'Restricted' digital/media repertoires in rural Kenya
a constructive critique

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'Restricted' Digital/Media Repertoires in Rural Kenya: A Constructive Critique

Abstract:

The ambition of this article is twofold and consists of an attempt to outline a problematic bias of research attention and interpretation, discernible in the field of studies that address the appropriation and usage of new media and networked communication technologies, as unfolding in Africa. Thus, I voice my concerns in respect to scholarly attempts, quantitative and qualitative in nature, to define those who are 'left behind' at the 'bottom of the digital/media pyramid', in narrow deterministic terms. Based on qualitative interviews from field work in Uasin Gishu County, Kenya I suggest a methodological-analytical approach to overcome this blind spot of attention and understanding, by show-casing a different strategy of data generation and interpretative reading. The article draws attention on the media practices and routines that are contextually embedded in the lifeworld concerns and pragmatic decisions of individuals located at the 'excluded' end of the continuum of communication ecologies in Kenya. My in-depth presentation and discussion of two protagonists from rural Ziwa ward, seeks to challenge commonplace characterisations of the causes and consequences of restricted digital/media repertoires. This includes a rejection of techno-centric, normative claims that define digital inclusion in narrow terms and the excluded as human impediments to democratic transition and development. Instead, I put forward a situated understanding of digital/media repertoires that while realised under constrained conditions, nonetheless allow people to address their lifeworld concerns. Concerns, here understood "as activities that matter to people" (Helle-Valle, 2019, 147), in consequence affecting digital/media practices and vice versa.

Introduction

> "Indeed, the structuring southern experience of ICTs for/in development has been anxiety or even panic as to whether they fit in to the normative techno-developmental path of becoming an information society (as fx. in the issue of 'digital divide' or Castells-style 'informational black holes'), whether people or communities or nations will fall into the blank spaces between nodes, and whether their marginality will become irreversible" (Slater, 2013, p. 3).

Over the last two decades, Kenya has witnessed an ever deeper penetration of mobile phones, from its urban centres to its provincial towns and rural areas. Moreover, the popularity of data-enabled mobile devices has placed the East African country amongst the 'frontrunners' of mobile internet/broadband access in sub-Saharan Africa (Bailur, Donner, Locke, Schoemaker & Smart, 2015).[1] This development has gone hand in hand with the increased presence of (trans)national network operators and Internet service providers. With the sustained success of M-Pesa, a mobile-phone based money transfer and microfinancing application launched in 2007, Safaricom has become a global 'first mover'. Nowhere is this more evident than in Nairobi, one of Africa's up-and-coming *fintech* hubs. The concurrent emergence of greater Nairobi as a major sub-Saharan centre for ICT development and

implementation, nicknamed *Silicon Savannah*, illustrates the nexus of rapid market saturation and ICT sector growth in Kenya.

This article will direct the reader's attention towards a less eminent part of Kenya, Uasin Gishu in the Upper Rift Valley, home to a million plus people. The county is Kenya's breadbasket and centre of agrobusiness. The capital, Eldoret, is one of the fastest growing towns in Kenya, home to several universities/institutions of higher education, but peripheral to Kenya's digital sector. Thus, matching my article's thematic focus on the less dynamic and spectacular 'middle ground' within a varied continuum of communicative ecologies in Kenya.

As emphasized in the government's *Vision 2030* – which aims to "transform the country into a modern, globally competitive, middle income country – and as reinforced in the *Kenya ICT Master Plan*, the ambition is to support a policy-enabled but market-driven transition towards a digital Kenya. The national development and employment of digital technology, a network-based economy and e-governance/participation policies are envisioned to translate into social change and economic growth. Aspirations that are "easier stated in policies than carried out in practice" (Tufte, 2017, p. 264). Also, Kenya's ICT-driven dream of modernisation is characterised by continued disparities of digital inclusion (Gustafsson, 2019; Wildermuth, 2018). Thus, underlying socio-economic and socio-cultural inequalities have been more resistant to change, than the swift uptake of mobile phones alongside a steady increase in use and ownership of radios, TV sets and other digital/media devices might suggest.

The empirical study that this article is based upon, has a focus on user perspectives and agency, rather than being an inquiry into the systemic-structural, policy or textual dimensions of the intersected digitalisation of Kenya's media and communication landscape.[2] In 2015, when field work was conducted on two occasions, the digital switchover of TV signals and accelerated roll-out of submarine fibre cables along the East African coast, were some of the decisive infrastructural innovations that have framed the investigated practices of cross-media consumption and communicative interaction (Nielsen, 2019, p. 213). Understood in this systemic-technological context of Kenya's accelerated penetration of cable, satellite and digital technologies, I will ask to which extent the continued assymetric processes of digital proliferation and appropriation impact on ordinary citizens' situated media practices and how these uneven dynamics are perceived and dealt with by those who in tendency are at the bottom of an emerging digital divide.

Contours of a context-sensitive, theoretical framework

The main objective of this article will be substantiated by a combination of deductive reasoning and empirical-analytical exemplification. Focussing on just two respondents – out of a sample of 30 persons interviewed – is deemed necessary, though this concentration will come at the prize of omitting other findings.[3] Pursuing an interpretative reading 'against the grain' of established perspectives, the presented analytical outcome is admittedly too narrow in its evidence base to allow for generalisable statements and theory building. The descriptive 'thickness' and media-ethnographic 'richness' of the presented personifications, located at the excluded end of sustained digital divides in Kenya (Wildermuth, 2018), meanwhile is the

productive trade-off to this shortcoming. Thus, I have prioritized deeply contextualised and situated particularisations over the presentation of generalisable, but shallow evidence and sweeping delineations of the 'other half', a term that conflates all too comfortably millions of people within an all-encompassing category. That is, I seek to challenge the inadequate conceptual amalgamation of the mass of 'digitally excluded' individuals that are imagined to be crowded together on the 'bottom of the (digital) pyramid'. Seen as an indeterminate mass of people, but for distinctions made along quantifiable, socio-demographic parameters (age, income, gender, education, location etc.), respective common perceptions of the 'digital divide' stand in the way of a more differentiated understanding of the nature and dynamics of digital exclusion.

In contrast, the presentation of my two 'cases' makes no attempt of aggregation, but insists on emphasizing the particularity of media and communication repertoires that are enacted as domesticated practices and everyday routines and embedded in the distinct lifeworld realities of Esther and Kibe. The outcome is the identification of a cluster of not yet sufficiently explored research issues and questions, outlined throughout the analysis and discussed in conclusion in an attempt to inspire and strengthen research efforts with a comparable approach and intention.

Central to this cluster of open issues and research questions is the core concept of social mechanisms as used in the practice-ethnographic approach of Helle-Valle (2019) and Storm-Mathisen (2019). Social mechanisms are understood to exhibit a form of 'tendential causality', "some mechanisms reinforce each other; others are contradictory in their tendential effects" (Helle-Valle, 2019, p. 157). In the framework of my study, social mechanisms link, but resist to predict or fully explain, the dynamic interaction of individual media/communication practices, processes of individual/collective empowerment and tendencies of systemic-structural change in society.

I will discuss the identified media practices and communicative agency of both respondents in relation to optimistic accounts of the role of new and legacy media in Kenya. It is in this sense that the presented descriptions and interpretations, which cover but a fraction of the study's empirical data, reach beyond the particular as mere anecdotal. Open to a discussion of the broader social and political significance of the findings, the contours of a comparative perspective on the 'political' impact of digital/media repertoires, observed across a broad spectrum of communicative ecologies in urban and rural Kenya are put forward as the objective of research efforts beyond the scope of this article.

Embedded in a great variety of communicative ecologies – as constituted on regional, community, household and individual levels – evolving/restricted media practices have to be acknowledged and investigated in their full diversity. To this purpose, I have completed a qualitative audience study, as part of a larger, collective research project involving a dozen scholars from Kenya and the Nordic countries. Thus, my study is theoretically and conceptually embedded in the paramount project *Critical Perspectives on New Media and Processes of Social Change in the Global South* and builds in many ways on the research accomplished in Uasin Gishu, by my co-researchers from Moi University and several Nordic universities (Gustafsson, Ngomba & Nielsen, 2019; Tufte, 2017). Like most of them, I have adhered to a user- and society-centred approach. Rather than seeking to identify neat causal

relations between individual media repertoires, lifeworld challenges, opportunities and broader processes of social change, my (sub)project has strived to unpack the tensions and dynamics, complexities and constraints that exist in these relations. In other words, I have set out to capture some of the particular appropriations and cross-media practices within Kenya's proliferated, hybrid media system, in order to understand these practices as tactically embedded in the everyday lives of my respondents.

Lifeworld aspirations and concerns – as conceptualized in the media-ethnographic work of Helle-Valle (2019) and Storm-Mathisen (2019) – are assigned a crucial role in the reported study. They constitute the conceptual and analytical prism through which self-reflexive accounts of the scope, nature and meaning of evolving/restricted media repertoires and networked communication practices can be explored. Verbalized assessments of the relevance of particular media topics reflect on the subjective hierarchy of lifeworld aspirations and concerns that each respondent brings to the recurrent execution of her/his domesticated media repertoire.

Under conditions of polymedia (Madianou & Miller, 2013), a "high-choice media environment" (Van Aelst et al., 2017) affords, in principle, individuals to access content from a diverse array of media and sources. However, as Donner points out, the conceptualisations that "allow Madianou and Miller to capture multidevice, multimedia practices also reveal limits to polymedia's pervasiveness in the present. … it might be a while before polymedia *is* fully achieved, because salient differences of access, cost, and media literacy will continue to define the choice sets of many resource-constrained users" (Donner, 2015, p. 107). Accordingly, a user-centred approach that seeks to explore how ordinary citizens navigate Kenya's altered media landscape must pay attention to the constrained nature of contemporary media practices. Anchored in sustained-disadvantaged lifeworld conditions, a majority of Kenyans struggle to accomplish diverse and high-choice media repertoires.

Quantitative efforts of empirical mapping and correlational analysis of the diversity of individual/household media repertoires in Uasin Gishu have been at the heart of Gustafsson's baseline survey with 799 respondents, conducted in October 2014.[4] The survey has been constitutive to our joint *Critical Perspectives* project. The aim was to comprehensively "map out ordinary people's access and usage of media and communication" (Gustafsson, 2015, p. 2) by data collection in five (peri)urban and rural sub-locations including Ziwa ward. Recording media access and uses in relation to demographic data the survey's rich and profound findings "suggest that media ecologies in all five sub-locations have undergone dramatic changes" (Gustafsson & Nielsen, 2017a, p. 291). Moreover, the comparative analysis has confirmed differences in terms of digital/media inclusion: "although the fast spread of mobile phones is revolutionary and has bridged the urban-rural digital divide in terms of basic connectivity, the urban-rural digital divide is still reproduced in new patterns of media access and media usage" (ibid., p. 296).

Research on digital/media divides has a long tradition and consists of a plethora of theoretical perspectives, methodologies and analytical approaches. Too encompassing to be adequately

presented or discussed, I will suffice to make eclectic reference to work in this vast field, that I have been a part of for decades.

As mentioned, I argue for the existence of an epistemological *blind spot*, going hand in hand with efforts to delineate and predict the (likely) determinants of a *failed* digital/media inclusion. The systematic identification of correlational links between patterns of digital/media uptake/usage and of typical traits and behavioural characteristics of *excluded* individual and collective actors, has resulted in a plenitude of studies identifying and typifying individuals who are (potentially) at the bottom of the digital/media appropriation pyramid. Our baseline survey has underwritten this predominant, evidence-based categorization of the *excluded other*. However, this quantitative approach mandates to be complemented, as most of my *Critical Perspective* co-researchers have already done by means of their qualitative studies.

Methodology

This article draws on our baseline survey as a source of secondary data outlining the communicative ecologies of Ziwa. At the time of my field research, the survey's data collection was completed, but not yet processed. The productive tension between the survey's quantitative and my study's qualitative representation of discernible differences in media appropriation and consumption have in consequence materialised later, during the analytical interpretation of my interview/observational data.

Notably, the processed survey data has informed the rationale by which I have selected two respondents for presentation. Esther and Kibe are different from each other in terms of age, gender, ethnicity and location. What relates them is their restricted appropriation of digital media assessed against my study's other 28 respondents. It is them, who to my best judgement, occupy the 'low end' of the overall sample, qualifying them for selection.

Based on prior research, three emerging news topics were identified, assumed to be highly relevant to adults in Nairobi and Usain Gishu. They can be summarized as the then ongoing: (1) terrorist threats and attacks by Al Shabaab; (2) post-election violence proceedings at the International Criminal Court in The Hague; (3) roll-out of the constitutionally mandatory devolution process.

The topics' anticipated significance was deemed in relation to my study's interest in emerging digital/media practices directed at news and the *political* in a broad sense. The rationale behind their selection as thematic foci in all interviews, was thus grounded in my understanding of Kenyan media and society. That is, the selection was grounded in the recognition that all three topics allow for an individual's collective positioning along the axes of religious, ethnic and regional identity in the process of reception and thus an implicit or explicit adherence to respective interpretative communities.[5] However, corresponding interview questions were foremostly intended to function as heuristic windows of exploration and not employed to produce validated, empirical findings about perceived user relevance.

Indeed, addressing widespread economic concerns about the provision of jobs and income opportunities and major physical security threats, the selected topics have

encouraged my informants conversational engagement. Unified by their underlying discursive contestation of collective identifications and *othering*, they have engaged particular subject positions, as I will demonstrate with reference to Esther and Kibe. Our in conversation co-created reconstructions of the flows of communicative engagement and media appropriation linked to three developing news events, have thus provided a deeper understanding on two analytical levels. First, they allow to map trajectories of information and knowledge acquisition, as materialising in the *tracking* of specific news topics across platforms and modes of delivery available to an individual. Based on these descriptive maps of "rarely fully conscious media practices and routines" (Gustafsson et al., 2019, p. 128), explanatory insights regarding an individual's perception and tactical utilization of the situated affordances of particular media and communication technologies are gained. Second, the resulting, verbalized reconstructions of cross-media content appropriation provide opportunities to co-explore the respondent's underlying views on culture and society, polity and policies, economy and religion, among other macro dimensions of concern and relevance to them.

In sum, a combination of qualitative methods and clusters of research foci on media practices, routines and perceived (news) relevance criteria informed by personal concerns and subjective identities makes the tactical pursuit of mediated knowledge and information visible. Advanced/restricted cross-media repertoires can be mapped out and accounted for in a research design based on the respondents' verbalized reasoning.

On a practical level, the research design's methodological approach involved field visits to four locations in Uasin Gishu county. Field work was done in the company of two male assistants, recruited through our co-researcher and host, Abraham Mulwo at Moi University. Importantly, one of my assistants was of Kalenjin the other of Kikuyu origin, allowing me to contact informants by a member of their own tribe, in situatiuons where affiliation was deemed crucial. Both came along on excursions to Ziwa, Langas, Burnt Forrest and Eldoret initiating contact and acting as interpreters.

Their capacity to interact with respondents and (young) men, who were present at some of the interview sites, was most helpful to disarm suspicions, threats and attempts of disruption in locations that have been notorious sites of post-election violence (PEV) and consequently sites of criminal and journalistic investigation. Being a white male who seeks to involve locals in long, video-taped conversations on media, politics and identity, my research efforts were at worst perceived to be indistinguishable from other forms of unwelcome inquiry.

Analysis

Let me present my respondents. Kibe (24 years) lives in Ziwa, a sub-county ward 48 km northwest of Eldoret. Ziwa is a village cluster inhabited by approximately 1.000 households, with a small commercial area at its centre. Esther lives in a hamlet some 15 km southeast from Ziwa.

Esther (76 years) occupies a basic farmhouse which bears witness of economic hardship. She is married but her husband lives with his younger, second wife at a distant

place. Three grandchildren of school age stay in her custody. Esther has farming as her only occupation. She farms a plot the size of a vegetable garden and no longer has access to the land that she and her husband cultivated in earlier years. Esther has lived in the vicinity for 34 years. She receives no help from state authorities, though she witnessed life-threatening calamities in her neighbourhood during the 2008 PEV and been displaced in consequence.

Esther owns no television and has not read a newspaper for 7 years, that is since her refuge in Eldoret in the aftermath of the PEV. The only communication devices in her possession are a basic mobile phone and a transistor radio. As her home has no electricity, using them imposes additional costs. Nonetheless she listens to the radio daily:

"In the morning I listen to news at 7 am and lunch time news, and also from 6-10 pm in the evening."

She charges her phone, against a small fee in a nearby settlement.

"I normally receive calls. People call me most times and sometimes I call, when I feel there is need of. I rarely use it nowadays, because of my eyesight. I have a problem of operating the phone. My grandchildren help, if I want to call somebody and talk with them. … Mostly I speak with other grandchildren, who are outside the country. I talk with my sisters and brothers."

The only *official* calls that she makes on her phone are to the local chief.

"Someone like the chief, I sometimes call, if I have issues that I want to clarify with him. But places like hospitals and schools, I hardly call them. Especially in the hospital, it's only when things are bad. I have never called other leaders apart from the chief, because I don't see why I should."

Though literate, Esther refrains from texting on her phone, because of her weak eye sight. The use of Internet or social network sites are neither a reality, nor an ambition of Esther. The affordances of digital media configure not in her imagination. Ambitions to enlarge her (legacy) media repertoire are neither mentioned. Constrained by the harsh circumstances of her life and her home's lack of electricity, desires for television, are deemed unrealistic. Obviously, mechanisms of social exclusion – possibly exaggerated by her Kikuyu etnicity in a Kalenjin dominated environment – and her subordination within the local power structure, intersect with social mechanisms of communicative exclusion.

The example of Esther illustrates some of the quantitative survey findings at Ziwa ward, reported by Gustafsson (2015). She falls into the group of Ziwa women who rarely speak on the phone and never send or receive SMS (23% of female respondents). She is among the 77% of Ziwa women without an email account (100% above 60 years). Like the female majority she does not participate in social media (70%) or online debates (79%). Finally, she

belongs to the 59% of Ziwa women who read no newspaper and the small group of women (18%), who neither own a tv, nor watch television elsewhere.

Compared to urban areas, complex communication ecologies with access to a plethora of communication technologies are rare in rural areas. In a rudimentary account of the baseline data, Nielsen identifies a rural continuum of communication ecologies, spanning from complex to simple:

"Most prevalent are simple communication ecologies comprising dry cell battery radio and a basic mobile phone, however, the mixed ecologies are slowly becoming more common, owing to increased access to solar power and car batteries have television ownership and penetration of smartphones steadily increased" (Nielsen, 2019: 213).

In sum, Esther belongs to a diminishing, but still existent group of marginalized people, mainly women in rural areas, who have very limited access to networked communication media, or media at all (Gustafsson & Nielsen, 2017a, p. 304). Given her age and social position, can we expect Esther to care about political and social issues? Does she show any interest in news and current affairs, or does her media practices exemplify an intersection of barriers of access, ownership, affordability, skills, education and motivation? The answer is a difficult one, but accentuates the need for a user-centred approach which seeks to create a deeper understanding of the involved dynamics and to reach beyond the analytical comprehension generated by descriptive media behavioural mapping.

According to Van Dijk (2005), "motivational access" is the first factor in shaping the adoption and use of networked communication media. If people do not see a value in using the Internet, it is unlikely they will go online (ibid.). Research into secondary digital divides has suggested a lack of motivation on the user's side to be recognized as a common and powerful barrier to digital inclusion (Van Deursen & Van Dijk, 2015). Motivations "need to be examined in addition to socio-economic factors" (Reisdorf & Groselj, 2017, p. 1171). In consequence, "both non-users and low users need to be addressed in policy interventions, which need to tackle traditional socio-economic inequalities, infrastructures, and skills, but also motivations and attitudes that may prevent both groups from spending (more) time online and engaging in diverse Internet uses" (ibid., p. 1173).

A positive correlation between systemic-structural and individual-psychological barriers to digital/media inclusion is well evidenced by empirical studies. Behavioural-psychological perspectives on digital exclusion are meanwhile problematic, if they advocate a one-dimensional claim of causality. Whether people have "good" reasons to eschew the expansion of their digital/media repertoires, under the given circumstances of their lives, must be the objective of empirical studies and not denounced categorically, based on normative claims regarding the beneficial and empowering effects of digital/media adoption. Predictive models that seek to identify individual personality traits causing some individuals' observed lack of interest in networked media communication, ignore the situated nature of motivations and attitudes. Insufficient aspirations of digital inclusion become hence conceptualized as the reason, rather than the consequence of the underlying social, cultural,

economic and political asymmetries which exclude, in tendency, many people in a country like Kenya.

In analogy to Rogers' (2003) diffusion of innovation model the *laggards* are assigned the blame and rational-pragmatic reasons for their *reluctance* are ignored, or at best accounted for as symptoms of a regrettable but unsubstantiated rejection of innovations and change. User-centred perspectives as carried out in media-ethnographic and qualitative reception studies provide an opportunity to challenge the simplifications at the heart of this attribution. With this in mind, let me come back to Esther and her interest in mediated news and political information.

From our interview, it transpires how relevant Esther's radio-only repertoire is to her. Asked for her radio listening habits and preferences we learn that she listens, whenever possible, to national Citizen and local Q FM, while also an audience to vernacular (Kikuyu) Inooro and Kameme FM. Contrary to my initial expectations, Esther is far from ignorant of local/national news and current affairs. In fact, she declares to be politically interested and makes it evident when asked about her participation in elections:

"I have voted during the last two elections. I did not feel scared to vote 2013. This time things were different. … I know the candidates from radio only. I have never met them in person. From the radio and what people say about them. The radio was helpful. We go to a school nearby, called Milimani, to give our vote."

Not surprisingly, her interest in political content is concrete and motivated by key lifeworld concerns and expectations:

"Politicians don't keep the promises they make, although I had hopes in them. They have promised to give money to the elderly above the age of 70 and I have been 70 for the last six years. I had hopes to be given money, but I'm disappointed. … I have not received any information about pension, but I always hear from the radio that they have allocated some money for elderly in the budget … It's now three years since I applied, but no village elder or chief or any other person has contacted me."

Islamic fundamentalist terrorism, though not an immediate threat in Uasin Gishu and thus a personal lifeworld concern, is nonetheless prominent on the agenda of Esther's constrained news repertoire.

"Right now, I am interested in Al Shabaab security issues, since they have killed many students there (in far-off Garissa; my addition). I also follow news about rules and the kind of decisions that they make on the laws. I don't care who leads, since they both (referring to president Kenyatta and his deputy Ruto; my addition) won in elections. It is in the interest of both the leaders interest to know how they treat them (Al Shabaab; my addition)."

Interestingly, in the face of an external, indiscriminate threat to all Kenyans, Esther's tribal identification is played down, in her comments on the Garissa campus attack which left 148

dead, just a fortnight prior to our field research. Though she declared not to feel personally at risk, security and peace figure high on her agenda:

"Although they (politicians; my addition) don't keep their promises, at least there is peace in the country."

With regard to the devolution process, her expectations in the county government are no less concerned.

"The basic things that the government should do for people is to build schools and hospitals. Also the roads. They have built, but it has taken long to complete construction. Schools, medical care and roads, the devolution might bring these to our region. But I don't think it will make a difference for people like me."

"People like me" may signify "an elderly, impoverished woman like me." In my interpretation, it connotates also another 'we', that is her self-identification as an elderly, impoverished Kikuyu woman, amidst an overwhelming rural majority of Kalenjin. Esther thereby grounds her understanding of the devolution process within a common notion encountered on the occasion of this and other fieldwork in Kenya, namely that a county's dominant tribe will profit disproportionally from the de-centralisation of budget allocations that comes with devolution. What matters to me is not how valid Esther's assessment de facto is. What matters is the sentiment of discrimination that Esther verbalizes in conversation with us, as it seems to correspond with anxieties and concerns that are only addressed when she feels safe to speak her mind.

Arguably, the expressed negative sentiment on the devolution process resonates well with her active choice of mediated news sources, Kikuyu vernacular FM and the Swahili programming on Q and Citizen FM. Though she understands the local dialect, vernacular Kalenjin stations are not part of her media repertoire. Thus, Esther restricts her potential news consumption, in accordance with her ethnic identification and adherence to an interpretative community. Yet this positioning as consumer of media/digital news content is not solidified, but delineated with variation depending on the specific nature of news and political topics. The cross-media enlargement of her news repertoire is in consequence not a desirable achievement in itself, her lack of motivation to be digitally included an act of selective consumption.

Like Esther, 24-year old Kibe considers his economic situation as tight. Recently married and the father of an infant child, "manual jobs, little errands here and there" are the main source of income for this young man from Ziwa. His wife's modest earnings at a local restaurant keep the family afloat. Kibe grew up in a farming family and has not completed primary education. A web-enabled, basic feature phone is his only media and communication device. This puts him in the broad (87%) group of phone owners in Ziwa. The FM radio on his mobile phone is the affordance that he values most. By it he listens to vernacular (Kalenjin) stations, the state broadcaster KBC and national, Swahili stations.

He does not own a television (like 56% of Ziwa households). As Gustafsson points out: "While radio is affordable for most people, television is a luxury that many 'low income' families cannot afford especially in rural areas where lack of electricity might be an equally important issue" (2015, p. 28). However, like many others, Kibe sometimes goes "to a bar at the centre … to watch news or football". He only reads a newspaper if handed down to him "for free, at the centre". Therewith he is part of 43% of Ziwa men, who read a newspaper less than once in a month.

In terms of usage and appropriation of networked communication media, Kibe ranks low, compared to his Kenyan peers. However, he claims to have accessed the Internet daily to consume news and music, before he got married:

"I was not in social media, Facebook or WhatsApp, but I love music. I still have some music that I have downloaded earlier, in my phone. Nowadays I go to watch videos at the centre. I go to a video-place in the morning, since they put free videos, before the show starts."

To cut down on expenses, he stopped buying data bundles and visiting cybercafés, after becoming a husband-father. This self-imposed restriction takes him off the grid, as there is no access to the Internet via open Wi-Fi in Ziwa. He explains:

"I don't go to internet. My phone has internet but I don't use it … Initially I used my phone in browsing, but when I got a family, I found that it is quite expensive to put airtime in my phone."

Admittedly, the price of mobile data connectivity has decreased dramatically in Kenya, over the last decade. Affordability barriers to the use of mobile-enabled Internet are nowadays less pronounced. Under the given situation, the luxury of browsing is nonetheless prohibitive for Kibe. His *setback* should caution us to naively imagine processes of digital/media inclusion as paths of linear and unidirectional progression.

We can blame Kibe's restricted media repertoire on systemic-structural barriers of access, ownership, affordability, rural location etc. We can stress his low socio-economic position, lack of digital/media skills and education in general. We can argue that a lack of relevant content is key to understand Kibe's *reluctance* to make the most of the communicative opportunities afforded to him. Finally, we may state that motivational barriers – as reflected in negative attitudes toward technologies and the Internet (Reisdorf & Groselj, 2017) – are at the heart of Kibe's persistent *failure* to join the growing community of polymedia users in Kenya. However, to blame the absence of evolved media practices and uses on pessimistic socio-psychological dispositions above all, is an undue reductionist and simplistic conceptualisation of motivational barriers.

Kibe's situated efforts and decisions to address the concerns and challenges of his life, deserve recognition, not condemnation for the agency that they involve. The de-appropriation and rejection of (new) media is neither per se and under all circumstances the outcome of a motivational deficit, nor of negative consequences for the individual and

society. An individual's sustained toils to monitor and understand his/her lifeworld, with the aim to accomplish the dreams, desires and ambitions that are at the heart of every human agency, may very well encompass an intentional limitation and (temporary) decrease of media consumption. States of individual digital/media exclusion are thus not unequivocally of an 'imposed' nature. In the words of Storm-Mathisen the social significance of media "must be approached as open, contested and often chaotic processes in which the degree and form of order and stability must be investigated empirically, not taken as an analytical premise" (2019, p. 165). In sum, we can understand Kibe's self-imposed state of digital exclusion as rational and his temporary 'inertia' at the bottom of the digital/media pyramid as a necessary sacrifice in the interest of his family, rather than the outcome of ignorance and a lack of motivation.

Asked about his plans for the future, Kibe affirmed how low he ranks an expansion and diversification of his digital/media repertoire, for the time being. We asked, how he would spend additional KES 5.000 (USD 50) monthly. The question was 'pishing' for a disclosure of (digital) media desires. He didn't take the bait:

"In the future, I want to have two children. At the moment I stay with my wife and mother, at a rented place. But there is a piece of family land. I want to go back and build a house. … Right now, I pay rent and spent money. Building a house, will be more economical. It takes an hour by foot to the place. My wife can still come to the centre for work and be back in the evening …. If I get an extra five thousand, I will plough land and open a small business. I will put all the money in the business and if it grows, I put the money back to increase the business."

Half an hour into our interview Kibe declares not to be interested in politics, contradicting thereby a statement made earlier:

"It is a must for me to listen to news. If I fail to listen during the day, I must ensure that I listen to the news in the evening. … I listen to the news on my phone. I follow news about the security."

When asked to address the three developing news events, Kibe who is the child of a Kalenjin father and Luhya mother, avoids to comment on the ICC proceedings. We dare not ask about his own involvement in the PEV. As in the case of Esther, we should be cautious to interpret Kibe's silence as disinterest or ignorance. Access to and consumption of additional cross-media content on the PEV, does not necessarily address the challenges of reconciliation that Kenyans still face seven years after the traumatic events.

In regard to the Al Shabaab threat Kibe is rather brief in describing how he has engaged with respective media coverage, when pointing out the importance of security in political leadership:

"I heard about the Al Shabaab attack through the radio, late in the evening, since I was at

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work during day. I heard in the radio only … I did not vote in 2013, but I will next time. In voting, I will not look at the tribe, but at the persons instead. I will judge if they are good leaders or not, whether they can take care of the citizens. The president has to protect us and give the country security."

Last but not least, Kibe verbalizes his hopes in respect to the devolution process:

"I will be satisfied if we get security, roads and school. … I've forgotten to mention the hospital. We have a hospital here, but every time we go there, we have to buy medicine from outside and come back to be treated."

Like Esther, he expects the state and the polity to act, ideally, as efficient providers of security and public services. Meanwhile, not just the center, but also the devolved county authorities located in Eldoret are conceived as distant and aloof. Their mediated representation makes them known and familiar, but not as approachable as local authorities:

"It is hard to meet with the leaders. The chief is available. If there is a problem, I approach the village elders first and ask for advice or help and if they are unable to solve the problem, they refer us to the chief. Especially when somebody has done me wrong. The chief and village elders are settling disputes only, but persons who can help, in terms of economic development, are people like the governor. But it is hard to meet people like governors."

Summary discussion and conclusion

Methodological and analytical efforts of thick description and deep reading as exemplified by Esther and Kibe, allow for a contextualised understanding of situated media practices and routines. The latter can be labelled as restricted, in comparison to the digital/media repertoires of other Kenyans. Yet, a decade ago their media repertoires would have been deemed normal for a rural citizen. Then a radio or basic mobile phone were still considered more than sufficient.

By now, the number of accessible FM channels in Uasin Gishu has increased to a total of 25 stations transmitting terrestrially from Eldoret.[6] Radio listening is central to media repertoires that lack the innovative, high-choice characteristics of polymedia appropriations and consumption. However, radio has become more diversified in content across accessible stations, than its image suggests. Thus, the degree of choice and diversity of media repertoires depends not necessarily on the use many different media and communication technologies. The assigned normative superiority of polymedia repertoires as found amongst urban elites in Kenya and majorities of the Global North, obscures a recognition of the diverse and pluralistic character of less privileged, media practices such as radio listening.

What has become visible, on the basis of the totality of interviews in my study, is the continued comparative advantage of radio perceived in terms of reliability, portability and audio background to other activities. The integration of FM modules in mobile phones and

growth of vernacular channels, has enabled the particularisation of radio consumption, allowing for media content appropriations that circumvent online-centric trajectories of media consumption which systematically overemphasize the gains of (mobile) data connectivity and understate inclusive forms of communicative agency that radio and other legacy media still afford vast sections of (Kenyan) society with. Communicative inclusion equals not necessarily digital inclusion.

Television usage has been hampered by affordability (Gustafsson, 2019; Gustafsson & Nielsen, 2017a). The uncompleted electrification of Kenya and frequent power cuts affect appropriation. Operating television sets by electricity obtained from car batteries and power generators, is laborious and costly. Kenya's switch-over to digital television signals has imposed additional costs. However, efforts to overcome these constraints confirm a strong desire for television ownership amongst those who have not set at home. In the hierarchy of media-inclusive strategies, pursued by households at the excluded end of the spectrum, television takes the lead.

The financial entry barriers to Internet usage were low for those who already own a web-enabled smart or feature phone, but relatively high for the 40 plus % Kenyans who had but a basic phone in 2015.[7] Terrestrially distributed television channels come for free. Mobile data uses inflict recurring costs, unless the Internet can be accessed by means of free public data connections. Strategies of data-economization based on a 'metered mindset' (Donner, 2015) are the consequence.

De-facto media repertoires are dependent on affordability and skills but are also the outcome of practical considerations. Individuals assess the benefits and costs of greater media inclusion. The logic of 'expansive realisation' (Miller & Slater, 2000) makes the reluctance to acquire and use new digital media a pragmatic one. Judged against the particular lifeworld situations of many Kenyans and in the light of their basic needs and concerns, their existing media practices can be understood to address and exhaust the majority of their communicative needs. New needs and desires, not just for news and information, but in the field of entertainment, might be relinquished or pursed, dependent on changes in the communicative ecologies of Kenya and resulting media opportunity structures.

To expect a majority of Kenyans to enlarge their media repertoires continuously, to live up to appeals of democratic empowerment and political deliberation made by overtly optimistic accounts of the impact of all-encompassing processes of digitalisation and digital inclusion, is naïve. Desires to participate digitally in practices of mediated consumption and political communication were articulated by some of my thirty respondents, but deemed irrelevant or too abstract an ambition by the majority.

Mobile phones are valued to enable voice calls, texting and radio listening, besides allowing money transfer and other financial services. The maintenance of social contacts and social networking are key to their overwhelming popularity. The transfer of image, music and other media files and social media uses are not as commonly perceived a need or desire. Voice calls and texting are still the preferred mode of interpersonal communication for many, though the use of WhatsApp and Facebook is gaining fast ground.

Over-the-top media and communication services are about to change the equation of cost-benefit assessments (Stork, Esselaar, Chair & Kahn, 2017). Voice over IP calls and online chat can save the user money, spent on regular calls and texting. However, these applications depend on a higher level of digital skills and demand initial investments on hardware and data access. More important, data connectivity is less stable and reliable in vast parts of Kenya than ordinary mobile signals. This has limited the promise of zero-rating strategies that seek to target the digitally connected (burdened by the cost of data bundles) with non-data-consuming versions of social media access (Galpaya, 2017; Wildermuth, 2018).

As commonly argued, media are the main, often the only, source from which citizens learn about politics. In this way, the media are ascribed "a decisive importance in the process because citizens' experience with politics is to a large extent a mediated experience" (Salgado, 2012, p. 1374). By extension, democratisation, deliberation and citizen engagement have been declared the expected outcomes of potentially enlarged and high-choice, digital media repertoires (Gumede, 2018). However, "to state that new media will tend to empower people within the political field is a contention about an explanans (introduction of new media) and an explanandum (empowerment), where the causal elements that together might explain the link are unaccounted for" (Helle-Valle, 2019, p. 149).

As Salgado has it "African countries present important singularities and caution should be exercised when applying Western concepts to the study of political and social dynamics in these countries. … the cultural ethos, which is mainly oral and, in some cases, bears tribal influences, differs, and can shape how people perceive politics and how they understand the basic features of democracy" (Salgado, 2012, p. 1375).

Esther's and Kibe's reported style of interaction with local authorities points in direction of a continued, strong clientelism shaping perceptions of the political in rural Kenya. Corresponding expectations have also been voiced by other respondents located at the lower end of the socio-economic spectrum and digital/media divide. In these accounts a personal contact with the chief or other officials is described as all-decisive. Dis-empowerment is phrased in terms of not knowing the right people and not being able to meet them in person. This is a reasonable, pragmatic perception and understanding of Kenya's political culture and governmentality, yet radically different from the normative models of an ideal democracy that inform overtly optimistic perspectives on the supposed democratic transition facilitated by the extensive roll-out and inclusive appropriation of digital media technologies.

Having a mediated voice or being able to receive and find additional news and information on political and social issues that are thematically addressed by a relative pluralistic and independent broadcasting media in Kenya, should not be expected to drive the digitalisation of media repertoires at the excluded end. Online delivered news and information are potentially valued as first breakers of events. Mobile Internet access holds a promise to address security concerns and to monitor the immediate environment in case of threats. To expect digital media to solve the very real power asymmetries and hierarchies that exclude a majority of Kenyan citizens from participation in political debate and decision

making, is to overstate their communicative potential. Media uses are "filtered through the structures and processes of society" (Curran 2016, p. 33), digital media are no exception.

Millions of Kenyans are categorised as digitally excluded and/or not sufficiently included. As 'adequate digital inclusion' is a moving target, this perception might be sustained, disregarding the scope of evolving media practices that they appropriate over time. The overlapping, but not fully identical aggregations of socially, economically and politically excluded Kenyans, play an important role in the success or failure of Kenya's transition into a more equal and democratic society. With half the population being under the age of 20 years and mobile Internet penetration sharply on the rise, also in rural areas, scores of young adults communicate online and consume digital media content, albeit their digital/media practices are for the most constrained and restricted in scope. It is up to them to determine the extent that the digital is to play in the communicative agency that this transition of society demands of them. It is up to us, media and communication researchers to investigate and respect the situated meanings and decisions that they bring to the realisation and maintenance of their digital/media repertoires and to conceive their informed choices unprejudiced.

Endnotes:

[1] Mobile internet/broadband connections stood at 26.8/10.8 million in 2016 (Wildermuth, 2018)

[2] "Intersected" signifying here that these changes go hand in hand with broader transitions of social, cultural, political and economic character.

[3] The remaining 28 informants, aged between 20 and 51 years, were from Uasin Gishu (13) and Nairobi (15). While most respondents from Eldoret and Nairobi were in the process or had completed a higher education, the majority of informants from semi-urban Langas, rural Ziwa and Burnt Forest had mainly primary and/or vocational levels of education. Five of the interviews were conducted with media professionals at Nairobi-based vernacular radio stations of great popularity in Uasin Gishu, respectively with prominent bloggers and chat forum moderators who focus thematically on the county. The gender ratio amongst all informants was 16 males to 13 females. More than half the number of informants in Uasin Gishu were selected not to belong to the dominant Kalenjin tribe. In the ethnically more heterogenous Nairobi, this 'balance' was likewise accomplished, in order to explore how cross-media interaction with local and national news is embedded in the construction and performance of multiple collective identities. In terms of digital literacy and digital skills, the informants covered the whole spectrum, though with an overweight of respondents positioned in direction of the included end of the continuum, especially amongst the urban, higher educated and younger. That is, a substantial number of respondents, male and female, have demonstrated both the economic means, the motivation and skill to develop a complex and extended digital and cross-media news repertoires.

A qualitative analysis of six informants from Uasin Gishu at the highly included and skilled end of the digital repertoire spectrum was presented as conference paper titled "Reflections on an Emerging Space of Online Deliberation in Kenya" at the IAMCR pre-

conference "Era or Error of Transformation" in July 2019, other parts of my empirical data as paper on occasion of a Critical Perspectives workshop at Upsala University in December 2016.

[4] Findings and methodological considerations of this survey have been published by Gustafsson & Nielsen (2017a; 2017b).

[5] The amount of coverage of all three topics across new and legacy media, accessible in Kenya, could have been a valid indicator. An audience survey on their perceived relevance, another. However, this kind of specific user data has not been available.

[6] See https://radio-africa.org/fm/fm.php?itu=Kenya&region=rif

[7] This number has decreased in recent years, with 57% of all adults owning a smart or feature phone in late 2018 (https://www.pewresearch.org/internet/2019/03/07/use-of-smartphones-and-social-media-is-common-across-most-emerging-economies/)

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