

Why Don't Africans Use Social Media To Revolt Like Arabs? (guest-blog)

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Africa's social media tool?

If a tree falls in a forest and no one is around to hear it, does it make a sound?" Apparently not. For there to be 'sound' there needs to be ears that hear the vibrations made by the falling tree. This philosophical riddle speaks volumes about the muted protests happening in parts of sub-Saharan Africa at the moment – and of the seeming disinterest both in the countries where they are started and in the international media.

Eliza Anyangwe reports.

On Wednesday [23 February](#) Cameroonians were expected to take to the street in a show of Arab-style defiance of a president who has been in power 28 years. Frustrations with Paul Biya's dictatorship have run deep since the 1990s, expectations were high but as the day dawned, turn out was very low and the world remained largely disinterested. So what went wrong?

The answer is simple: many didn't know it was happening, but more importantly, even fewer believed it would amount to anything. A post on my Facebook page asking which of my friends in Cameroon were joining the protests was met with incredulity. One said: "it's actually very quiet here. Nobody's talking about [the protests], so pretty sure nothing will happen."

So what does that mean in the content of social media and social movements? Why weren't Cameroonians and the Gabonese before them blogging, tweeting and updating their Facebook statuses with such ferocity that the world could not but pay attention? Is Africa not yet able to use these tools to communicate political change?

I think, in part, these platforms are not sufficiently adapted for an African user. Africa has entered the technological age at breakneck speed. Despite the costs and poor connectivity, there are [100 million internet users](#) in Africa. 17 million of them are on Facebook. Sounds great but compare to 400 million mobile phone users, web-based tools as the medium for activism isn't ideal.

Civil society needs to take their cue from [M-Pesa](#) in Kenya or [MXit](#) in South Africa and capitalise on the proliferation of mobile phones. More software such as [Frontline SMS](#) needs to be developed – and made available for free. This is already happening. For February's election [UgandaWatch 2011](#) encouraged Ugandans to send in an SMS to "report election abuses, ask questions, or praise individuals or groups that are contributing to a good election."

Granted, as has already been said countless times [elsewhere](#), it is pointless to argue that social media can cause a revolution. Cultural change – exemplified in the right for Africa's young, disenfranchised and increasingly desperate population to demand and receive answers – is essential. But even here social media can be an effective medium for youth empowerment as a [efforts to engage young Nigerians](#) in this year's elections shows.

The whole point as I see it is to give a lot more power to the people, the sort of power that makes change inevitable. If we want to capitalise on the potential of social media to support civil society, we must use the most accessible medium available and as [Jillian C York](#) puts it: "mobile...and not the web is the real champion tool here."

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