9. Digital Democracy, Analogue Politics: How the Internet Era is Transforming Politics in Kenya - Nanjala Nyabola

TONY ROBERTS: Nanjala, welcome to IDS

NANJALA NYABOLA: Thank you.

TONY ROBERTS: Thanks for making time to come and talk to us. I have to say the book really gripped me from the very first page. It deals with some really complex issues in what has been a turbulent decade for Kenyan politics. But you succeeded in dealing with those subjects in a very compelling and accessible way. And I read the whole book in a single weekend. And as you know, I ended up live tweeting, chapter by chapter as I read it. So we know Kenya well for its leadership in digital mapping with the Ushahidi in 2007 and more recently with mobile money and with M-Pesa. But we're less familiar with the use of digital technology in Kenyan politics. And your book is titled *Digital Democracy, Analogue Politics*. Can you summarise for us what its main messages are?

NANJALA NYABOLA: Right. It's really, honestly, the book is about a collision. And it's about a collision between, I guess, Kenya's schizophrenic personalities – these two personalities, these two faces of Kenya, that are constantly in this push and pull. And the digital face of it is what a lot of people would have encountered, for example, in magazines or in the press here in the West, which is: you have the quintessential image of the Masai with the mobile phone in his ear, which is that there has been this unprecedented uptake of digital technologies, both in the private and the public sphere. And you've mentioned Ushahidi, M-Pesa, mobile money in general, Kenya is the number one leader in mobile money in the world. I think in 2016 mobile money transactions were equal to one third of the country's GDP. And then there's other things like the elections, right? The fact that we had a massive digital election in 2013. Everybody notices 2017, but actually the introduction began in 2013. And the fact that the two major political parties in 2013 invested obscene amounts of money in their digital, social media, internet campaigns, because this was becoming a really potent political space. So that's the digital side of it. The analogue side of it is the side that resists transformation, that resists change and wants to keep the old way of doing things, because there's so much profit and there's so much both economic and social profit to be made from keeping things the way they are. And that is, you know, corruption and that is manipulating elections and that is a government that doesn't want to relinquish control to a new generation of political leaders, to a new generation of political participants. And the way I see it is the last 10 years have just been a push and pull between these two faces of Kenya, and sometimes one side trumps over the other. So we have like Ushahidi and M-Pesa, but also just the way people are mobilising online, winning for a certain bit and then the other side kind of figuring ou, 'Oh, I can't let this get out of control. I must also resist that.' And what I'm trying to do in this book is to try and situate these clashes, this collision and to

leave it at the point where I don't know what's going to happen next, and I don't think anyone really does, but to point out that it's not as simple as giving a society more technology and saying, 'Well, now everything's fixed,' because these two sides are not on the same page.

TONY ROBERTS: You mentioned there the obscene amounts of money that were spent during that election and I'm going to come to that now, because when we're told the story of the effect of Facebook, Twitter and Cambridge Analytica on politics, the dominant narrative generally concerns events in the global north. So can you tell us how those same technologies shaped governance and democracy in Kenyan elections?

NANJALA NYABOLA: It's, it's really one of the underlying themes that I have in this book, which is to connect what's happening in this one African society, country, not just to other African societies and countries, but really to the world. I'm not sure that enough people are aware that the tactics that were being used by Cambridge Analytica in the UK vote, Brexit vote and in the US general election were first tested in Kenya and in Nigeria and in South Africa; that there have been political parties who have invested a great deal in . . . well, number one is harvesting information from social media users. Whether it is through seemingly benign games, seemingly benign surveys, interviews, that are actually harvesting user information; whether it is tracking, understanding how people respond to different news, or things that people place. So, for example, there's a practice that's well known in public relations called 'building a smokescreen', which is exactly what it sounds like. That if something bad happens, or the government is in a bad news cycle, what they do is they either encourage, or they even start, their own hashtag, their own conversation about something that seems really benign right? Like, here's a picture of a cute dog, or here's a picture of a man standing in line eating githeri out of a bag it's like, 'Oh here's Githeri Man.' And this actually happened in 2017, that when the stories about the second election . . . oh no, the stories about the first election in August were getting out of control, suddenly there's this hype-cycle around this man who was drunk and was eating githeri out of a bag and was standing in line to vote. And that man actually ended up winning national honours. It just became this massive, massive hype-cycle. And in the process, you stop asking questions about ballot stuffing; you stop asking questions about the head of ICT dying two weeks . . . or being murdered two weeks before the election. And so things like that, right? So the behaviour, the ways in which states, the ways in which governments manipulate public opinion and public conversation online. These are things that have been tweaked and tested in other parts of the world before they're re-imported back to the West. And I always make sure when I say this that I'm not saying that these things matter only because they will eventually affect Western countries. They matter in their own space. Like, it matters that a British PR company, by local reports, the Jubilee administration, which won the Kenyan election, spent $6 million on Cambridge Analytica alone. That mattered . . .

TONY ROBERTS: For 10 days' work.

NANJALA NYABOLA: For 10 days' work. I mean, that, in contrast, the estimate, a local estimate was that each presidential candidate spends $5 million on their entire presidential run. So we're talking about money that could actually . . . it's make or break. But we're also talking about states that are very unusual in their specific context, and I'm thinking right, now not about Kenya, but about Nigeria, and how Cambridge Analytica's involvement in the anti-Buhari campaign and stoking anti-Muslim sentiment in Nigeria. It's not just about winning or losing an election – a people might die, you know? In the context of local politics, in Kenya as well, things can escalate very quickly and people will die and there is moral ethical questions that need to be asked about: should Western corporations be free to be that involved in election campaigns, other parts of the world, where there is no legal framework that can say, actually, 'You are culpable,' if this leads to someone being killed or someone dying. Those are the kind of things that I hope the underlying theme of connection brings to the fore, that the world is not a set of isolated data points, that we're all connected and things that happen on one side of the world can easily affect us on the other.

TONY ROBERTS: So you mentioned how technologies were used to fan the flames of ethnicity in Nigeria. I mean, in the United States, in the UK, in Myanmar, in India wherever we look, we've seen the use of social media used to amplify ethnic divisions and mobilise violence for political ends. So can you tell us about the use of digital to exploit ethnicity for political ends in Kenya?

NANJALA NYABOLA: One of the things that . . . well, my favourite question that I've gotten so far in talking about this book was always, 'What didn't you put into the book?' Because the conversation on ethnicity and how technologies intersect from the ethnicity, I do go into it quite a bit, but there's so much more to be said and I think the one lesson that I would have loved to have more space to explore was: what local language radio can teach us about social media. Because local language radio was a big part of the ecosystem that made the 2007 post-election violence in Kenya possible, was that we had gone from having one national broadcaster in English and Kiswahili, to having 178 radio stations broadcasting in multiple languages and a regulator that did not have the capacity to listen into all of those conversations, all of the time. And so people were being fed this menu, this menu of hate speech over multiple, multiple, multiple years. And indeed, one of the people who was indicted by the International Criminal Court for incitement was a radio presenter. And that just speaks to how much radio had come to represent this information manipulation, this misinformation ecosystem that made violence possible. And Kenya is not the only example of this. You had it in Rwanda. You know, with Radio Mille Collines and because, again, it's rich, it's the fact that 78 percent of Kenyan households have radios. And so there are lessons there about information silos, about talking to people who already agree with you, about advertising – because it really does come down to advertising and people trying to sell you things by convincing you that you are unique as their listener, you have unique characteristics that do not translate to other ethnic groups, for example. And so, for me, what's happening on social media with ethnicity, and we talk about ethnicity, as you mentioned, it's not an African thing, that's what we're seeing right now, right? We're seeing this identity question is not necessarily quote unquote 'primordial' or,

you know, ancient rivalries or whatever that language is. There's something about the human condition that wants to build community outside the family and there's something about how that intersects with information that makes it a very powerful and potent thing. And with Kenya, a lot of what happened on social media, and especially with Whatsapp and Facebook, replicates what we saw with local language radio. That is: information silos, that people are only talking to people that they already agree with, that people are sharing information that hasn't been verified, that hasn't been tested. There's no fact, you know, it has no basis in fact. That it masquerades as news, it has the patina of news in the sense that the websites look very fancy, like a news website or whatever that it has . . . it speaks to a very unique characteristics of the person who's receiving the information. So we had a campaign called The Real Raila Campaign, that was run almost entirely on social media in the 2017 election. And it was basically a YouTube video, a couple of Facebook pages, and a couple of memes that were spread on WhatsApp, that would say that if you voted for Raila, that there was going to be anarchy in Kenya. The main opposition leader, that he was going to turn Kenya into a warzone. And it was all very dire and high production value et cetera. But not everybody got those messages. The messages were being sent to people who checked off certain criteria. And what a lot of people don't realise, for example, on Facebook, based on what pages you like, based on what advertisements you click on, based on who you speak to, they're able to glean a really significant amount of information about you and your preferences and send you advertising based on that. And when political campaigns are able to feed into that advertising ecosystem, that they're able to pay to send messages to specific people, then we start to see the kind of problems that we've seen over the last couple of years, not just in Kenya but around the world, because the basis of political discourse has to be that we're all consuming the same information, even if we disagree about what that information is and what it means. But if I'm consuming information that you're not consuming and we're both going to the ballot, you know, on the same day to decide about the future of the country, then we end up with the kind of problems that we saw in 2017, which is: we're not reading from the same script. You can't argue with people, you can't have political debate or discourse between people who are not reading from the same script, because they're all convinced about the absolute rightness of their position. And then what are people going to do after that? That then becomes the question for the political scientist, which is: each society is going to respond to that very, very differently. But all will be negative, it's just going to be a question of extremes.

TONY ROBERTS: So one of the more positive pleasures of reading your book was the focus on the positive agency of Kenyans and their use of digital technologies to, to challenge orthodoxies. So can you give one or two key examples of that?

NANJALA NYABOLA: My favourite thing to witness over the last couple of years has been how women, especially, have been using . . . radical feminists have been using social media to organise. And I do have an account about how the mainstream women's rights organisations have become captured by the political system and therefore stuck in this discourse, this very disempowering discourse about who women are and who women should be. And I give the example in the book about the leader of the Maendeleo Ya Wanawake Association, which is the largest

women's rights organisation in Kenya, who went on television and said, 'I'm only a feminist until I get to my front door, when I enter my house I leave the feminism at the door and I become a wife and mother.' And it's [*laughs*] it's such a bizarre moment to, to encounter, because what she's suggesting is that feminism is incompatible with being a wife and being a mother, and that is something that radical feminists in Kenya are rejecting. There is very little space for radical feminism in the public sphere in Kenya. There's very little space for people who challenge traditional family values and especially lesbians especially people who are parts of sexual or gender minorities wouldn't find representation in the public sphere at all, prior to the social media area. But what we're seeing right now is movements being built. You know, We Are 52% is one of my favourite examples, it starts off as a hashtag, but actually has a very significant offline component, because there are meetings, there are people who are showing up lobbying state, because the Constitution of Kenya provides that not more than one third of any public body should be made up of either gender. So right now every single arm of the legislature in Kenya is unconstitutional, as is the judiciary, as is the executive, the senior executive. And so We Are 52% is a point of mobilisation, by radical feminists, by women, to try and draw attention to this issue and to change the conversation from women being given benevolent favours from the patriarchy, you know, 'Here, you can have an extra seat,' to saying, 'We actually demand representation, because we are 52% of this country's population.' There are similar examples with LGBTQI community, with the Rafiki film – that was another great moment of social media giving a platform to a group or to a class of Kenyans that wouldn't otherwise be heard from in the traditional public sphere. And I spend a lot of time in the book talking about media, because media is a big part of the problem or the challenge, I guess, that people face. And it's important to understand media capture, because the internet has a surrogate function in every society that reflects what is missing in that specific society. So it can be a networking function; it can be political mobilising function; itt can be a site of political resistance – all of that, because there's something that's not happening. And so, in Kenya, it's the retreat of the media, the traditional media, from the public sphere with censorship, with self-censorship, with lack of funding, with all of that and the internet sort of coming in as a surrogate space for that, and especially for people who wouldn't find space in the traditional media, and grabbing that space and turning it into a really powerful story of agency and recapturing narratives. Right now we have a litigation that's going through the courts in Kenya that is trying to repeal Section 162 of the penal code, which is the one that provides that homosexual acts are punishable by 14 years imprisonment, automatically. And they've had almost no coverage, the people who are running the case, in the traditional media. A lot of people wouldn't know that this case was happening. But if they did, it would have been framed as a question of morality, right? This is an immoral versus moral conversation. Because of the space that's been afforded by the internet, now it's a conversation about human rights, and it's a question about dignity, and it's a question about what kind of society do you want to live in. That to me is a really powerful thing, because it's retelling a story about a section of Kenyans that most Kenyans would not really have known about before.

TONY ROBERTS: Great. Your book does a great job of going into that kind of depth about the agency of Kenyans, and I hope people will listen to this and want to go and read that book. But right now, I want to kind of widen the angle because you're an international correspondent and policy analyst. And so, whilst you were writing this book, you must have been also visiting many other countries and seeing both similarities and differences too. So tell us please, what is common of these themes across the countries that you're familiar with, and what is distinctively Kenyan?

NANJALA NYABOLA: One of the things that really struck me was . . . well, first of all, internet shutdowns. Kenya hasn't had an internet shutdown yet, but it is something that was very much . . . the fear was there, in 2017 that at some point they might shut down the Internet and what would that mean, and what would that look like? By the end of January 2019 there had been five internet shutdowns in Africa, and I think that, because these are happening especially in smaller countries with smaller internet penetration, there isn't enough attention given to how to support people who are experiencing those internet shutdowns. And there's not enough investment in developing tools to help people circumscribe their shutdowns, because it's mostly activists who are on the wrong end of this. I'm struck by the differences . . . the reason, part of the reason why we feel we, those of us who are work in this policy space, we suspect that there wasn't an internet shutdown in Kenya was because of the amount of public functions that have shifted to the internet. So Zimbabwe kind of found itself at the beginning of 2019 with this tension, because they shut down the internet. But one of the currencies that's in use in Zimbabwe because of the currency collapses, RTGS, which is Real Time Gross Settlement, which is basically interbank internet-based money transfers. And so they basically made people more poor, internet shutdowns actually made people more poor. And you see this in Uganda as well, that the taxes on the internet were supposed to be a method of curtailing the presence of the internet, but have actually had really significant economic outcomes for the Ugandan . . . the Ugandan economy is taking a hit. And so there are all of these lessons about how far is too far, and how should we think about what the internet is for? Right now, I think that's the big main question that a lot of countries are going to have to ask themselves: what's the internet for and how should it be protected, or whatever. But I also want to mention Germany, because I found Germany to be a really interesting case about how a country can demand differential treatment. Because in Germany, for example, with Facebook, every other country Facebook, the moderators, the content moderators are in the Philippines, almost regardless of what language you speak, they just got there first. And there is one person for all of Ethiopia who does content moderation in Ethiopia in Amharic. And she's not in Ethiopia. But Germany said, 'No, if you want to run Facebook in Germany, you have to do your content moderation in Germany.' Same thing to Twitter, 'If you want to run Twitter in Germany, you have to make it impossible for anyone to see Nazi . . . to share Nazi imagery on Twitter.' So you can have a Nazi post that was created in the United States and put on Twitter, but as a German follower, you cannot see that post. I find that to be a really fascinating example of the fact that these tech companies are not immovable. And for the right amount of political pressure, they will make the necessary concessions. And that gets me thinking about

various African countries, with the election conversation. And how do we have a policy environment that makes the protection of African people as much of a priority as Germany has made the protection of German people? And I don't know what the answer is to that, off the top of my head, but I think it's something that we really need to think about: the idea that this is Facebook and this is how it has to run is not true; this is Twitter and this is how it has to run is not true. There actually is a lot of room for agency, even within that conversation.

TONY ROBERTS: It's just it's just another orthodoxy.

NANJALA NYABOLA: It's just another orthodoxy, yes.

TONY ROBERTS: So finally, are you optimistic and what do you hope for?

NANJALA NYABOLA: Oh, so you end with a hard question. I don't know if optimistic is the word that I would use. Every time I'm about to resign myself to the fact that we're sleepwalking into a nightmare, I see an expression of agency and an expression of solidarity that changes my mind. I think, overall, I'm apprehensive. I think that more people in – I will say Kenya for the purposes of this conversation, but certainly in the world – I think more people need to be thinking politically about the internet, that it can't just be that tech is tech and it's its own thing and it's a, quote, unquote, 'morally neutral' thing, because it's not. I think we need more humanities in the tech conversation and we need more human psychology, sociology, all of that in the tech conversation, because we are really heading towards a nightmare. Especially like in Kenya, a panopticon that's run by a government that has no interests, no citizen interests at heart. But then, I think about how young people, how activists in Kenya, used WhatsApp to document police violence and made it impossible for the police to deny that there was a door to door campaign that was happening during the worst of the violence in 2017. And I think about how they're building websites to keep track of extrajudicial executions, and to hold individual police officers accountable for these executions. These are expressions of agency that are small, in the context of the national/international conversation, but would not be happening otherwise. So I guess, to me, the challenge is how do you balance our concern for all of this state-driven stuff that's really out of control, with enabling this agency, this grassroots, one person, two people, one community group, three community groups, agency on the other. And to me, that's the interesting policy conversation that I think we need to be having moving forward.

TONY ROBERTS: It sounds like pessimism of the intellect

NANJALA NYABOLA: [*laughs*] Yes, I'll accept that.

TONY ROBERTS: Nanjala Nyabola, thank you for spending time with us.

NANJALA NYABOLA: Than you. Thank you for having me.