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# Exploring power struggles in online spaces: a study of selected political WhatsApp communities in KENYA.

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# ABSTRACT

A free and accessible media is indispensable to citizen participation in democracy and development. In post-colonial Kenya, free media is elusive. However, the advent of social media technologies is disrupting this hegemony. The citizenry can participate in content creation and dissemination and exercise political power. Specific to this study is how WhatsApp, a smart phone instant messaging application, has popularized mass messaging by citizens through its group formation affordance, a model that has the potential to reinvigorate participatory democracy in Africa. This study conceptualizes WhatsApp groups as WhatsApp communities and considers two such communities in Kenya; Kabula Forward and East Asembo Development Forum. The study uses discourse-material analysis to explain how affordances availed by WhatsApp influence users' online community membership (right to participation, identity negotiation and sense of belonging) in political discourses in Kenya. Theoretically, the study holds that in any social interaction lies power struggles. This study analyses how WhatsApp discursively provides both free spaces and technologies of control. This netnographic study employs qualitative interviews (both online and offline), background listening and focus group discussions to collect multi-modal data in the human-technology WhatsApp community assemblage. Findings show that "new media," as social media and other digital media are often referred to, are a remediation of old media, not only in terms of the modes of communication they avail but also the power hierarchies they create in the media ecology and the society. For instance, while participants construct WhatsApp as a free space, certain affordances, and conventions such as the administrator convention, create modes of structural and discursive exclusion in WhatsApp communities. Through the share-ability affordances, hegemonic political discourses previously sedimented in the old media are remediated into the so-called free spaces, threatening emerging modes of participation, identification, and construction of sense of belonging to a community. In the process, dislocations which could potentially provide new ways of meaning making and re-politicization of sedimented discourses are hindered. As such, WhatsApp through what I term as a techno-trope (a neologism of technology and rhetorical tropes) process, acts like an "open-label" placebo would, where participants metaphorically construct WhatsApp communities as free spaces despite experiencing the control and exclusions the technology affords. In other words, the very affordances of WhatsApp which enable discourses of freedom, also constrain them.