

: Conference Report

sef:

Potsdam Spring Dialogues 2021 – Online

Making Digitalisation Work for Peaceful Development

Ingo Nordmann

Digitalisation in Africa is in full swing. Online tools can bring people together and help prevent violence. Participation in democratic processes becomes easier and more inclusive. New business opportunities emerge in the digital space. Social movements increasingly connect online and bring change to rural and urban regions alike. At the same time, hate speech spreads online at unprecedented speed, authoritarian governments use new technologies to control their citizens, and extremist groups recruit members online. Digitalisation has multiple beneficial and harmful aspects, and reliable political frameworks are needed to strengthen the positives and mitigate the threats. This was the focus of the Potsdam Spring Dialogues 2021, which took place online on three afternoons from 10 – 12 May 2021.

The main themes of the conference were digital violence and conflict prevention in Africa, democratic participation and digital rights, and the impacts of digitalisation on development prospects for Africa's youth. A specific emphasis was put on regional cooperation within Africa, between nation states, Regional Economic Committees (RECs) and the African Union (AU), and on the cooperation between the AU and the European Union (EU).

Online hate speech, real-life violence and possible counter-measures

Digital tools can bring people together, but they can also be misused for violent purposes. Online hate speech, in particular, has horrific real-life consequences in many African countries. Nanjala Nyabola, a prominent researcher and author from Nairobi, explained how online hate frequently turns into actual violence on the streets, citing the current conflict in Ethiopia as an example. Online media can also contribute to the spread of violence when news of killings is shared online and causes targeted reprisal killings as a direct consequence. The range and speed of these mutually inflammatory exchanges are far higher than before the internet and social media existed.

Ambassador Fred Ngoga Gateretse, Head of the Conflict Prevention and Early Warning Division at the African Union Commission, agreed that hate speech has been spreading "like bushfires". He pointed out that even the most extreme opinions, which used to



Impressions from the Mogadishu Tech Summit, organized by iRise Hub, Somalia

get little to no attention, can now become normalised in echo chambers on social media. Digitalisation could and should, however, also be used to tackle the problem: “When intolerance becomes the norm, we must beat perpetrators at their own game.”

Civil society organisations have developed innovative ways to do exactly that. For instance, the #defyhatenow campaign in South Sudan and other countries provides community-based and data-driven solutions to fight hate speech and misinformation online. As Programmes Director Nelson J. Kwaje stated, it has also helped with debunking dangerous myths around the coronavirus pandemic. Tuwindi from Mali offers apps to users with which they can fact-check information spread online, thus reducing the danger of fake news. CEO Tidiani Togola also presented an app that provides access to reliable political information online prior to elections, enabling users to make informed decisions. And the Humanitarian Open-StreetMap Team (HOT) aims to reduce violent effects of online communication in the real world, using digital tools in innovative ways (see Box).

The power and responsibility of tech companies

Dr Nicole Stremlau, Programme Head at the University of Oxford and Research Professor at the University of Johannesburg, added that online-related violence in Africa receives much less attention from tech companies than it does in other parts of the world. A reason for this is that many hate speech incidents happen in local languages to which companies do not pay attention. They lack the linguistic capacities for effective community management, social network rules are often not translated, and algorithms do not work in these languages. Consequently, hate speech in Africa often cannot even be efficiently flagged, much less sanctioned or prevented. Nanjala Nyabola

Preventing violence with map data: the Humanitarian OpenStreetMap Team

A practical example of how digital tools can be used to fight violence was given by Monica Nthiga, Regional Director at the Humanitarian OpenStreetMap Team (HOT) in Kenya. HOT uses online map data to enable swift and precise responses to natural disasters or violent incidents. For example, during the last election in Kenya, plans for an incoming attack by a violent gang became public. Map data was used to help the police establish roadblocks and successfully stop the attack, with the data being shared in real time via Facebook, Twitter and SMS. HOT also uses map data to validate information online and to fight fake news and misinformation in digital spaces.

emphasised how striking this was, considering that many of these languages, such as Amharic, Hausa and Somali, are spoken by tens of millions of people.



Chair Ute Lange getting ready for the first session

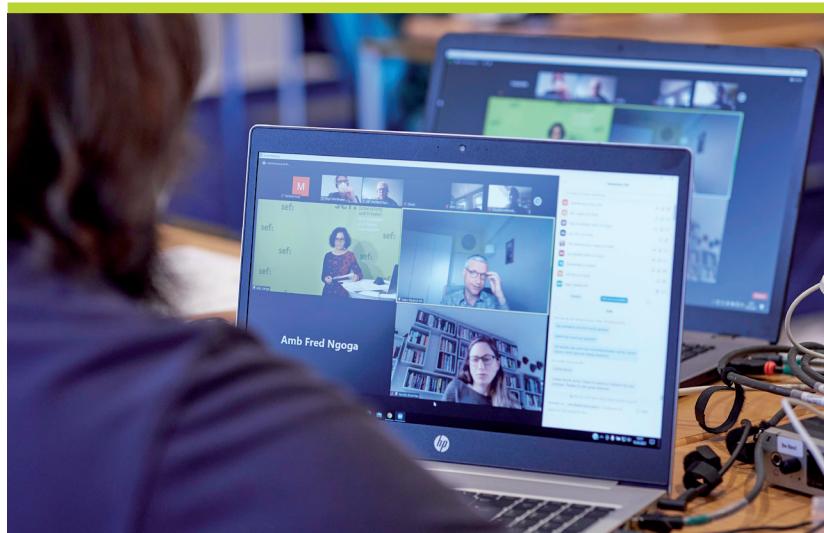
Nicole Stremlau also spoke about the considerable influence of international technology companies in Africa. She highlighted the discrepancy between the power of some small African nation states and “Big Tech”, referring to the largest global IT companies such as Facebook and Google. Their total turnover is much greater than many countries’ GDP, inverting the power balance between the state and the Big Tech businesses. As Nelson Kwaje from #defyhatenow pointed out, many global tech companies “were started by some white guys in Silicon Valley” but now have very considerable influence on the conditions in countries they have never even visited. In many cases, they are not accountable to any government.

Nanjala Nyabola was equally critical of the rising power of European companies such as Vodafone and Orange in Africa. Unlike larger European countries, which may have working policies to rein in Big Tech’s influence in their domestic markets, many small African countries cannot do that. Intensified international cooperation is needed here, as supranational organisations may be able to set frameworks to keep the extensive power of these foreign companies in check.

Strengthening inter-regional cooperation

Nicole Stremlau called for more robust engagement from the African Union. This could be a promising opportunity for collaboration between the AU and the European Union, which has already developed some good strategies to deal with these issues. As a representative from the European Commission, Marc Fiedrich agreed that the two continents face

many similar challenges in fighting online violence and pointed to regular dialogues between the EU and the AU on the effective regulation of social media. He added that Africa should, however, not just copy Europe, as Europe is still looking for answers in this



Ambassador Ngoga, Marc Fiedrich and Nicole Stremlau in dialogue

fast-paced and volatile area. Many policies may have to be adapted in a few years' time, given the rapid developments in digitalisation.

Exchange and collaboration should be intensified not only between Africa and Europe, but also within the Global South, as Nanjala Nyabola argued. Africa, Asia and Latin America face similar challenges in the field of digitalisation. For example, Brazil is currently the world's largest WhatsApp market, followed by India and Nigeria. Therefore, WhatsApp (which belongs to tech giant Facebook) might attempt to consolidate and expand its market dominance in similar ways in all three countries. The Nigerian and Indian governments should therefore try to learn from Brazil's experience in dealing with this. Besides governments, civil society organisations from different continents should collaborate more often when tackling challenges related to digital innovations.

Regulating online communication without restricting digital rights and free speech

When governments are asked to intervene in digital conflict, a dilemma may arise: How can online communication be regulated without jeopardising democratic achievements such as free speech? Nanjala Nyabola urged considerable caution when calling for more state regulation. She warned that if governments were given the power to regulate online communication with the intention of fighting hate speech, they might first and foremost use it against critics of the state, to silence any unwelcome voices of activists. Dr Julia Leininger, Programme Head at the German Development Institute, concurred that digi-

tal tools might "allow autocrats to become even more autocratic". They enable them to control their people, e.g. by collecting data and enhancing surveillance technologies. As a particularly worrying example, she cited the case in which the Chinese government sold facial recognition software to Zimbabwe's authoritarian government, which used it to monitor people in the capital Harare. In return, the government provided the collected data to the Chinese software company, which used it to improve their algorithms and software capabilities.

Another shocking and relatively blunt tool to restrict communication is shutting down the internet completely, which many autocratic governments have done. Nanjala Nyabola said that currently, governments are "shifting from closing civic space online to controlling the predominant narrative". It is virtually impossible in countries such as Ethiopia, Rwanda and Nigeria to criticise the government online without being drowned out by government-controlled bots. Nelson Kwaje cited an example from Uganda where Facebook had to ban several accounts connected to the government for spreading false information and targeted harassment of users. As critics generally work alone, they struggle to gain traction against these organised spamming techniques. As Marc Fiedrich pointed out, inverse cases have been known as well, when governments attempted to balance large amounts of misinformation, for example about health issues. All these examples show that



Nanjala Nyabola, researcher and author from Nairobi

governments have become more capable of framing the online discourse and influencing it to their advantage.

Julia Leininger further warned that when elections are increasingly digitalised, manipulation and vote rigging may become easier. Tech companies provid-

ing digital election management tools may be easily influenced by politicians, especially if governments hold a substantial proportion of the company's shares. This would make conflicts of interest almost unavoidable and render politicians particularly prone



Ute Lange (Chair), Thomas Helfen, Pempho Chabvuta and Muneinazvo Kujeke in dialogue (clockwise)

to corruption. Attempts have been made by civil society to rein in such negative behaviour, for example by monitoring politicians' actions and making this information digitally available (see Box). In this way, digital tools may also contribute to more transparency and accountability in governance.

Regional organisations to set the frame, but national implementation needed

There is clearly a need for more regional cooperation within Africa in order to tackle issues of corruption and accountability across state borders as well. Ambassador Ngoga pointed out that while the African Union has already introduced many political frameworks in this area, some nation states lack the political will to implement them. He claimed that states often invoke national sovereignty, rejecting external influence from organisations such as the AU. Therefore, it must be conveyed to nation states that implementing international frameworks and cooperating with international organisations is actually sovereignty-enhancing. In fact, refusing to give up some national sovereignty in conflicted times may threaten a country's very existence.

Muneinazvo Kujeke, Research Officer at the Institute for Security Studies in Pretoria, pointed out that Africa was not short of ambitious policies on paper, and challenged the view that they should be compiled by the African Union in far-flung Addis Ababa. She argued it should instead be done closer to home by Regional Economic Committees (RECs) and member states. Nevertheless, she concurred that the bulk of

the work lies with the national governments, while regional organisations and civil society can only increase pressure. As 'Gbenga Sesan, Executive Director of the Paradigm Initiative in Nigeria, said in his closing remarks: "There is still reason for optimism, but also a gap between optimism and reality. That is where the work lies, and it lies with the nation states."

Offering Africa's youth prospects through digitalisation

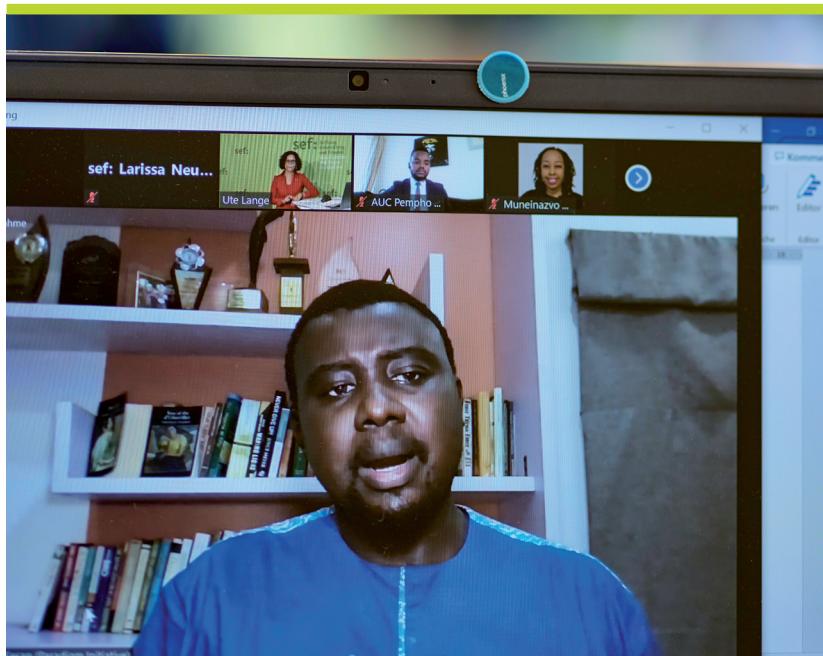
Africa is the continent with the world's youngest population. All panellists agreed that if the continent is to flourish, young people must be given the prospect of earning a sufficient and stable income. However, with a de facto unemployment rate of around 20% and an extremely high working poverty rate of 40%, it is still a long way off. This makes young people more susceptible to the influence of violent groups. As Nelson Kwaje stated, "criminal organisations are preying on exactly those people who have experienced historical injustices, exclusion, identity crises and economic issues". Young people who join extremist groups are both perpetrators and victims simultaneously. Therefore, if the problem of violent extremism is to be solved, the underlying issues which drive young people to join these groups in the first place must be addressed.

Abdihakim Ainte, co-founder of the iRise Hub in Mogadishu, knows many of these difficulties first-hand. His organisation tries to empower young entrepreneurs in Somalia with business opportunities, for example by organising the Mogadishu Tech Summit, one of the most important networking events for Somali start-ups, initiatives and businesses. iRise has received direct threats from extremist groups trying to interfere with its work. He confirmed that violent groups both "abuse and use" young people, most of whom come from severely disadvantaged families in rural regions.

Monitoring the activities of Ghanaian Members of Parliament (MPs): Odekro

The Accra-based non-profit organisation Odekro monitors the activities of parliamentarians and makes the information digitally available to Ghanaian citizens. In this way, voters can track what their elected representatives vote for, what statements and speeches they make, and how often they attend parliamentary sessions, allowing citizens to make informed voting decisions. As Odekro's Principal Lead Nehemiah Attigah explained, in one case it was discovered that 19 "silent MPs" did not make a single statement during four years in parliament. When the data was published, 12 of them lost their seats at the next election.

Digital innovation can benefit people in disadvantaged communities and promote their economic and social participation. For example, new digital payment methods can empower small business owners by enabling them to conduct quick and reliable financial transactions with customers or business partners. However, these methods are also harder to regulate and tax, and innovations such as mobile



Key findings presented by 'Gbenga Sesan, Paradigm Initiative, Yaba, Nigeria

lending (often at very disadvantageous rates) can be risky for a population with little experience and/or education in financial matters.

Dr Thomas Helfen, Division Head at the German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development, also saw economic prospects as crucial, and identified unemployment and under-employment as the greatest challenges facing African youth.

Empowering young people in Nigeria with digital skills: the Aspilos Foundation

The Aspilos Foundation is a youth-led non-profit organisation dedicated to empowering young people in Nigeria by teaching them digital competence, data science and programming. The focus is on young women and girls from rural or semi-rural regions, with the aim of qualifying them for jobs in the digital economy. Executive Director Simi Olusola explained that Aspilos has taught more than 500 young people on six-month courses, which are followed up by mentoring programmes and internship placements.

He underlined the need to boost the economy with digital investment, while at the same time empowering young people with digital skills. This is where organisations such as the Aspilos Foundation in Nigeria come in; it teaches digital competence to young people, which hopefully leads to further employment opportunities and economic prospects (see Box).

Over the course of the three-day conference, it became clear that we must be ready to shape the digital world for the long term. As Nanjala Nyabola stated in her final remarks, we must address issues in the digital space with determination and perseverance to shape them in the same way we have shaped offline media over a long period of time. It requires hard thinking, painstaking work and constant vigilance. Neither a hands-off mentality, which many governments have shown in the past, nor a naive "techno-utopian trust" (Stremmlau), which hopes that digital innovations will magically solve our problems, is suited to addressing present and future challenges. Digitalisation is neither Africa's (or humanity's) doom, nor its salvation. It is whatever we make of it.

Cooperating partners



Imprint

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