**It’s not enough to tell stories | Media, youth and the potential for accelerated change in Africa, and across the world**

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Social change in Africa has been influenced by youth-triggered popular mobilisations, leveraging the power of media – especially new / social media. From the #OccupyNaija protests in Nigeria in January 2012, #BringBackOurGirls processions to call for actions to get the kidnapped girls from Chibok, to the recent #BringBacktheInternet campaign to get internet back after government suspension of internet services in Cameroon, citizens in Africa have harnessed the media to call attention to undue policies and request accountability from elected public office holders.

Africa is not alone; the societies in the Middle East, Southern Europe, Western Asia and the United States of America provide an especially compelling vantage point to understand the influence of growing up in the digital age and finding the resolve to take actions in virtual spaces. From Iran's Green Movement - which erupted in 2009 due to a disputed presidential election, to the Arab uprisings, followed by the anti-austerity demonstrations around southern Europe in 2012, and in the year the Taksim square protests in Turkey, young citizens have been challenging the state and the status quo on the streets and in virtual spaces (Herrera & Sakr, 2014).

The DNA of protests, social movements, and grassroots mobilization are affected by and rooted in the social, political, and historical conditions within a country. These new protest movements are also influenced by the youth bulge: a demographic shift across Africa (among other countries of the global South), which has resulted in an increased youth population (Yarwood, 2016).

**Shifts in ‘power grip’**

One of the common themes in social change sweeping Africa and the rest of the world is the credence it gives to the thought of ordinary citizens occupying the highest office in any nation to galvanise efforts of others and inspire change. To avoid self-reference, one instance is the Y’en a Marre (YEM) protest movement in Senegal, which took place from early 2011 through early 2012. The founders of the movement were youth activists led by a collective of some of the country’s most-famous rappers and journalists who organised and led protests to denounce injustice and inequality in the country.

The movement gained mass popularity after then-President Wade attempted a power grab by changing the constitution and running for a third term in office (Nossiter, 2011).  What happened afterwards is history; the population responded with protests led by Y’en a Marre among other citizens and civil society groups. Wade responded to the protests by withdrawing the proposed changes, yet he moved forward with his controversial bid for a third term. YEM and other citizen coalitions then turned their energy toward defeating Wade at the ballot box (Yarwood, 2016).

**Change, not Enough?**

Civic actions led by young people have resulted in wondrous changes in several African countries. From driving dictators and poor performers out of power, reversing unpopular decisions by government to reawakening other citizens to take action against the status quo and demand better governance. This trend has been witnessed in Nigeria, Tunisia, Senegal, Congo-Brazzaville, Burkina Faso and Cameroon among others. Africans and the rest of the world are also watching the recent development in Zimbabwe.

Researcher and international development expert, Alcinda Howana has attributed these achievements by youth movements to three main factors: “First, young people present a very simple and clear analysis of the situation, one that any young citizen can understand and relate to.” The choice of the name “Enough!” – as adopted by several groups including one that I co-founded and led in 2010 using social media as the primary tool of organisation – embodies the simplicity and accessibility of the message and crystallises a common sentiment.

“Second, the youth movements ably use new technologies of information and communication to their advantage. Facebook, YouTube, Instagram, blogs and text messages have been instrumental to publicise events, communicate, mobilise, energise the masses as well as expose the abuses of the regime. With the Internet, these protest movements are propagated across borders in very high speed facilitating exchanges in real time. Internet’s social networks also facilitate horizontal communications and obviate the need for centralised organizations with strong hierarchical structures. And third, the structures and modes of organisation of these youth movements reflect a generation’s deep disaffection with the political system. They strive to create new forms of political engagement, based on broad, decentralised, horizontal and consensus-based associations, imbued with strong anti-hierarchical and anti-authoritarian principles” (Honwana, 2015).

**Rise of Citizen Media**

Of course, concerns have, throughout recent history, been raised about the centralisation of political, civic and symbolic power inherent in the political economy of media industries (Hackett & Carroll, 2006). Media owners have a lopsided influence over what political issues enter into public arena, how they are framed to create an unfair advantage for their political causes and interests.

This is not a debate I find myself attracted to, more than a more useful exercise is accepting this reality and channelling it. Over the years, several movements engaging the media have learnt to use the media for various purposes. Using the words of American Sociologist Harvey Molotch, movements use 'an establishment institution to fulfil non-establishment goals: communicating with movement followers, reaching out to potential recruits, neutralizing would-be opponents, and confusing or otherwise immobilizing committed opponents' (Molotch , 1979).

This, to some extent, changed with the advent of citizen journalism. Citizen journalism, defined broadly as the practice of an ordinary, unpaid, non-professional and unpaid person voluntarily gathering and sharing news, overlaps conceptually with the concept of participatory journalism. (Bosch, 2016). With the growing youth population across Africa, active citizen participation has been fuelled by digital citizens creating alternative news sources and then networks, off and on line, driven by media support or with media at the center that inspire deliberative democracy that lead to social, economic and democratic change.

This realisation should inspire media units and firms across Africa to reflect on the values and dimensions that may shape their involvement in democratic activism. For instance, the authors of *Remaking Media: The Struggle to Democratize Public Communication*, Robert Hackett and William Carroll preferred to make that choice based on the following questions. ‘Is it primarily oriented towards changing the system, or the 'lifeworld' of civil society?, as distinct from its target for change, does it emerge primarily from within the system, or from the lifeworld?’ (Hackett & Carroll, 2006).

At RED, we anchor our decision to get involved based on the growing youth bulge in Africa – a ‘phenomenon’ we were ignorant about when we started – and our commitment to inspiring millions of young people in Africa to take action.

**Sustaining the intersection**

Revolutions happen at the intersection of youth, media and a clamour for social change. One of the primary resources for revolution in Africa is citizen’s anger caused by disenchantment with the status quo. As my cofounder Adebola Williams noted at the Obama Foundation Summit two weeks ago, without angry citizens, nothing much can be done (Williams, 2017).  My new book, *How to Win Elections in Africa* notes this in the chapter ‘Anger matters’ from Nigeria, Ghana and Gambia in Africa, and a cluster of thinkers and story tellers have noted the same in the United States, France, Germany and the United Kingdom. (voxEurope, 2016).

This is, as Indian essayist, Panjak Mishra notes as the title of his new book, The Age of Anger. However, as Williams said, the trigger may be Anger, but the remedy is action. Sustaining that intersection of anger, action and change involves creating incentives for young people to continue doing great work that fuels social change. That catalyst as we have seen in Africa has been the media.

For over a decade, we have shown Young Africans the 209 winners and 1291 nominees of The Future Awards Africa, deploying the media as effective tool to inspire young people to take action. The winners from that award, who have in turn become media influencers, have remarkably been the drivers of several of the popular movements mentioned above, in Nigeria, and to some extent in Ghana, validating the thesis of the media’s limitless possibility.

It is not enough to tell stories. Stories must lead to action. Stories must drive people to take responsibility. The influx of connected digital communities and more active citizens will result in more demonstration of social change initiatives in the continent. This will be a redefinition of youth power.

We can accelerate this trend, if those of us who have the capacity and platform to tell stories take advantage of the opportunity, the duty and the urgency of the responsibility we hold.

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