CRYPTOPOLITICS: Exposure, concealment and digital media

Victoria Bernal, Katrien Pype, and Daivi Rodima-Taylor (editors)

Introduction: Cryptopolitics and Digital Media in Africa.
Victoria Bernal, Katrien Pype, and Daivi Rodima-Taylor

Chapter 1.
Four Ways of Not Saying Something in Digital Kinshasa
Or, On the Substance of Shadow Conversations
Katrien Pype

Given that online communication is very much embedded in a pragmatics of everyday life, especially the management of social relationships, and that encoding and decoding are familiar practices to many, the main argument of this chapter then is that, if we want to grasp the social bearings of online communication such as Whatsapp status updates, Facebook Stories, and Instagram publications, we need to acknowledge and analyse the online exegesis and hermeneutics along local communicative practices. We need to combine online ànd offline research. Only then can we fully grasp that cryptic digital communication is purposive, embedded in relationships, and speaks to self and other, and more importantly, to personal futures. I propose the method of "reconstructing shadow conversations", in line with Irvine's elaboration of "shadow conversations" in (Senegalese) Xarxar insult poetry (1996). It is based on observations that social media usage in Kinshasa (DR Congo) is very much embedded in the negotiations and calibrations of hiding information, playing with double meanings, and double-crossing. Digital Kinois (inhabitants of Kinshasa) purposely manipulate the distinction between the surface (the screen, what is said and shown online) and the underneath (the offline, what is meant with the said). Silencing the names of the intended receivers of public digital publications, for example, is a strategy of protection, and fully embedded within infopolitics (Bernal 2014) of Kinois sociality. The method of "reconstructing shadow conversations" bears relevance beyond Kinshasa's ethnography, and can inspire a new way of studying digital culture.

Chapter 2.
The Power to Conceal in an Age of Social Media
Simon Turner

Having the power of the 'parole', and controlling and withholding information have always been important aspects of political power in Burundi. Members of the royal court were trained in the art of concealing emotions and information, and it is still associated with class status and ethnicity. The focus on controlling information has fostered its opposite: namely rumours

and conspiracy theories that seek to uncover 'secrets and lies' and search for hidden truths and deeper meanings. Whether they exist or not, there is a strong sense in Burundi of an omnipresent cryptopolitics, playing a central role behind the scenes. In this paper, I explore how the politics of concealing and revealing information plays out in situations of crisis and displacement, and how it is mediated through social media such as Twitter and Whatsapp. The present political crisis in Burundi has been intricately linked with struggles over information. The media in Burundi were vocal in criticising the President's bid for a third term and journalists were among those most systematically persecuted by the regime in its clamp down on the demonstrations. Since then, the debates have moved to twitter, Facebook and Whatsapp. I explore how the political field has shifted to these arenas and how the concept of concealment has changed due to the conflict and the shift to social media.

Chapter 3.
KOT, Digital Practices and the Performance of Politics in Kenya
George Ogola

The relative ubiquity and use of digital media in some parts of Africa such as Kenya have given it significant political, social and cultural agency. In a country where the production and circulation of information has traditionally been attended by various economies of control, digital media and particularly platform media have been markedly disruptive. This disruption manifests in various ways, not least in their incubation of new expressive digital cultures as novel information regimes of(dis)order, from the margins and the centre clash in the reconfiguration of both collective and individual subjectivities and in the (re)making of social, cultural and political aesthetics and practices. This chapter focuses attention on some of these emerging cultures through a discussion of Kenya's online Twitter publics. These publics generally congregate under the metadata tag 'Kenyans on Twitter', popularly referred to as #KOT. This is arguably one of Africa's most active groups on Twitter. Of particular interest is KOT's political instrumentalization of Twitter through discursive ambiguity and other such narrative practices. But we look at the political not in its narrow institutional form. Instead we approach it as dispersed, infra-institutional and residing in the everyday, and in everyday practices. Conceptually, we re-invest agency in the realm of the popular and the informal, sites which fundamentally make possible 'cryptopolitics'. The chapter explores how through such practices, KOT assembles important pockets of indiscipline, which at once disrupts information 'orders', at another, potentially provides new opportunities for the creation of a new repressive information regime of order by the state.

Chapter 4.
The "Muslim Mali" Game
Revisiting the religious-security-post-colonial nexus in Malian popular culture
Marie Deridder & Olivier Servais

In 2013, a game titled "Muslim Mali" was upload and allowed gamers to pilot a plane to shoot down French aircraft. Game-over pop-up text praised the dead player as a martyr to jihad. Mocked by some Western media, this game also ambivalently reveals the tensions and emotions embedded in Malian popular culture about the former French colonizer, the West and ruling elites associated to the West.

The public statements western media have made about that game and its controversies highlight the reproduction of the old and unsettled story of African Otherness, replaying the guiding trope of 'us' versus 'them', while the 'African them' is glossed as inferior. Therefore, this paper considers how some western media engagement surrounding the "Muslim Mali" game has led to the production and reproduction of a particular imagery of 'Malians', 'Mali', and 'Africa' in general, including the idea that "Africa and Africans can be meaningfully discussed in the singular" by western media, reducing diversity and plurality on the continent (Sanders 2003: 53). The media controversies reveal the "coloniality of power" (Quijano 2000) encrypted in the way western media have engaged with this game in the digital sphere. However, this war through digital media has concrete consequences on the field for Malian population experiencing the occupation of the three-quarters of the country by irredentist armed groups, as well as international military forces. Compared to official narratives, this game blurs the line between the good versus the bad and connects with local claims of insurrection spread at micro-level in Mali, localizing and challenging the idiosyncratic transnational trajectories (West & Sanders 2003: 10) of the global terrorism ideoscape (Appadurai 1996).

In conclusion, the fact that some western media reporting on the "Muslim Mali" game underscored some images of African Otherness has serious implications for how western media communicate information and feed social imagination. That reveals the 'infopolitics' (Bernal 2014) of asymmetric power relations concealed behind technologies, discourses and debates between the former metropolis and its former colony. The way some western media have engaged decrypting "Muslim Mali" Game resonate strongly with historical patterns of colonial rule, whereby humanitarian and developmental terminology played a key ideological role in justifying paternalistic protection through a monopoly of violence and a permanent breach of local sovereignties (Deridder, Pelckmans, Ward 2020). These practices thus exhibit remarkable continuities indicating colonial matrices of power (Lemberg-Pedersen 2019) that are ambivalently encrypted in the 'Muslim Mali' online game and its media controversies.

Chapter 5.
Algorithmic Power in a Contested Digital Public: Crypto-politics and Identity in the Somali Conflict
Peter Chonka

This article outlines multiple conspiracy theories that surround Al Shabaab's ongoing insurgency across a fragmented Somalia, and considers how structural and algorithmic characteristics of the Somali-language digital public allow for their emergence, circulation and deployment by political actors. Al Shabaab's extensive clandestine networks across and beyond a divided Somalia lend themselves to local crypto-political interpretations of their

alleged utility for a variety of different political actors. Various commentators and authorities have accused each other of secretly supporting Al Shabaab's militancy for different territorial or 'clan'-based agendas. This occurs within the context of wider contestation over the ongoing reconfiguration of the Somali state. These conspiracy theories circulate across a digital public characterised by an equally high level of fragmentation, intense social media contestation between supporters of different political projects, and the production of various types of 'fake news'. These claims are also periodically appropriated by elite political actors. Given the number of competing administrations - as well as local and foreign military actors with 'boots on the ground in Somalia' - it is unsurprising that the crypto-politics of the Al Shabaab war has become a significant feature of local debates that increasingly occur in digital spaces. This article draws on the author's research on these narratives, focusing on Somali-language texts circulating through various interconnected media networks. This is supplemented with analysis of particular effects of algorithms in Somali-language digital platforms: for instance, search engine auto-completion suggestions/predictions that foreground particular (and controversial) Somali-language keywords, such as that of actors' 'clan' identity. The article argues that such algorithmic phenomena need to be scrutinised and accounted for in relation to online (mis)information sharing in digitally-connected conflict settings, and factored into analyses of identity formation and enactment in contexts of contentious politics.

Chapter 6.
The Cryptopolitics of Digital Mutuality in Africa
Daivi Rodima-Taylor

This chapter explores the cryptopolitics of informal savings groups and contribution networks in Africa as mediated through encrypted digital messaging platforms. Such platforms have rapidly become widespread in the global South. In Africa, they are central in mobilizing online savings groups as well as used for fundraising for a variety of causes, both public and private. Based on cases from South Africa and Kenya, my chapter argues that the emerging crypto-publics are constituted through multiple materialities and communicative forms, including the offline spaces of self-help groups with their social and historical embeddedness, and new digital platforms with BigTech connectivities. Mediated by encrypted messaging apps, the poor and marginal exercise their agency through self-help groups and networks, carving out new public spaces. While building on vernacular organizational templates and facilitating alternatives to more formalized versions of financial inclusion, such initiatives may also create exploitative invisibilities and foster data capture, scams and 'Ponzi schemes.' The chapter argues that such spaces always involve important and interconnected offline and online, and material and human modalities. It offers new perspectives to the formation of the digital public sphere in Africa through attention to cryptopolitics, and advances new approaches for analyzing it. When discussing the potential of encrypted chat apps to enable new types of collectivities built on peer solidarity, the paper draw parallels with other types of crypto-publics that emerge with cryptographic technologies and currencies.

Chapter 7.
Crazy, Stupid, Lying, Traitors: Eritrean Politics, Expression, and Repression Online
Victoria Bernal

This essay explores the dynamics of expression online in the context of Eritrea's fraught politics. I consider the public sphere established on a website as constantly open to collapse and subversion, and thus requiring on-going negotiation among participants. The analysis draws on a close reading of a set of online exchanges in response to a narrative posted on a leading Eritrean news and discussion website. The operation of an open public sphere online is especially significant for Eritreans since there is no right to freedom of expression and no independent media inside the country. Yet how can trust be established in the ambiguous online space when the overall context of Eritrean politics is one of suspicion, self-censorship, and duplicitousness? In heated exchanges online, people's identities as Eritreans and their loyalties are questioned in spectacular attempts to silence, intimidate, and exclude certain people or ideas. What I also uncover are the strategies used by some posters and the moderator to assert the value of civil discourse and to keep the public forum open and inclusive. The analysis reflects on questions of political repression and the limits of internet freedom.

Chapter 8.
Digital Security in an African "Sanctuary City"
Lisa Poggiali

Nairobi, Kenya has a thriving informal economy, a diversity of languages and cultures, good access to information and communications technologies, and a relative absence of violence, making it one of Africa's "sanctuary cities" for those fleeing civil war, armed insurgency and persecution in the nearby Great Lakes and Horn of Africa. At the same time, since the Kenyan army invaded Somalia in 2011, Nairobi has also become a hotbed of al-Shabaab activity, as the Somali offshoot of al-Qaeda has launched dozens of reprisal attacks. In response, and with U.S. and U.K financial backing, the Kenyan state has begun to prioritize "security" – particularly digital methods of surveillance and regulation – as a means to thwart terrorist activity. This paper, based on six months of mixed methods research in Nairobi, examines how digital governance has transformed refugee issues in Nairobi by attempting to make refugee identities legible to security systems. Conversely, it explores how refugees are using digital tools – particularly the social media and communications platform WhatsApp – to redirect the state's gaze, and sometimes evade it altogether. I show how refugees' skillful use of digital tools enhances their own security, which has become increasingly compromised over the past few years, while arguably undermining the security of the Kenyan state.