The limits of publicity: Facebook and transformations of a public

realm in Mombasa, Kenya

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Over the past decade, Kenyan citizens have actively engaged in public communication through digital media. With the growth of digital communication, questions arise about its effect on the nature and political significance of public discussion. Does the political contribution of public discussion shift if it takes place on a virtual site or in a face-to-face gathering? Looking in the context of Mombasa, Kenya, this paper provides a unique perspective about how and why there is cause for concern about the political implications of Facebook-mediated discussion. It interrogates the extent to which Facebook provides for discussion that is capable of reshaping shared imaginaries among Kenyans. To do this, I first outline the specific form that publicity takes on Facebook, taking into account both its openness and limitations. Second, I analyse what this has meant for the reconfiguration of shared political imaginaries. Drawing on the case of the public Facebook group, Mombasa Youth Senate, I argue that the conditions of Facebook create an open space that provides a great deal of flexibility in how people can appear and be recognised. However, this open and flexible experience frustrates the emergence of new and shared ideas of difference and belonging. Facebook's underlying structures combined with user experiences are reinforcing rather than reconfiguring established ideas of citizen-state relations.

Keywords: citizen participation, publics, public sphere, social media, Facebook, Mombasa, Kenya

Introduction

On 29 September 2014, a young man in Mombasa posted the following statement within the public Facebook group, 'Mombasa Youth Senate':

To all members of this group,we appreciate your contributions in this forum.

Nobody should take anything personal coz [because] the issues debated here are

purely for the benefit of the good people of msa [Mombasa] county n [and] kenya

at large.

Those charged with the responsibility in public offices should give out information

willingly without being coerced to do so.

Thank you,yes you reading this, for being part of this noble idea.

GOD BLESS KENYA

GOD BLESS MOMBASA

GOD BLESS MSA YOUTH SENATE GOD BLESS US ALL

Have a great day[1]

This statement reflects a rise in active debate about politics on the social

networking site, Facebook, in Kenya in the 2010s. It was directly preceded by a lively

discussion about a report published in one of Kenya's main national newspapers about

county government spending. Discussion of the report in this group took place over four

days and 76 comments, in which participants debated budget allocation processes,

government effectiveness, and the appropriate protocol for the Facebook conversation.

Even a member of Mombasa's County Assembly contributed content. Facebook

discussions like this, in public forums and about local politics, have become

commonplace in Kenya, drawing on the diverse forms of expression possible. This

conversation was text-based, but more recently 'discussions' also involve sharing and

responding to photos, videos, memes and articles.

Debates over citizen-state relations, loosely defined, on Facebook are framed by

a longer-standing struggle to create space for opposition voices and citizen participation

in Kenya, from the push for multiparty politics in the 1990s and debates preceding a

new constitution in 2010. These debates have been contested through diverse channels, including protest movements, political satire, print broadsheets and radio broadcasts.[2] A steady increase in access to and use of digital communication media[3] has brought new media for past forms of expression, for example, the creation of a televised and online political satire show, *The XYZ Show*, as well as new forums, like Facebook and WhatsApp groups.

Mobile phones and the internet appear to profoundly affect who can produce public information, and whose voices might be heard in debates over citizen-state relations. In Mombasa, there were few active public Facebook groups about local politics prior to the 2013 General Elections, the year afterwards seeing a growth in their number, size and activity.[4] This article interrogates the political significance of changes in the material base of public discussion. Taking a unique view in African Studies of publics and their significance, it empirically examines the nature and possibilities of Facebook-mediated discussion in Mombasa through Hannah Arendt's ideas that the value of publics lies in their potential to re-configure shared imaginaries. This article makes a two-fold argument. It finds the conditions of communication on Facebook illuminate the nature of what it means for a discussion to be a 'public', specifically its underdetermined and fleeting nature. Equally, this article argues the particular way these conditions take shape through Facebook in relation to Mombasa politics has perverse effects on their potential to create new and shared imaginaries amongst citizens. They are generating mistrust and diverting participants' attention away from public appearances to what might be hidden from view.

A limited and contingent view of publics

The study of 'publics' focuses attention on spaces and moments constituted through public talk, taking shape in the act "of being addressed".[5] In the 1990s, the study of publics in African Studies tended to be highly normative, looking for moments of inclusive and equitable 'public talk' as a basis for democratic legitimacy.[6] In recent years, there is evidence of a greater effort to establish empirically-grounded ideas about the nature of publics on the continent.[7] New communication technologies add complexity to the study of publics in Africa. Empirically, the boundaries of publics become increasingly difficult to pinpoint, both spatially as people can engage simultaneously in virtual and physical places, and temporally, as individuals can choose to communicate almost instantaneously or delay.[8] Normatively, when considering their effect on citizen participation, digital media are found to have ambivalent effects: making discursive practices more inclusionary or exclusionary, or augmenting inequalities or providing opportunities for disruptive citizen engagement.[9] Assessing the significance of digitally-mediated 'publics' in relation to forms of rule results in contradictory views about the political affinities of digital media. Some find an affinity between digital media and popular politics.[10] Others identify how new communication technologies are most effectively employed by those in positions of authority.[11]

This article argues for an alternative way of interpreting the significance of digitally-mediated publics, which accepts this ambivalence and identifies value in within these contradictory dynamics. It suggests, in the digital world, there is a case to be made for basing the normative value of publics on something other than a relationship to rule. Drawing from Hannah Arendt, I take the view that limited publics can still have normative significance. Arendt locates the value of publics in their potential to reconfigure shared imaginaries between strangers, irrespective of what new

form these shared imaginaries take. This creative capacity is possible when communication takes place within two conditions: publicity, when it extends to potentially unknown strangers, and plurality, when participants can openly and equally express their distinctness.[12]

Yet, Arendt does not search for these conditions in an ideal form in practice. Rather, she suggests they always materialise in limited forms depending on the media, space and conventions within which people interact.[13] Forms of control are necessary to the act of public discussion, to bring order and stability to communications. Publicity, or 'the quality of being public', takes on distinct forms as people make themselves known to strangers, and as others make sense of what appears. The basis for assessing the value of digitally-mediated publics from this perspective requires first interrogating specific forms of publicity and plurality possible through digital channels, and second, interrogating the potential for new and shared imaginaries to materialise given these particular conditions.

To examine the creative power of publics on Facebook, this article draws on participant observations and interviews conducted in 2013 and 2014 in Mombasa, with further online observations until June 2015. Online observations were recorded and analysed through fieldnotes and PDF screen shots. To avoid using potentially sensitive information without people's knowledge on social media,[14] I observed public groups and pages. Observations of Mombasa Youth Senate's (MYS) public Facebook group began after being invited into the group by the conveners, who were aware of my interest as a researcher. Private communications through SMS and online messaging were treated with the same confidentiality as face-to-face interviews and correspondence, and were only considered for research purposes when the individual involved was aware of my interest as a researcher. Any Facebook user names that were

not already anonymised or tied to public figures have been removed or pseudonyms have been used.

This article now turns to examine the case of the public Facebook group, MYS. It begins by reviewing dominant shared imaginaries as identified in scholarship, which define the terms of political and public debates in Mombasa. From here, attention shifts to MYS. I outline the features that give rise to specific conditions of publicity and plurality, and unpack associated constraints and forms of control. I then consider how these forms of publicity and plurality implicate configuration of shared imaginaries. I conclude by reflecting on the significance for citizen-state relations in Mombasa, as well as further study of digital publics more widely.

Digital media and publics in Mombasa

The identities through which citizen-state relations are debated in Mombasa have sharpened since independence, with political differences becoming constructed according to place of origin, religion and ethnicity. The 2013 elections in Mombasa, the first under the devolved system introduced in the 2010 Kenyan Constitution, drew attention to competing bases of political identity. At first glance, electoral outcomes at the national level and in new county governments suggested the majority of the Mombasa electorate shared partisan allegiances. The Orange Democratic Movement (ODM) won all seats in the County Assembly and Executive, and four out of six posts for Member of Parliaments to the National Assembly. ODM had a general appeal as a party in favour of devolution, led by Raila Odinga.

ODM's electoral success overlies long-standing differences in ideas and experiences of citizen-state relations among residents of Mombasa.[15] Mombasa's population is diverse. A poll by Ipsos Public Affairs in October 2013 found that one-

third of residents identified with ethnic groups originating from outside of the coastal

region. Religiously, Mombasa was 40% Muslims and 60% Christians.[16] The 2013

election campaigns brought renewed contestations over coastal secession, which

constructed divisions along racial and ethnic lines. Debates highlighted some residents'

shared identity as *wapwani* (people of the Coast), and were reminiscent of narratives

from the independence period. The relatively covert organisation known as the

Mombasa Republic Council (MRC) became increasingly active in campaigning for

coastal independence in 2010 and 2011.[17] Individuals and publications advocating for

coastal secession invoked different group identities, for example, sometimes

campaigning for the rights and unity of *wapwani*,[18] and sometimes separating out Arab,

Swahili and Mijikenda peoples.[19]

Religious differences have also sharpened as relevant to citizen-state relations in

recent years. Public narratives depict the national government as premised upon

Christian law and hostile to Muslim populations. National politicians have publicly

professed to be practicing Christians.[20] A shared sense of disadvantage as Muslim has

been heightened amidst the Kenyan government's rhetoric and participation in a global

"war on terrorism".[21] A 2015 report by the Kenya National Commission on Human

Rights (KNCHR) accuses Kenyan security agencies of 25 extrajudicial killings and 81

forced disappearances during counterterrorism operations.[22] This echoes a report

launched in Mombasa in 2014, which relayed stories by members of Kenya's Muslim

community about unlawful killings and enforced disappearances.[23] Legal and

extrajudicial activities in Mombasa have amplified perceived exclusion along both

religious and ethnic lines. Attacks by al-Shabaab within Kenya have provoked religious

conflict, including attacks on churches.[24] Differing ideas of grievance arise: on one side,

instances of terrorism, linked to al-Shabaab, have constructed Christians as victims; on

the other side, victimisation has remained strongly felt amongst Kenya's Muslim communities.

Public discussions articulating political divisions unfold upon a varied and evolving urban communication environment.[25] A port city and transport hub, Mombasa's street networks are organised around a few primary transit ways that link the city to the north and south coasts, and inland to Nairobi. Informal *baraza* materialise as spaces for publicly-minded discussion on street corners and in front of houses. *Baraza* reflect continuities with Swahili social practices during and prior to the British colonial period.[26] More violent forms of expression, including attacks on homes and shops and street-based protests, also take place from time to time, tied to issues such as land rights, coastal distinctiveness and religious difference.[27] Leaflets also circulate in the streets during moments of unrest; for example, threatening settlement communities in the Coast in June 2014 during attacks in Mpeketoni, Lamu County.

Amidst this, as noted at the outset of this article, the use of digital communications in Mombasa has risen, particularly since Kenya's first connection to international undersea fibre optic cables in 2009. Within expanding opportunities for social media access, Mombasa Youth Senate (MYS) was created on Facebook by several young people, all residents of Mombasa, in late January 2014. The Facebook group was accompanied by a Twitter handle, blog and Facebook page. Its Facebook group quickly became the most active for public discussion (see Figure 1). Individuals would share and discuss information about Mombasa politics in the Facebook group throughout the day and into the night. When it was first created in late January 2014, 208 Facebook profiles were subscribed to the group as 'members'. By 31 August 2014, there were 1,762 members, rising to 4,915 by 3 February 2015, approximately one year after its creation.

Accessing and making discussion 'public'

As indicated above, plurality and publicity shift from abstract to concrete forms as people interact in specific contexts and practices. In MYS's Facebook group, publicity began with the separation and individualisation of participants' experiences as they access and experience discussion through individual devices, and personalised interfaces. First Facebook was accessible through a variety of devices. In Mombasa, and Kenya more widely, this has often occurred through data-enabled mobile phones.[28] While internet cafes were still accessible in Mombasa during fieldwork, the administrators of MYS's Facebook group accessed the site through mobile phones. Someone could comment on a post immediately through a device, or wait and contribute later, provided it was not deleted. Their new contribution would return the post to the top of the group's discussion page.

Individualised devices also meant that the format of what was observed could differ in ways that were undetected by other participants. One interviewee showed me Facebook on his basic feature phone – images were not visible and text was in a basic format. He could scroll through 100 comments on a post at a time, but he could not see the total number of comments, and he could not easily search for specific content.[29] MYS's founders had versions of smart phones with greater data capacities and more varied interfaces, for example, they could see and take photos.

From here, the Facebook group was 'public' in that its content was potentially visible to anyone with a Facebook profile. The features of the public group allowed its content to be accessible to users without prior moderation of group administrators, though only group members could post and comment. Current members of MYS could also add users from their Facebook network to MYS without administrators' approval.

Others could request to join pending administrators' approval. With this, membership has grown beyond the acquaintances of the founders.[30]

Further indicating a 'public' scope, participants' presence as observers was not visible to other users. During fieldwork, a Facebook group did not indicate which and how many users had viewed specific content. A user could observe what was shared undetected. Someone's whereabouts might be claimed or approximated on Facebook through its location services but individuals' locations could not be identified by other users in the group.

The condition of publicity on Facebook also had a temporal dimension, tied to users' uncertainty about *when* others participated and how timing affected what each observed. Actions taking place between the original posting and the time of observation affected what was visible. Either the user responsible or the group administrators could permanently delete posts and comments. If a user deactivated their Facebook account, their posts and comments also disappeared, but could reappear if a user re-activated their account. Administrators could block users from the group, preventing the blocked user from viewing or contributing content. Blocked users' comments and posts remained visible, accompanied by a 'greyed out' user name. To illustrate the effect of timing on individuals' experiences, I copied a discussion in MYS about a nominated Senator as viewed on my laptop in February, April and October 2015. Indicated in Figures 2 and 3, comments appeared differently each time it was accessed. Users changed their profile photos and names. Comments disappeared and reappeared. One member's comments were invisible when observed in April, but reappeared in October.

To summarise, publicity emerged through features in MYS that individualised experiences. The reach of discussion on MYS was experienced as public, or inclusive of strangers, because individuals participated through personal devices in their own time.

Anyone within Facebook's networks could be viewing content, but each participant could not know who else was participating, when and what they observed, and how others' observations differed from their own.

Providing for an open and equal exchange

Similar to publicity, the condition of plurality, the open and equal expression of difference, was bound up with Facebook's structures and affordances. Generally, on Facebook, individuals express themselves through user profiles and interactions with other users through various forms of connection, including groups, pages, applications, and other evolving features. In MYS, the user profile and the Facebook group were most directly linked to how individuals appeared in the group's communications. Both contributed to how individuals appeared. For example, posts and comments were accompanied by a profile picture and user name.[31]

Considering the user profile, to quote from boyd and Ellison (2007), "[Facebook] [p]rofiles are unique pages where one can 'type oneself into being'."[32] Participants in MYS would use the Facebook profile to construct images that did not necessarily align with how they appeared elsewhere. Reflecting a wider practice of referring to others by unofficial titles or affiliations,[33] some members of MYS altered and/or obscured given names on Facebook, and claimed titles that they did not formally hold, such as Honourable, *Mheshimiwa* (honourable), Prince, *Mzee* (elder, older person) or Governor. To illustrate, among 1,266 visible[34] members of MYS on 14 August 2014, 4% (N = 53) claimed such a title, and 15% (N = 193) appeared to have explicitly adapted their names. They used descriptors such as Mombasani (of Mombasa) or Swthrt (Sweetheart), and dropped vowels and changed consonants from formal English or

Kiswahili spellings. The presence of altered names and titles with MYS's membership hint at the flexible and diverse appearances possible on Facebook.

Further indicating diversity in individuals' appearances, a profile did not have to align with one person.[35] One person sometimes appeared to have created multiple profiles, and some users within MYS's membership represented organisations or campaigns, such as 'Alac Mombasa'[36] and 'Kecosce Mombasa'.[37] Other profiles were devised to be fully anonymous; a user hid his or her name, gender, physical appearance and place of residence. Further, there were indications of 'fake' profiles in MYS participants' networks, referring to profiles that pretended to be another person, real or fictional. Periodic allegations have been made within MYS that there were invalid profiles claiming to be the Governor of Mombasa.[38]

As individuals interacted within the group, they were presented with additional features that expand how they might express themselves. This included the ability to share photos, videos and memes, link to other websites, groups and users, and make text-based statements. During fieldwork, users posted, tagged and shared photos of themselves in the group. They sometimes included captions that indicated a specific location, event or acquaintances, or link a photo to other user profiles. In some cases, a profile was anonymous, but contributions made to the group discussion indicated a specific individual. A case in point, one active MYS member's profile[39] did not use the given name or title of senator, but posted and responded to others' posts from the perspective of a nominated Senator,[40] Hon. Emma Mbura, including sharing photos of herself. The features of the Facebook user profile and group interface equipped individuals with discretion over how they presented themselves, enabling them to continually re-shape how they appear. Plurality thus materialised in the ease and fluidity with which individuals could present themselves online.

In MYS's Facebook group, conditions of publicity and plurality acquired specific characteristics that were tied to the structures and practices through which discussion takes place. Discussion was public because any Facebook user might be observing content undetected by others, as each participates through individual devices and personalised online interfaces. Discussion allowed for plurality as individuals were visible to others through malleable and fleeting virtual appearances. These specificities raise the question that is the focus for the next section: have these forms of publicity and plurality affected the potential for new and shared imaginaries to take hold across a community of strangers? Or, have they been sufficient for unleashing this creative capacity of publics?

Underlying contingencies on a public and plural discussion

Publicity and plurality have become inseparable from material structures, institutions and actors.[41] Underlying structures and forms of order limit the reach of discussion and how differences can be expressed. MYS's discussion has become contingent upon controls at the group level, and the level of Facebook as a technological and corporate entity. Forms of control at both levels simultaneously enable, restrict and threaten publicity and plurality. Most visible to the participant, the publicity and plurality of MYS has depended on the group administrators. Its features as a 'public group' were the result of choices made by group administrators. It is not necessarily the case that the discussion must, or will, remain accessible to any Facebook user. At any point, group administrators could choose to exercise their control over access and participation, for example, blocking individuals or deleting content. They could also restrict access more permanently, such as introducing requirements for administrator approval to comment, join or view discussion.

MYS's administrators were aware of their control over group access and
content. They periodically made participants aware of this in the group. In one example,
on 20 September 2014, one administrator posted to MYS:

> We have no apology for blocking people who cant meet the quality of agument as
> per the post. i mean those people who shift away from the post and start engaging
> into personal issues. some of them are returning with fake accounts after being
> blocked.[42]

For the duration of fieldwork, group administrators allowed MYS to be
accessible to any Facebook user, and attempted to shape discussion by appealing to
users to exercise self-censorship. To illustrate, one administrator posted on 12
November 2014:

> 1.We want to thank all the new members who joined this forum. 2.we have
> recieved more than 300 requests within a week. 3.we want to urge our members to
> fill free on any issue posted here and debate freely.4. u r allowed to agree or differ
> on any matter bt [but] on a positive point. 5.Dont insult anybody. 6. if u post
> anything with no likes or comment, then dont worry coz [because] the message is
> already passed. 6.[43]

While group administrators did not exercise their control over what was said and
who participated, allowing for unpredictability in both regards, this was not sufficient to
ensure the group retained its particular forms of publicity and plurality. These
conditions also depended on limits tied to Facebook as a technological and corporate
entity.

To begin, participation on Facebook requires access to enabling infrastructure.
This brings implicit forms of exclusion. In Kenya, social media activity has been
growing, but access to internet or data-enabled devices remains limited. In 2012

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Research ICT Africa found that while 74.0% of those aged 15 years and above in Kenya

owned mobile phones, 32.3% owned a mobile phone capable of browsing the internet.

Further, mobile internet was more common than internet access via computers; this

same study found 21.2% used a computer, the majority through an internet café

(68.8%).[44] Beyond this, access to reliable telecommunications networks and electricity

is unequally distributed between homes and neighbourhoods in Mombasa.[45] During

fieldwork, blackouts were sometimes daily, lasting from a few minutes to hours.

During fieldwork, these inequalities were framed by widespread material

insecurity in Mombasa. High levels of unemployment and temporary employment in

Mombasa restrict who might participate on Facebook. In October 2013, the global

market research company, Ipsos Synovate, released a survey of adults aged 18 years and

above in the coastal region of Kenya.[46] They found the majority of respondents were not

in full time employment and there were substantial levels of poverty. Only 18%

indicated they were employed full time in either the public or private sector. Amongst

those employed, 28% in Mombasa earned less than 10,000 Kenyan shillings[47] per

month. Wider material differences affect the ease with which individuals might access

the technical devices and networked services required for Facebook, indicating forms of

exclusion that might limit the reach of publicity.

Facebook also exists as a corporate entity with its logics and interests that

further delineate who might participate and how.[48] Facebook grows as people create

profiles and grow social networks.[49] Its active user base, the time they spend online and

the data that is produced through their engagements has become the basis for revenue

generation.[50] Jodi Dean provides a strong critique of networked communications and its

corporate underpinnings. She argues this turns communication into a commodity,

meaning its primary function is for capitalist production, rather than political or social

ends.[51] Underlying interests and structures impact on who might access and participate

in Facebook-enabled discussions. Napoli and Obar (2014) raise concerns about the

potential for the 'walled garden metaphor' to characterise mobile internet access as

economic accumulation becomes the primary aim. This occurs when users' access is

somehow restricted to proprietary content, for example, through payment regulations or

vertically integrated systems.[52] In Kenya, such constraints were becoming visible in

2014 as Facebook and Airtel Kenya formed a partnership to provide access to specific

internet services and sites through the Facebook platform, internet.org.[53]

 Further, networked and corporate dimensions of Facebook made the public

group vulnerable to sudden closure. Without participants' input, either group

administrators or Facebook could shut down a public group. A limited number of

people had this control, but those who did could exercise it easily and suddenly. This

indicates a precariousness of publics through Facebook, contrasting with physical

infrastructure that wears over time and requires physical displays of force to be

destroyed.

 In looking at the dynamics and structures of public discussions, a complex and

contradictory picture of MYS as public emerges. Networked structures have brought

different forms of control and exclusion. This includes the group administrators who

could, but chose not to, restrict access and content, the technical requirements of

participation, and the underlying imperatives of corporate Facebook that continue to

drive its development. Still, these structures must also be seen to have enabled

participants to experience publicity and plurality. Participants could not be certain about

who is participating, even though the space was exclusionary. Also, there was a range of

options available to them to express themselves, even if these options were shaped by

corporate interests.

Political possibilities of a constrained and contingent 'digital' public

Thus far, I have laid out contradictory conditions that give shape to publicity and

plurality in MYS on Facebook. What has not yet been considered is whether there is an

argument to be made for the normative value of this limited public. Now I turn to

consider existing shared imaginaries in political discourse in Mombasa and the potential

they could be disrupted. As will be the focus for the remainder of this article, even when

releasing publics of normative aims tied to democratic legitimacy or citizen

participation, MYS's Facebook group has fallen short as participants' experiences

frustrate the realisation of new and shared imaginaries.

Importantly, participant's experiences were limited the *novelty* of imaginaries

that take shape. First, participants' attention has been directed to familiar relations,

rather than complete strangers. Facebook has tended to link users along lines of

familiarity and/or similarity; this was evident, for example, in the greater activity and

communication possible among users who were connected as Facebook 'friends'.

Familiarity was also evident in the very founding of MYS as a space for public and

political discussion. The idea for the group developed through face-to-face

conversations between friends. All of this framed a degree of familiarity within the

group. Users sometimes jointly narrated an event on the ground. In August 2014, a few

members discussed their experiences together at international youth day celebrations in

Mombasa in MYS; this discussion unfolded through both photos and text.[54] Users also

copied content from private online messaging services in MYS's public discussion,

further indicating that public engagement was underpinned by more personal

connections.[55]

Second, novelty was constrained by patterns in how participants draw

conclusions about the nature and scope of the group. Group administrators were singled

out among the wider participant base by virtue of their administrative capacities. New

members periodically 'thanked' group administrators for 'adding' them to the group, to

which individual administrators sometimes responded directly.[56] As mentioned above,

administrators also drew attention to their unique ability to block individuals or delete

content.[57] This became a source of contention at times as accusations were made that

administrators restricted contributions on the basis of their partisan leanings; thus

participants imagined the group to be bound by partisan lines. Individuals also became

prominent through their contributions. Two participants were responsible for 16 out of

24 posts that generated 50 comments or more between 30 January and 14 April 2014.

This again gives the impression that the group has convened around a few individuals

and their perspectives.

Further challenges to the scope of new imaginaries appeared through patterns in

how participants have responded to others' contributions. Though who participated was

continually questionable, users hesitated to interpret others in new ways. There was

often a personal and partisan tinge to how participants assessed others' contributions.

This was evident as participants continually voiced suspicions that users were

manipulating their online appearance in order to hide personal or partisan bias.

Suspicions were directed towards the administrators as well as more generally.

Participants raised allegations that politicians indirectly manipulated MYS's discussion,

for example, paying users to make specific comments. In July 2014, a conversation

about two county leaders[58] digressed into allegations about participants' personal

motivations for engaging in the discussion. One was accused of having been paid by a

specific politician to make biased statements. An MYS administrator commented:

"███ is a driver to Mwembe Tayari ward rep" and also, "@█ we understand u

[you] sold ua fb acc [your Facebook account] @1k to a ward rep to insult this pg [page]. u [you] wont make it."[59]

Shared concern about hidden personal and partisan biases was clearly conveyed in a discussion following a post on 1 October 2014, in which one user queried the identity of a Facebook user and MYS participant, asking "who is Mpwani Halisi". Mpwani Halisi was a Facebook user whose name, translated from Kiswahili, meant 'an authentic person from the Coast'. In comments on this post, participants expressed discomfort with claims to anonymity. They asked what perverse or personal interests might compel someone to adopt an anonymous profile. One individual commented, "It seems you have been caught in a snare . Its either one of the two you are coward or you are ashamed of yourself ". A Member of the County Assembly also commented, suggesting anomymity to be a mask through which to criticise politicians: "Am sorry! I dont need any praises! But, sadly u have an agenda to tarnish the image of some leaders! And praise others whom you work for! #truthexposed Aibu wallahi!! [shame from Allah!!]".[60] It was difficult for those who commented to imagine Mpwani Halisi could discuss local politics without being aligned to a certain politician or political party.

Still, while these suspicions constrained how participants might be seen, they did not foreclose the possibility of alternative interpretations. Suspicions remained unsubstantiated. This became clear when one of the group administrators again questioned Mpwani Halisi's identity a few months later, indicating the issue was unresolved.[61] Uncertainty drove MYS participants both to suspect one another of personal bias and prevented them from confirming their suspicions. As a result, multiple imaginings have remained at play. Different ways of interpreting others through the group were apparent even among the MYS group administrators. On Facebook and in

conversation with the author, group administrators shared different lenses through which they interpreted contributions. At times, they were suspicious that partisan and personal biases informed others' contributions. At times, they directed their own contributions to a specific individual, naming a public figure or a personal acquaintance and sometimes linking that user to the contribution so that they would receive an individual alert.[62] They also would imagine the audience as 'senators', addressing their posts and comments to the 'senators' of MYS. In so doing, they separated participants based on the nature of their comments. Finally, administrators' statements indicated and sometimes addressed a more indiscriminate audience.

Finally, though the example of MYS administrators shows there has not be one agreed way of imagining participants and how they relate, the realisation of new and shared imaginaries has not necessarily been forthcoming. Thus far, the questionable scope of the group and identity of participants seems to prevent any sense of *shared* interpretation. The separation of individuals' experiences not only has made suspicions unsubstantiated, but also has made it difficult to imagine, with any degree of certainty, that others might share someone's interpretation. A sense of being part of an identifiable collectivity thus far seems beyond any participant's vantage point.

Conclusion

Scholarship on digitally-mediated publics in Africa has tended to view digital media instrumentally in relation to the effect of publics on forms of rule. Digital media strengthen the influence of those who access and use them effectively: whether as citizens for citizen participation or as governments for surveillance.[63] In contrast, here, communication technologies are not assessed as politically significant to publics based on the nature of rule they enable. This article accepts that publics always have

contradictory relationships with rule in practice, and assesses the political significance of digitally-mediated publics as mechanisms of change in shared imaginaries, rather than the nature of citizen-state relations configured. This approach results in a more critical view of the potential of publics through Facebook. From one perspective, attention to participants' experiences in the Facebook group, MYS, vividly conveys the elusive nature of being 'public': its scope was clearly evasive, and people could express themselves in varied and unpredictable ways. Yet, from another perspective, while clearly revealing these conditions of 'publics', their particularities challenged their ability to reconfigure shared imaginaries. In MYS, features giving rise to publicity and plurality also removed cues that might encourage participants, together, to accept novel appearances as reflective of a person. Appearances were met with mistrust. Contributions were suspected of hidden interests, partially tied to an awareness of group administrators' controls. At the same time, attention was diverted away from other limits on publicity, specifically Facebook's technological and corporate dimensions. Looking forward, these dynamics compel further interrogation into the ways both visibilities and invisibilities tied to experiences via Facebook limit potential shared imaginaries. Thus, while actively giving shape to 'publics', this article suggests the need for caution about the possibilities of Facebook-mediated publics to realise new and shared imaginaries.

Figure captions

Figure 1. Mombasa Youth Senate Facebook group's discussion page, screenshot from a laptop, recorded on 3 October 2015, 20:05 EAT

Figure 2. A changing object of observation: Excerpts from a discussion in MYS

retrieved on 22 February, 23 April and 20 October 2015 (Part A)[64]

Figure 3. A changing object of observation: Excerpts from a discussion in MYS

retrieved on 22 February, 23 April and 20 October 2015 (Part B)

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Development, marginalization, security and participation*. Nairobi, KE: Ipsos
Public Affairs, October 2013.

Notes

[1] Post to Mombasa Youth Senate public Facebook group on 28 September 2014 at 11:27 EAT, recorded on 29 September 2014 at 14:06 EAT. Facebook posts are copied verbatim throughout.

[2] Musila, "The 'Redykyulass Generation;" Ogola, "Popular culture and politics;" Ogola, "The political economy of the media in Kenya."

[3] In 2000, the International Telecommunications Union (ITU) estimated 0.3% of the Kenyan population used the internet and there were 127,404 mobile phone subscriptions. By 2014, 43.4% of the population used the internet and there were more than 33.6 million mobile phone subscriptions. ITU. 2016. *Time Series Data*. Retrieved from https://www.itu.int/en/ITU-D/Statistics/Pages/stat/default.aspx on 5 April 2016.

[4] This increase could be hypothesised to be linked to increased political consciousness associated with the recently devolved political system, which introduced new local elected posts and new political insiders and outsiders within counties. Interrogating potential linkages requires further research. See Cornell & D'Arcy, Plus ça change?"

[5] Warner, "Publics and counterpublics," 50.

[6] Willems, "Interrogating public sphere."

[7] Banégas et al., "Espaces publics de la parole;" Barnett, "Media, democracy and representation;" Diepeveen, "Politics in everyday Kenyan street-life."

[8] Baym, *Personal* connections; Couldry, "What and where;" Fraser, Transnationalizing the public sphere."

[9] Manganga, "The internet as public sphere;" Moyo, "Alternative media;" Moyo, "Repression, propaganda, and digital resistance;" Obijiofor, "New technologies as tools of empowerment."

[10] Nyamnjoh, *Africa's media*; Obadare, "Playing politics with the mobile phone;" Obadare, "The uses of ridicule;" Osborn, "Fuelling the flames."

[11] Gagliardone, "New media and the developmental state."

[12] Arendt, *The human condition*, 50, 175-176.

[13] Arendt, *The human condition*, 52.

[14] boyd & Crawford, "Critical questions for big data," 671-673.

[15] Willis and Chome, "Marginalization and political participation."

[16] Wolf, Muthoka, & Ireri, *Kenya Coast survey*.

[17] Willis and Gona, "Pwani c Kenya," 1-2.

[18] Willis and Chome, "Marginalization and political participation."

[19] Willis and Gona, "Pwani c Kenya," 20-21.

[20] Mwakimako and Willis, *Islam, politics, and violence*.

[21] Prestholdt, "Kenya, the United States, and counterterrorism."

[22] Lind, Mutahi and Oosterom, "Killing a mosquito."

[23] Horowitz and MUHURI, "We're tired of taking you to the court."

[24] Anderson and McKnight, "Kenya at war."

[25] Diepeveen, "Politics in everyday Kenyan street-life," 269-270.

[26] Kresse, "Philiosophising in Mombasa," 78-79.

[27] Mwakimako and Willis, *Islam, politics, and violence*.

[28] Stork et al, "Internet going mobile."

[29] Interview with male human rights activist, 5 September 2013 (Interviewee number 6).

[30] For example, membership rose to 7,883 members by June 2015. Recorded 23 June 2015 at 14:33 EAT.

[31] Different levels of detail on an individual's profile would be visible to other members of MYS. This depended on whether users were linked as Facebook 'friends.' For a more general description of Facebook's features for communication and networking, see Appendix A in Wilson, Gosling, & Graham, A review of Facebook research, 214.

[32] Sundén, in boyd & Ellison, "Social network sites," 3.

[33] Diepeveen, "Politics in everyday Kenyan street-life," 273.

[34] At 10:57 EAT on 14 August 2014, Mombasa Youth Senate had a total of 1,292 members. However, of these, 1,266 were visible through my Facebook account. This was likely limited due to users' privacy settings.

[35] Keith & Van Belle, "The use of a social networking site."

[36] Alac Mombasa is a profile posting as the Advocacy and legal centre at Transparency International Kenya, in Mombasa, member of MYS as of 16 October 2015.

[37] Kecosce Mombasa is a community support resource centre, founded in 2006, working in the coastal region of Kenya, member of MYS as of 16 October 2015.

[38] Post to Mombasa Youth Senate's Facebook group on 20 December 2014, recorded on 2 July 2015 at 11:09 EAT).

[39] The profile also changed its user name in early 2015 to a name that appeared to reference a Giriama female fighter against the British colonial rule, Mekatilili wa Menza, by using the name 'Mekatilili Jeri.' See Oketch, Angela. 2015. "I once worked as a househelp in UAE." *Daily Nation mobile version*, 7 March. Retrieved from http://mobile.nation.co.ke/lifestyle/Emma-Mbura-My-journey--to-politics-/-/1950774/2645732/-/format/xhtml/item/0/-/mksvtc/-/index.html on 24 August 2015.

[40] In addition to 47 elected senators, each representing one county, Kenya's senate has 16 nominated female members, two members representing youth, and two representing persons with disabilities.

[41] Owens, "Not life but the world," 300; Arendt, *The promise of politics*, 118; Arendt, *The human condition*, 181.

[42] Recorded 22 September at 14:53 EAT.

[43] Post to MYS on 12 November 2014, recorded 24 August 2015 at 23:19 EAT.

[44] Stork et al., "Internet going mobile."

[45] Crandall et al., *Mobile phone usage at the Kenyan base of the pyramid*, 39.

[46] Wolf, Muthoka, and Ireri, *Kenya Coast survey*.

[47] Approximate value of £70.00 at the time of fieldwork.

[48] To quote from the Facebook Newsroom, the mission of Facebook as a corporate entity is "Founded in 2004, Facebook's mission is to give people the power to share and make the world more open and connected. People use Facebook to stay connected with friends and family, to discover what's going on in the world, and to share and express what matters to them." Retrieved from http://newsroom.fb.com/company-info/ on 17 March 2016.

[49] See Marichal, *Facebook Democracy*, 3.

[50] For example, The Economist reported Facebook to be the sixth-most-valuable public company as of April 2016, with 1 billion people estimated to log on daily. The Economist 2016. "The new face of Facebook: How to win friends and influence people." *The Economist*, 9 April. Retrieved from http://www.economist.com/news/briefing/21696507-social-network-has-turned-itself-one-worlds-most-influential-technology-giants on 9 April 2016.

[51] Dean, "Big Data;" Dean, "Communicative Capitalism."

[52] Napoli and Obar, "The emerging mobile internet underclass."

[53] Facebook Newsroom. 2014. "Internet.org App comes to Kenya." *Facebook*, 10 November. Retrieved from http://newsroom.fb.com/news/2014/11/internet-org-app-comes-to-kenya/ on 17 August 2016.

[54] Posts to MYS on 13 and 14 August 2014, recorded 19 August 2014 at 11:57 EAT.

[55] Informal correspondence with three MYS administrators, 13 September 2014 (173).

[56] The individuals who approved the membership requests commented in response to notes of thanks on 5 March, 24 April, 11 May, 24 May, 27 May, 9 June, 24 June, 17 July and 13 August 2014 (all recorded on 19 August 2014 between 11:57-11:58 EAT).

[57] For example, post made on 20 September 2014, recorded 22 September at 14:53 EAT.

[58] The Mombasa County Commissioner and the Governor of Mombasa

[59] Comments on MYS, 13 July 2014, recorded 24 August 2015 at 23:39 EAT.

[60] Comments on MYS, 1 October 2014, recorded 1 October 2014 at 17:13 EAT.

[61] Post to MYS, 1 February 2015, recorded 2 February 2015 at 16:28 EAT.

[62] Informal correspondence with three MYS administrators, 13 September 2014 (173).

[63] Wasserman, "Introduction;" Wasserman, "Mobile phones, popular media."

[64] The application 'Paint X' has been used to blur faces and obscure information that might

distinguish specific individuals in Facebook screenshots.