

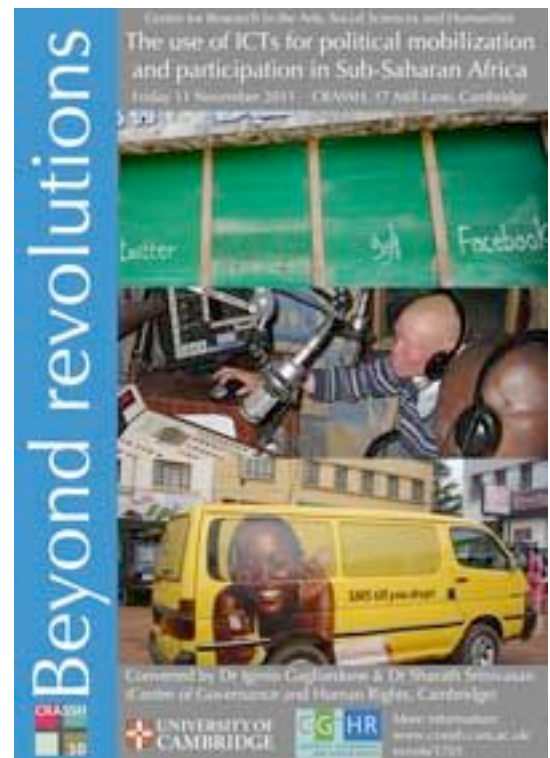
Beyond revolutions: the use of ICTs for political mobilization and participation in Sub-Saharan Africa

Convenors: Dr Iginio Gagliardone and Dr Sharath Srinivasan (CGHR, University of Cambridge)

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On the 11th of November 2011 CGHR and the Centre for Research in the Arts, Social Sciences and Humanities ([CRASSH](#)) gathered scholars from a range of disciplines to examine the ability of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) to affect and transform governance processes in Africa. The event was part of CGHR's current [research project](#) (http://www.polis.cam.ac.uk/cghr/research_sms.html) on how innovations in ICTs can transform governance processes and experiences of citizenship in Africa, especially through hybrid platforms for participation and public discussion combining mobile telephony and radio broadcasting.

The workshop was an opportunity to share and generate feedback on initial research findings of this two-year on-going project with both academics and practitioners and to discuss, more broadly how ICTs are affecting the nature of political mobilization and participation across Africa. It was also an opportunity to stimulate a dialogue between scholars who have critically examined institutions and processes of governance in Africa and those who have studied the diffusion of ICTs, suggesting combined approaches that can better serve to analyse the ICT-governance relationship in context. This dialogue was further facilitated through the analysis of a great variety of case studies ranging from Zambia to Cameroon, through Kenya, Somalia and Uganda.



Panel 1: ICTs and political change in Africa. How to bridge the communication and governance divide?

Winston Mano (University of Westminster), editor of the *Journal of African Media Studies*, and Richard Crook (Institute of Development Studies, University of Sussex), a senior researcher on the Overseas Development Institute led [Africa Power and Politics Programme](#) provided some important insights into how the scholarship on governance and on the media can better talk to each other. Richard Crook stressed the necessity to study 'real' governance dynamics and to 'work with the grain', analysing what 'already works' rather than adopting the 'good governance' criteria to evaluate public goods delivery in Africa. Participants agreed that this approach was particularly inspiring when thinking about how to seize the evolutions and the effects of the media in Africa, by subscribing to a context-rooted approach and parting with too narrow evaluative visions of how the media in Africa *should* act. Instead, an assessment of how the media are *already working* in Africa, sometimes in their own specific way, and how different actors use ICTs pursuing a range of different agendas and according to their different agencies, leads to a better understanding of their effects and their potential for change. Winston Mano warned about the importance of re-situating the uses of new ICTs in Africa, in

particular because Internet is only accessed by a handful of happy few (only 17 million facebook users in Africa, which comprises a billion people), but he also called to take into account how fast this reality is changing and how ICTs do have effects among certain spheres like the urban youth. He particularly insisted on the necessity to study the articulations between ‘new’ and ‘old’ media, like radio, but also the word of mouth, as well as the conditions and effects of the domestication of technologies originating from the West in African contexts.

Panel 2: Mobile phones and citizens’ voices in the African airwaves. How is interactive radio affecting governance in Africa?

Three members of the CGHR research project [“ICTs and citizen-led governance in Africa”](#), Iginio Gagliardone, Alastair Fraser and Florence Brisset-Foucault (University of Cambridge) presented the preliminary results of their fieldwork in relation with the research questions the project asks. The specificities of the Kenyan, Zambian and Ugandan cases were exposed and common dynamics and issues were drawn. Panellists discussed in particular how new spheres of discussion opened by the articulation of ‘traditional’ media like radio and the uses citizens make of mobile phones, and particularly SMS, were integrated in existing political settings. One of the questions was how much do these ICT-radio mediated discussions are transforming mechanisms of representative democracy, existing political practices or local hierarchies. Radio and mobile phone discussions open new venues for citizen participation, and affect party politics, clientele relations, interactions between constituents and MPs, parameters of political control, elite formation processes, and offer new business opportunities for radio station, as many of these talk shows are part of a commercialised transaction between the stations, politicians and international NGOs. ICT-radio mediated discussions are also the cradle of debates around what it means to be a citizen and a leader, and play a role in the evolution of the values, the practices and the expectations attached to these political and social roles.

Panel 3: ICTs and political mobilisation in Africa

The third panel discussed “ICTs and electoral politics in Africa”, through two case studies from Kenya and Cameroon. Teke Ngomba (University of Aarhus) assessed how ‘man-to-man’ relationships and particularly ‘door to door’ practices are still central in Cameroonian political parties’ techniques of canvassing, as compared to the use of ICTs. Political rallies, rather than media time, were privileged by politicians, even if Cameroon benefit from a vibrant media scene, with more than 600 newspapers and 100 radio stations. Nevertheless, technology is also embedded in these political practices and strategies based on proximity: accessing a ‘big man’ personally by getting his personal mobile phone number for example, becomes a sign of power. Gianluca Iazzolino (University of Edinburgh) analysed how SMS were used after Kenya’s electoral crisis and the violence that followed to rebuild social relations in the slum of Kibera, according to different patterns, practices and imaginaries of the community. He compared the use of SMS by Kamukunji, a pressure group linked to Prime Minister Raila Odinga’s networks of clientele and mobilisation; and Peacenet, a Kenyan umbrella of civil society organisations.

Panel 4: Investigating ICTs and political change: Tools and methods

In the last session, panellists reflected on the ways to teach and research the impact of ICTs on political change. Alem Hailu and Helen Bond, from Howard University, presented the course they are piloting with their students to explore the influence of social media in the Arab Spring. They insisted on the necessity to analyse the uprisings in a historical and comparative manner. Given Howard University’s background, they illustrated in particular the possibilities to compare the revolutions that took place in Northern Africa with the Civil Rights Movement in the United States, and to study the role of communication and technological innovations in both cases. They also stressed the importance to work on the ‘post’-revolution period. This idea was also central in Emrys Schoemaker (LSE)’s presentation, which questioned the normative framework that is usually taken when

thinking about the part media are supposed to take in post conflict situations. Both he and Nicole Stremlau (University of Oxford) analysed the role and forms of media and communication in war-torn societies and how they are articulated in hybrid forms of power and governance. Nicole Stremlau discussed the situation in the break-away state of Somaliland and in south-central Somalia, and the necessity to understand freedom of expression beyond the 'freedom of mass media', taking into account other forms of communication such as poetry.

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