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Techno-affective elections and (Il)legitimate power: WhatsApp voice in Kenya's electoral deliberations

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Abstract

This thesis is about the concept of WhatsApp voice and its use in African electoral contexts. It devised a three-pillar framework comprising techno-pessimism, techno-optimism, and techno-pragmatism, and triangulated it with the qualitative network analysis. It used the case of Bungoma County to generalise African use of digital technologies in electioneering deliberations. The study sought to determine how and why the use of WhatsApp voice enabled and/or limited people's deliberations during the 2017 elections; with view to project how 2022 elections might pan out. Its significance was to explore the people's unique WhatsApp use; to popularise the less emphasized techno-pragmatic perception; so as to add knowledge in the field where social media is rapidly changing the digital media landscpate; and to predict how the 2022 elections may pan out. The study was guided by the question: What factors inform WhatsApp pessimistic, optimistic, and/or pragmatic perceptions during electoral deliberations? Debate on power, perception, and techno-affect threaded the work, advancing the discussion towards addressing philosophical considerations. It engaged the concept of illegitimate and legitimate power created through "mere" voting and deliberative voting; that does not change and/or change the power balance between the people and representatives; and how WhatsApp use perpetrates illegitimate and/or legitimate power by enabling affective and/or deliberative politics. The coalesced Kenyan media milestones assess how it has gained and lost credibility over time; with view to place the WhatsApp voice within historical contexts. The study's findings reveal how the people's unique cultural interaction with WhatsApp technology intertwines with the dominant social actors' influence, shaping how and why the platform is perceived as techno-pessimistic, techno-optimistic and/or techno-pragmatic. The study's prediction about the 2022 elections came to pass, with measure of accuracy.
Keywords: Social Media/WhatsApp, Techno-Affect, Elections, Kenya.