Can you help? Pls RT for me (@KKombani, October 27, 2013)

His message was retweeted more than 1,300 times, and many KOT responded with messages of encouragement and information on how to donate blood. The ties binding many KOT may be structurally weak, but participants still find meaning and utility in these connections (Granovetter, 1973).

Further, as Kenyans were still finding their voice on Twitter, #KOT offered the primary online space for discussions about technology, politics, society, and trends, particularly among Kenya's tech-savvy urban youth. More recently, #KOT has served as a connecting point for other conversations that are developed using issue-specific hashtags.

#SomeoneTellCNN to #TweetLikeaForeignJournalist: Media Criticism

Kenyans, and Africans broadly, have long been the victims of inaccurate and misleading representations by global media outlets (Ekdale, 2014; Fair & Parks, 2001; Hawk, 1992), but greater Internet penetration has created more opportunities for Kenyans to access and respond to content produced about their country by foreign media. As a result, Kenyans have become savvy critics of international media, rejecting misleading and misguided portrayals in favor of stories, particularly "positive" ones that reflect the everyday experiences of Kenyans. Kenyans also recognize that their image abroad was damaged by media coverage of the violence that followed the disputed 2007 presidential election (Tully, 2011). Anxious that international media would reinforce negative stereotypes even if democracy was exercised peacefully, Kenyans were keen observers of media coverage of their country before, during, and after elections in 2010 and 2013. During this time, participants in the Kenyan Twittersphere used hashtags to voice critiques of international media and to advocate for change. In doing so, these spaces facilitated the exchange of thoughtful, angry, comical, and often satirical messages.

The #SomeoneTellCNN hashtag emerged in 2012 after CNN reported on an Al-Shabaab attack on a Nairobi bus terminal that killed six people and injured many more. Kenyans responded negatively to CNN's framing of the story as "Violence in Kenya," claiming this frame reinforced stereotypes of Kenya as a violent place when Kenyans ought to be viewed as victims of a terrorist attack. Nairobi businesswoman Winnie Michelle Kenduiywa was the first to use the hashtag, tweeting:

> #SomeoneTellCNN to do their homework! (@winmitch, March 11, 2012)

She followed up with several tweets using the hashtag and was soon joined by a chorus of impassioned and enraged Kenyans who expressed disappointment in CNN and demanded an apology. Even former Vice President Kalonzo Musyoka contributed to the discussion, writing:

> It is extremely irresponsible for CNN to paint Kenya as a nation in chaos while we are victims of terror. #SomeoneTellCNN (@skmusyoka, March 11, 2012)

The hashtag became so popular that Kenya-based CNN reporter David McKenzie ultimately apologized on Twitter:

> Our reporting on last night was accurate, the banner used in the bulletin was not. I contacted CNN for future bulletins. Apologies to all. (@McKenzieCNN, March 11, 2012)

One concerned Kenyan recorded his phone call to CNN headquarters and posted the audio with accompanying visuals of #SomeoneTellCNN tweets on YouTube. In the video the caller, who says he "represent[s] all Kenyans affected by this demeaning story," tells the CNN employee that "we don't need an apology on Twitter. We need an actual apology to be posted on your TV station" (SomeonetellCNN, 2012). After witnessing the success of the hashtag she initiated, Kenduiywa later tweeted:

> The hashtag I started #SomeoneTellCNN is now trending worldwide!!! Yes I AM A KENYAN WITH A VOICE!" (@winmitch, March 11, 2012)

Although participation in the #SomeoneTellCNN space subsided a few weeks after the "Violence in Kenya" story, a 2013 CNN story about a militia group preparing for violence in advance of the presidential election reignited use of the hashtag (CNN, 2013). Kenyans revived #SomeoneTellCNN to direct their skepticism and anger toward the network, starting with Nairobian Farouq Fred's tweet:

> Just watched on CNN militia being trained in the rift valley for Monday elections.. This should stop. #kot #someonetellCNN we are peaceful. (@pharouqfred, March 1, 2013)

Although Fred had fewer than 200 Twitter followers, he connected his critique to the #KOT and #SomeoneTellCNN spaces, broadcasting his message to a much wider audience. Soon others joined by questioning the story's credibility and expressing anger toward foreign journalists intent on finding or initiating disharmony:

> @CNN Did you verify this story? … @McKenzieCNN #someonetellCNN (@kianiadee, March 1, 2013)

> #SomeoneTellCNN to stay the hell outta our country We are doing great without them tryna antagonize us (@mossjunior, March 1, 2013)

Participants using this hashtag called on CNN to listen to Kenyan voices, whether those voices were telling the network to apologize, make editorial changes, or get out of their country. Yet, some Kenyans used the hashtag to add humor to the critique:

> #SomeonetellCNN I am armed. Actually I have 2 arms. My left arm and my right arm. (@michellemartins, March 1, 2013)

> I hope they #cnn don't misreport outrage on twitter #someoneTellCNN as 'breakout of new violence' (@njooro, March 11, 2013)

In imbuing #SomeoneTellCNN with both impassioned criticism and lively satire, the hashtag became a site of playful engagement where Kenyans gathered to challenge stereotypes and misrepresentations.

Similarly, the hashtag #PicturesforStuart emerged on election day in 2013 in response to a tweet by France 24 reporter Stuart Norval. After witnessing a crowd of eager voters pouring into a gated voting area, Norval tweeted:

> BREAKING Gun shots fired in #Nairobi #Kenya as huge crowds fall over each other to vote. Dramatic pictures on @France24_en in 15 min. (@stuartf24, March 4, 2013)

Njoroge Nguru, a travel industry entrepreneur, challenged Norval's use of the word "dramatic" by creating #PicturesforStuart and posting:

> Those Dramatic pictures Stuart promised #picturesforstuart #KenyaDecides. @stuartf24 (@njooro, March 4, 2013)

Nguru's tweet featured a photo of a croissant and a cup of soup. Nguru followed up by urging others to tweet photos of their "dramatic" lives to Norval:

> #KOT please tweet some dramatic pictures for @stuartf24, he seems to have lost his #picturesforstuart (@njooro, March 4, 2013)

> We need dramatic pictures folks, some excited journo in Paris needs them #KenyaDecides #picturesforstuart (@njooro, March 4, 2013)

Like Fred, Nguru's tweets connected his new hashtag to existing communities using #KOT and #KenyaDecides, the main Twitter discussion space for the presidential election. Several Kenyans participated in #PicturesforStuart by tweeting a variety of mundane photos, such as a kitchen knife piercing a plate of food, ice cream melting, supporters of three different candidates embracing each other, and a goat wearing sunglasses, to ridicule the media's eagerness for shocking images. By sharing these pictures, participants in #PicturesforStuart used humor to offer a sharp, yet playful, critique of sensationalism in the news.

While #SomeoneTellCNN and #PicturesforStuart originated in response to specific stories by international journalists, the hashtag #TweetLikeaForeignJournalist was used to share satirical accounts of foreign journalists looking to frame the 2013 presidential election as the source of dramatic and heated conflict. Some tweets combined mundane activities with faux sensational descriptions:

> bloodshed and serious injuries in Kenya as people sit down to play Mortal Kombat #TweetLikeAForeignJournalist. (@ElyPetrelli, March 6, 2013)

Others speculated about how disappointed journalists would spin the peaceful election into an established narrative about Kenya:

> kenya: kenyans stay indoors to wait for the results / CNN: kenyans are dead and their bodies have diaspeard. #tweetlikeaforeignjournalist (@Aura_Helen, March 5, 2013)

The humor in this space succeeded in contrasting the peaceful elections with the unmet expectations of foreign journalists who desired or expected sensational, violent stories. The exchange of jokes provided entertainment for a Kenyan audience eager to challenge global media's negative representations of their country. In fact, one of the most prominent participants in this space was *Daily Nation* reporter Philip Mwaniki whose tweets ridiculed foreigners who had arrived in Kenya with the wrong intentions:

> Foreign Journalists stranded in their hotels as peace makes it hard for them to do their job. #TweetLikeaForeignJournalist (@mwanikih, March 5, 2013)

This type of satiric social commentary aimed at both local and international audiences exemplifies the playful engagement that Kenyans participate in through these hashtagged spaces.

#OccupyParliament to Remove #MPigs: Political Resistance

Similar to sites dedicated to media criticism, politically oriented hashtags represent spaces for Kenyans to talk back to politicians and publicly voice their concerns about governance and nation building. One such hashtag, #MPigs, is used to express anger over the perceived greed, wastefulness, and incompetence of Kenyan members of Parliament. This hashtag first appeared in late 2009 and has displayed moments of robust conversation around key events. One of the earliest and most active participants in the space was Nairobi-based business analyst Peter Chiira Maina, who expressed resentment toward politicians who earn huge salaries, live luxuriously, and benefit from tax shelters unavailable to ordinary citizens:

> #2010expectationsthatwonthappen The government finally taxes the #MPigs salaries (@Chiira, January 2, 2010)

In contrast to members of Parliament, Kenyan citizens are often portrayed as hard workers or as victims of the unjust system:

> With the rising cost of living in Kenya why on earth would #MPigs be given iPads which they can afford anyway and hunger is maiming Turkana? (@jeffkomonge, January 30, 2014)

Thus, #MPigs provides a space for Kenyans to denounce their politicians and rally support against their hypocrisy and greed. Yet, as with their media criticism, Kenyans also incorporate humor into their political critique. Whether through sarcasm ("Stop bitching about these tax increases. How do you expect your #MPigs to maintain his wife & mistress with all these cost increases?" [@samdave69, September 4, 2013]) or absurdist humor ("Just as the #MPigs were coined . . . I shall refer to the #Snaketors, #Grabenors & #CountyCreps"

[@coldtusker, April 6, 2013]), Kenyans used #MPigs to blend sober critiques of political excess with playful jabs at corrupt politicians. This playful engagement represents an opportunity for citizens to talk back to powerful political elites, something that has not been readily available in Kenya.

The outrage demonstrated in the #MPigs conversation manifested in other spaces as well. For example, the hashtag #OccupyParliament was used to rally support for and document a May 2013 public protest of a proposed salary increase for Kenyan MPs. While #OccupyParliament served as the primary online space for this protest, the #MPigs hashtag was incorporated into the event when demonstrators brought pigs covered in cow's blood to the protests outside Parliament. Images of bloody pigs and protest fliers circulated on Twitter as participants voiced opposition to the #MPigs.

The #OccupyParliament protest occurred in both online and offline spaces as participants who protested outside Parliament shared their experiences with engaged audiences online. Two prominent participants in both spaces were Robert Alai and Boniface Mwangi. Alai, a popular blogger and tech entrepreneur known as a vocal critic of government abuse, used Twitter to encourage others to participate in the protest and satirize government officials:

> Police looking for 40 mentally ill patients while they can locate the over 300 in our parliament. Start with what you see. #OccupyParliament (@RobertAlai, May 13, 2013)

Mwangi is a well-known creative activist famous for his postelection violence photo exhibit and a cofounder of the social enterprise organization Pawa254. He used #OccupyParliament to rally support for the protest, disseminate information about the demonstration, and update his followers on clashes with the government. Together, Alai and Mwangi shaped much of the conversation taking place on #OccupyParliament while also leading the on-the-ground demonstrations. As with other protests supported through social media, such as the Occupy Movement and Arab Spring, the distinction between on- and offline participation is blurred in collective political action (Srinivasan, 2013; Thorson et al., 2013).

#SickAt50 Is #WhyObamaWillSkipKenya: National Identity

While #OccupyParliament and #MPigs served as spaces where dissidents could organize protests and voice their opposition to corrupt politicians and government abuse, other hashtags have provided spaces for Kenyans to reflect on the nation's development successes and failures. In fact, two competing spaces emerged around the nationwide celebration marking 50 years of independence. At first, Kenyans began using #KenyaAt50 as the primary hashtag for discussions about the 50th anniversary. The hashtag invited well-wishes from multinational corporations, such as Coca-Cola ("Cheers to an awesome 50 years! RT if you're looking forward to the incoming #Kenyaat50 celebration!" [@CocaCola, December 5, 2013]) and scrutiny from global media outlets, such as *The Guardian* ("A mingled yarn of good and bad: #KenyaAt50 in pictures" [December 12, 2013]) but more important, it provided a space for Kenyans to reflect on the nation's progress, or lack thereof, during the previous half-century. Through #KenyaAt50, some Kenyans expressed their respect and appreciation for the nation, while others voiced frustration that it was far behind in economic and political development. For example, popular television anchor Larry Madowo, who was one of the most prominent and active participants in #KenyaAt50, combined patriotic expression with behind-the-scenes critique and humorous commentary:

> Happy birthday, Kenya. I love you. #KenyaAt50 (@LarryMadowo, December 12, 2013)

> TV stations fought to do a joint production (like Presidential Debate) but #KenyaAt50 organizers refused. Quality would suffer, and it has (@LarryMadowo, December 12, 2013)

> 27 choirs, 700 voices. Yawn #BoredAt50 #KenyaAt50 (@LarryMadowo, December 12, 2013)

#KenyaAt50 tweets were as likely to be critical as they were reverential. Some users blasted the government for spending a large sum on the celebration rather than investing in social programs or improved infrastructure:

If you agree that the 50 year celebrations at Kasarani are a sham, not worth 500M please Rt this. #KenyaAt50. (@SokoAnalyst, December, 12, 2013).

Others facetiously wondered where all the money went:

So the #KenyaAt50 budget didn't go on choreography. (@sunnysunwords, December 12, 2013)

Thus, the hashtag became a central gathering place for all, from Kenya's poor to the elite, including President Uhuru Kenyatta, to reflect on, joke about, and discuss the state of the nation. The significance of Twitter during this time of national reflection was made evident by this tweet:

On this day, 50 years ago, Kenya unfollowed Britain #KenyaAt50 (@jamie_kop, December 12, 2013)

In the days leading up the 50th anniversary celebrations, medical workers went on strike over changes to the national healthcare system. On Facebook, doctors and nurses convened to discuss launching a hashtag that would gain traction with the public and focus attention on these labor issues (Hebblethwaite, 2013). They opted to satirize #KenyaAt50 by creating the hashtag #SickAt50, with Nairobi-based doctor Karl Daniel posting the initial tweet:

Many doctors have to work regularly for more than 12 hrs a day & still be on standby for calls at night, weekends n holidays #SickAt50 (@Dr_KarlDaniel, December 2, 2013)

Shortly afterward, other healthcare workers promoted the hashtag to prominent Kenyans on Twitter, including Madowo and Alai, encouraging them to participate in this competing conversation:

@kmpdu Make #sickat50 trend . @LarryMadowo you need to follow this. @wambuiwaithaka @Chiefsultani (@jonkanyi, December 3, 2013)

@KennOdida @RobertAlai @junior_mutula #sickat50 is gonna steal the show (@Mtuzumab, December 3, 2013)

Within days, #SickAt50 became home to a counternarrative about the anniversary, drawing attention to the healthcare strike and attracting critics of Kenya's development. Alai, Mwangi, and other prominent Kenyans, such as activist and Ushahidi cofounder Ory Okolloh and journalist Ramah Nyang, participated in #SickAt50 to challenge the #KenyaAt50 narrative and praised Kenyans for approaching the milestone with skepticism:

#Nyayo estate Embakassi has 20 outages in a day. Miss my previous Eastlands neighbourhood. Power outages was never there. #SickAt50 (@RobertAlai, December 11, 2013)

Is the president aware doctors are on strike? I hope he will mention a solution on his speech. #Sickat50 (@bonifacemwangi, December 12, 2013)

It is not true that Kenyans just accept and move on from everything, witness #sickat50 (@kenyanpundit, December 6, 2013)

A more honest look at #KenyaAt50, lies in the #SickAt50 narrative we've been having ever since doctors went on strike. (@Ramah_Nyang, December 12, 2013)

As a result, the striking healthcare workers were able to reframe the discussion around the 50th anniversary by creating a "sticky" hashtag that argued that a faulty healthcare system was one of Kenya's many "sicknesses" in need of a cure, not a celebration.

Months before Kenya's 50th anniversary, U.S. President Barack Obama announced that his upcoming trip to Africa would not include a stop in Kenya. President Obama, whose father was Kenyan, had vowed to visit Kenya during his presidency, but he has yet to do so. The announcement of President Obama's Africa trip came months after electoral victories by Kenya's President Uhuru Kenyatta and Deputy President William Ruto, both of whom are accused of crimes against humanity during the 2007 postelection violence by the International Criminal Court. While many Kenyans hoped the nation's participation in a peaceful election would persuade President Obama to visit, the United States has been reluctant to treat the new government as legitimate (Warner, 2013). Kenyans responded to the news by using the hashtag #WhyObamaWillSkipKenya to speculate, at times pointedly and at others humorously, about Obama's decision to pass up his ancestral home.

In this space, some Kenyans reiterated the official message sent by the Obama administration ("#WhyObamaWillSkipKenya because Kenya is governed and lead by two criminals" [@JoelOduor, May 21, 2013]), while others offered more creative and critical explanations. Several criticized U.S. failures in its "war on terrorism," while praising Kenya's efforts to combat extremism:

> #WhyObamaWillSkipKenya because USA is embarrassed by Kenya's success in Somalia where USA failed (@Robert_Lunalo, May 21, 2013)

> #WhyObamaWillSkipKenya KDF [Kenya Defense Forces] overcame Al_Shabaab which Americans failed. (@N_getich, May 21, 2013)

A few reframed the incident as a sign that Kenya was no longer dependent on foreign powers, including Alai, who chastised Kenyans who sought validation from outsiders:

> Kenya will be developed by Kenyans not Obama. Stop worshiping an individual. #WhyObamaWillSkipKenya (@RobertAlai, May 21, 2013)

> There's nothing for him to do here. As Kenyans, we're slowly slipping away from neocolonialism. That's #WhyObamaWillSkipKenya (@Teckkariuki, May 21, 2013)

While some Kenyans viewed President Obama's decision not to visit as a snub, many Twitter users recast the incident as indicative of the country's national development and improved standing on the global stage.

Yet not all the discussion on #WhyObamaWillSkipKenya was emblematic of sober political critique. A few used the opportunity to poke fun at fellow Kenyans, joking about the prevalence of petty crime and movie piracy:

> #WhyObamaWillSkipKenya He might go back to U.S without his iPhone (@kissykennysmatt, May 21, 2013)

> #WhyObamaWillSkipKenya his speech had already been pirated at river road. (@alifix100, May 21, 2013)

Coincidently, the announcement of Obama's trip came shortly after a former United Nations worker was arrested in Kenya, suspected of hiring Kenyan women to perform "sexual acts with a dog" on video (Atieno, 2013). Much of the humor on Twitter suggested that the timing of these two events was far from coincidental:

> #WhyObamaWillSkipKenya hehe their family dog heard about mombasa (@stino, May 21, 2013)

The diversity of tweets tagged with #WhyObamaWillSkipKenya highlights the ways in which users participate in creative, playful, and serious commentary. As with #KenyaAt50 and #SickAt50, there is no single way for users to engage in conversations about the nation. The common space provided by these hashtags allows for widely varied comments to interact with and become part of the collective discussion. In a more formal context, jokes about bestiality would be inappropriate amid sober geopolitical critiques. Yet on Twitter each statement advances the conversation and contributes to the playful engagement that Kenyans regularly participate in when it comes to civic, cultural, and social issues.

Discussion

Through the use of hashtags, Kenyans on Twitter unite against self-bestowed raises by members of Parliament, respond to media misrepresentations of their country, and engage in discussions about Kenya's national identity and global position. Through humor and serious critique, participants in these sites of playful engagement challenge inequality and push development agendas forward. Such use of humor and critique is not new in African media. Discussing popular culture in Africa, Barber (1997) notes that "there is a powerful sense of the people naming the inequality they suffer from, and recognizing, often with humour and bitter irony, their own struggle and endurance" (p. 5). These same themes are evident in the Twitter conversations that emerge around the playful, yet civically engaged hashtags.

This research further indicates that the affordances of digital technologies create opportunities for unexpected uses by those who appropriate the technologies to suit their own purposes. Twitter's short-messaging structure and mobile-friendly interface allow for contributions from a Kenyan user base that often accesses the Internet through mobile phones, while hashtags provide users with the ability to begin, contribute to, or follow

discussion threads on topics of interest. Popular hashtags, in turn, create spaces that facilitate a rapid back-and-forth style of communication in which users can endorse the contributions of others through retweets, respond to each other's statements through replies, or add a new dimension to the conversation by tagging tweets that are humorous, angry, calculated, or absurd. When many Kenyans expressed outrage on Twitter over CNN's questionable reporting, others mixed in humor and satire to imbue the critique with a sense of playfulness. When Madowo expressed his pride as a Kenyan during #KenyaAt50, he quickly added he was bored by the overwrought celebrations. When President Obama opted not to visit Kenya, the #WhyObamaWillSkipKenya hashtag provided a space for Kenyans to criticize U.S. policies, to reflect on Kenyan political and social institutions, and to joke about bestiality. These spaces became sites of playful engagement in which sober critique, humorous commentary, and mundane observations contributed to the collective exchange of ideas around civic issues.

Further, our analysis reveals that sites of playful engagement can forge connections among people and topics that are desirable for ICT-enabled development. In preparing for the #OccupyParliament demonstrations, organizers latched onto the #MPigs symbolism by bringing real pigs to the protest. When Nguru sought to draw attention to his #PicturesforStuart hashtag, he solicited participation from those already active in #KOT and #KenyaDecides spaces. When healthcare workers tried to promote the #SickAt50 counternarrative, they called on prominent individuals, such as Madowo and Alai, to help them spread the word. Twitter's networked structure affords meaningful connections among topics, individuals, and actions in both online and offline spaces. It allows for the manifestation of ad hoc publics around issue-based hashtags that branch out from previous discussions (Kreiss, Meadows, & Remensperger, 2014). It also provides a space for emergent hashtags to compete in framing issues of public importance (Meraz & Papacharissi, 2013), such as when healthcare workers attempted to change the #KenyaAt50 conversation with #SickAt50.

At the same time, online spaces like hashtags should not be idealized as fully democratic. Power imbalances persist within and beyond the digital realm. Although anyone can create a hashtag or participate in discussion spaces using an existing hashtag, those with greater influence on sites such as Twitter—measured by followers, retweets, and mentions—are often the same people who have social, cultural, or economic authority in offline spaces (Marwick & boyd, 2011). Within our own sample, the role of prominent, well-connected elites in promoting certain hashtags is evident, though not absolute. Prominent individuals wield power on- and offline and are able to influence discussion and action across spaces. At the same time, non-elites such as Winnie Michelle Kenduiywa and Farouq Fred are able to create spaces and invigorate conversations around issues of social consequence. By reacting quickly, Kenduiywa was able to drive the critique of CNN, which led to an apology and Kenduiywa's feeling of vindication as a "Kenyan with a voice." By extending his reach to other #KOT participants, Fred reignited the #SomeoneTellCNN commentary.

The implications for ICTD research are threefold. First, Twitter affords connections among users and spaces often missing in traditional development projects that occur in isolation from each other. In Kenya, sites of playful engagement on Twitter often interact, which helps advance a broader conversation about social and political development within the nation. Second, although user prominence cannot be ignored, the participatory nature of hashtag spaces supports the type of grassroots, bottom-up initiatives favored within participatory development (Unwin, 2009). The hashtagged spaces discussed here were not designed or implemented by NGOs, government officials, foundations, or scholars; they were produced organically by Kenyans tweeting about Kenya. Third, sites of playful engagement on Twitter reflect the kinds of issues that resonate with local audiences. Thus, ICTD practitioners seeking to design initiatives with input from local audiences that address issues of real concern can learn from the emergent themes and ad hoc publics that arise in these spaces.

ICTD research often focuses on structured development programs that indicate how people could and should use information technologies. This narrow focus ignores the creative ways that individuals engage in development and social change practices in their daily lives using and adapting media technologies. This study attempts to capture and analyze behavior that may be missed within such a narrow ICTD research paradigm. Online behavior does not cleanly fit into one box, rather, it reflects the complexity of how people deal with social issues and express their views on these issues. Future research should continue to explore complex sites of playful engagement, such as hashtags and memes that are infused with playful and serious content.

Focusing primarily on ICTD initiatives or large-scale social movements and political protests misses the civic expressions and promotion of development happening daily in online spaces. As Heeks (2012) notes, development is no longer the purview of only NGOs and governmental agencies; new actors in new spaces now participate in development processes in creative ways. Dismissing these spaces as trivial because of the playful nature of the discussion risks missing opportunities to explore how users appropriate spaces to support development and social change agendas. The conversations and interactions in these sites of playful engagement offer fertile areas of exploration for future ICTD research. ∎

Acknowledgments

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