CHAPTER 3

Digital (Dis)order, Twitter Hashtags, and the Performance of Politics in Kenya

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Social media platforms such as WhatsApp, Facebook, Snapchat, and Twitter have gradually become indispensable platforms for everyday communication. In Kenya, precisely because of their relative ubiquity, they are increasingly facilitating new everyday practices and slowly assuming significant cultural and political agency (Ogola 2019). It is perhaps germane to note that in Kenya, the production and circulation of information have generally been attended by various economies of control, often part of a much broader strategy by successive governments to "husband" or protect power. The control of information and its enabling infrastructures have been particularly pertinent in the manufacturing of political legitimacy, usually lacking for the most part. We may draw on Victoria Bernal's (2014) notion of "infopolitics" to explain this regime of information management but more importantly, how this is subsequently resisted through various digital political performances by the public. I refer here particularly to the emerging digital practices largely defined by their ambiguity, "techniques of evasion" (Bayart 1993), and their use of what James Scott (1990) describes as "hidden transcripts," in their engagement with the state.

This chapter examines how Kenya's online community, commonly referred to as #KOT (Kenyans on Twitter), instrumentalize digital performances to facilitate the creation of new spaces and aesthetics of political practice. The formative part of the chapter briefly explores Kenya's tightly controlled information regime as one of the state's apparatuses for political domination. It then looks at how the growth of Kenya's digital infrastructure and the emergent online digital practices, which manifest as a form of "disorder," are subverting these controls. In the latter part of the chapter, I focus specifically on the micro-blogging site Twitter and how Kenya's digital community #KOT are using it to

create new spaces and ways of performing cryptopolitics. It is a practice that extends a familiar popular tradition of "concealment and evasion," shaped in part by the country's history of political suppression.

Infopolitics and Kenya's Digital Transformation

Infopolitics has been a dominant feature of Kenya's postcolonial history. Successive governments have either directly or through proxies, maintained influence or control of the dominant public communication platforms such as the mainstream media (Ogola 2016). By way of illustration, one could point to the case of Kenya's public broadcaster, the Kenya Broadcasting Corporation (KBC), which has, since the country's independence in 1964, operated primarily as a state broadcaster, faithfully beholden to the interests of the governing political party. Although by law a public broadcaster, KBC long reneged on this role. Successive administrations have also maintained their grip on the private media sector by deliberately undermining the spirit of media liberalism by operating a licensing regime that often only benefits those with whom they can transact political business. Several media owners are, therefore, one way or another, part of the dominant ruling class hence facilitate government media influence. In the few cases where this is not possible, the government has resorted to withholding state advertising to media organizations deemed too critical. This is significant because the state remains the single largest source of advertising revenue in Kenya (Ogola 2019).

It is within this context of state control that we should locate the rapid proliferation, adoption, and the resulting significance of new digital media practices in Kenya over the last ten years. It is arguable that social media has disrupted some of the older economies of information control. Social media has incubated a different information regime partly unencumbered by the older forms of control, thereby providing, however nominal, multiple opportunities for the growth of a new, even potentially transformative aesthetics of political practice.

I make this point about the disruptive role of social media while acknowledging that these platforms are simultaneously enabling new forms of control. We need to recognize that social media are part of a broader national and international economic and political infrastructure primed to advance provincial corporate interests (Srinivasan, Diepeveen, and Karekwaivanane 2016). These interests invariably mean that exclusions do occur. One may of course recall Michel Foucault's (1982) cautionary note about the dialectical relationship between new

media technologies and the participatory practices these technologies enable. To borrow the words of Lilie Chouliaraki (2010: 227), Foucault characterized this relationship as a dual economy of freedom and constraint hence the concepts "democratization of technology" and the "technologization of democracy." In the latter, he pointed out that technologies have their inherent economies of control, enabling the reproduction of the existing power asymmetries they apparently seek to destabilize. Indeed, one cannot ignore the structural and material conditions that limit popular participation on social media platforms. Popular participation is undermined by limitations of access, affordability, and digital literacy.

It is equally important to note that research on the impact of digital/social media platforms in Sub-Saharan Africa have been relatively instrumental in approach. With few exceptions, social media has largely been assigned a singular role—facilitation of progressive politics in Africa. Tim Markham (2014) observes that many scholars thus expect social media to "birth" revolutions, for example, when such "expectations" are not realized, social media are rendered lacking meaningful political agency (see Fenton and Barresi 2011). I want to argue that while it is true that social media use in Kenya has changed the way Kenyans communicate and organize politically and socially, this is not something that necessarily inheres in the technology. Instead, I argue that the significance and popularity of social media platforms in the country is because they have been able to successfully acculturate and reconfigure older forms and traditions of social and political communication and practices to interpret and intervene in the present. In a study on how an administrative chief in Nakuru, a town in Kenya, used Twitter rather than the traditional *baraza* (local open-air meetings organized and presided over by local chiefs primarily to promote government policies) to engage locals in his administrative unit, Dan Omanga, for example, argues that social media in this case "expanded both the spatial and temporal aspects of the *baraza*" (2015: 1), transforming it into a new deliberative space. The chief used Twitter to address his constituents, respond to their questions, and to discuss government policies. It is therefore analytically profitable to pay more attention to these processes of reconfigurations of old communicative practices. Indeed, as Patrick Chabal and Jean-Pascal Daloz (2010) note, to understand change, we should always focus on the continuities and historicity of what is changing.

Social media's (political) significance in Kenya therefore lies not in their capacity or potential to facilitate mass political movements or force structural institutional changes. Instead, it is in their transformative character as sites of the everyday, capturing the quotidian, both serious

and the mundane, revealing daily existential anxieties, organizing publics around ordinary issues, and providing spaces for direct engagement with the state and its agents by reconfiguring and reconstituting older forms of political expressions and practices. The grand narratives about revolutions or such monumental disruptive impact renders invisible the contexts and complex textures of technological appropriations. These processes are best understood within the realm of the everyday. It is in the everyday practices—in cryptopolitics, in the rumor, the multiple registers, euphemisms, even "fake news," that lay the "hidden transcripts," described by Scott as "the anger and reciprocal aggression denied by the presence of domination" (1990: 16).

The absence of well-formed singular social or political ideas or projects in these spaces, the disorder that so often appears to deny social media platforms coherent agency is precisely the politics of social media. In fact, I argue that the agency of these platforms lay in their users' creative instrumentalization of disorder as political practice. It is difficult to police a narrative that appears so dispersed, fragmented, and confusing.

Instrumentalization of Disorder as Political Practice

The instrumentalization of disorder as political practice is a concept I tease out from Chabal and Daloz's (2010) notion of "disorder as political instrument." I use it as a conceptual tool in discussing how social media users in Kenya are instrumentalizing disorder politically online. "Disorder as political instrument" refers to "the process by which political actors in Africa seek to maximise their returns on the state of confusion, uncertainty, and sometimes even chaos, which characterises most African polities" (2010: 150). Yet Chabal and Daloz remind us that the notion of disorder here does not index dysfunction or "a state of dereliction" (2010: 150). It is, in fact, merely a different order, one that features a number of key characteristics. First, they argue that it is "a reflection of the fuzziness of what constitutes the primary and secondary registers informing politics." Second, "it makes explicit the observation that political action operates rationally, but largely in the realm of the informal, uncodified and unpoliced," and third, "in a world of disorder there is a premium both on the vertical and personalized infra-institutional relations through which the business of politics can be conducted and on access to the means of maximizing the returns which the domestication of such disorder requires" (2010: 150). Theodore Trefon (2004) develops a similar idea in his attempt to retheorize African

urbanism by looking at the case of Congo's Kinshasa. He shows how through everyday practices, unregulated, messy, and yet creatively novel local residents are able to cope with the difficult conditions created by Kinshasa's dysfunctional municipal authority. To understand how users instrumentalize disorder as political practice then is to engage with both the infra-institutional uses to which these platforms are put as well as their institutional appropriation by the state and its agents. I will however focus largely on the infra-institutional practices.

My discussion primarily focuses on the political. But my reading of the political is of course broad. In reading the political, I borrow from Natalie Fenton and Veronica Barresi (2011) who argue that our conception of the political should go beyond the narrow confines of politics or of formal institutions (my addition) to simultaneously include the personal, gendered, and the cultural, routinely visible in everyday practices. I argue that social media is generative of individual and individualized political subjectivities and that this is crucial in understanding the politicality of citizens' usage of the platform. Secondly, à la Chabal and Daloz (2010), Achille Mbembe (2001), Karin Barber (1997), and many others, I argue that the political in Africa cannot be limited to the realm of formal institutions and processes. It is conceptually useful to adopt Chabal and Daloz's conception of the political in Africa as functionally fluid, where "boundaries are notoriously porous" and where politics "is not functionally differentiated, or separated from the socio-cultural considerations which govern everyday life," where "[t]here is a constant and dynamic interpenetration of the different spheres of human experiences: from the political to the religious" (2010: 1). The relevance of this interpretation lies in the fact that while the apparently mundane dominate conversations on social media in Kenya, it is also the case that citizens engage the political from a variety of non-political ways. In addition, as Chabal and Daloz observe, there is "a multiplicity of registers according to which individuals participate politically" (2010: 152). Therefore, they note that it is "both judicious and legitimate to switch from one register to another without undue concern for the political contradictions which such behaviours might appear to induce" because "this lack of distinction between various registers is utilized as a resource by those political actors able to do so" (2010: 152). The aim here however is certainly not to "overlook the continued relevance of the professional, institutional and deliberative aspects of politics" (Markham 2014: 92) or to advocate for what Fenton and Barresi (2011) refer to as "a deinstitutionalisation of politics." The case made here is for the relevance of horizontal informal political practices as facilitated by and through social media to be recognized as important political performances and interventions.

The Digital Context in Kenya

The ubiquity of the mobile phone in Kenya, the existence of a largely youthful population, and the relative freedom provided by platforms such as Twitter, Facebook, WhatsApp, Instagram, Telegram, and Snapchat, have made them hugely popular communication tools in the country. Nearly 75 percent of Kenya's population is below the age of thirty-five, which is an estimated 35.7 million according to the country's 2019 population census[1]. The youth (18–34 years old) constitute 29 percent of the population[2] (KNBS 2019). Nearly 80 percent of this group are active social media users[3]. Only 28 percent of young Kenyans reportedly read newspapers regularly with social media increasingly becoming their platform of choice for news and other forms of information. Meanwhile, two out of three young Kenyans now either own a mobile device or have access to one[4].

It is similarly important to note that internet penetration and use in Kenya are significantly higher than the continent's average. According to recent statistics from the Communications Authority of Kenya (CAK), 43 million Kenyans now have access to the internet, mainly through mobile phones. Internet penetration is estimated at nearly 85 percent (CAK 2019). Meanwhile, a study by SIMELab found that more than 8.3 million Kenyans are active on social media with the most used platforms being WhatsApp (89 percent), Facebook (81.7 percent), and Twitter (34 percent) (Wamuyu 2020). Twitter is dominantly used as a platform for civic and political debate in Kenya (Wamuyu 2020), making it especially relevant for this discussion. This political bent has been the subject of various research projects on social media use in the country (see Tully and Ekdale 2015; Ndlela 2014; Ogola 2018; Portland Communications 2016). In this chapter, I am interested in two intersecting "political" issues: the emergence of new as well as the simultaneous reconfiguration of old political practices through Twitter, and much more broadly, the nature of those political practices via the same platform.

Kenyan Twitter users are reputedly among the most active in Africa, coming fourth after Egypt, Nigeria, and South Africa (Portland Communications 2016). As noted earlier, the Kenyan Twitter publics congregate under an amorphous yet easily identifiable group called Kenyans on Twitter, usually referred to as KOT and identified through a common hashtag #KOT. Twitter users use this hashtag when discussing topics where Kenya is their primary reference to index the subject and to encourage participation among KOT. This group is "loud" and oftentimes narratively "unruly" as they discuss issues of shared interest. George Karikwaivanane (2019) identifies a similar characteristic in

Baba Jukwa, a Facebook account that facilitated heated political discussions in the run-up to the 2013 Zimbabwean elections. He describes these publics as characterized by their "heteroglossic qualities, their use of multiple registers, reasoned arguments, diatribe, religiosity and the use of carnivalesque as a mode of expression (2019: 57). He observes that Baba Jukwa "stubbornly denied ZANU-PF's efforts to discipline public debate, a stance which was underscored by the slogan *Tapanduka Zvamuchese* (we have rebelled completely), which was chanted by participants of the debates on the page" (2019: 57).

But as observed earlier, the material and structural realities that both enable and constrain the use of digital media are such that in practice, particular exclusions can occur even in the use of apparently "open and inclusive" platforms such as Twitter. Variable access to the internet, uneven digital literacies, and other economies of use structurally privilege particular voices online just as they do offline. Accordingly, most conversations on KOT timelines are generally scaled up or popularized by a few well-known bloggers, activists, politicians, celebrities, journalists, and mainstream news organizations (Ogola 2019). These individuals and organizations have also become almost by default "primary definers" of what trends on Twitter and seem to have significant impact on which stories go viral and therefore which are picked up, for example, by the mainstream press. This re-ordering of the online space into hierarchies of participation does, of course, have implications for Twitter's claims of horizontal participation.

Yet it is precisely because of this hierarchization of the platform that KOT have adopted alternative discursive political practices and narrative strategies that open up conversations to as broad a public as possible and to encourage participation. Similar to Baba Jukwa, the archive of knowledge, truth, and ways of expression is wildly elastic. Users have the freedom to use various registers, circulate rumors, invoke religion, and prosecute and pass judgments on the state and its agents. There is a conscious appropriation of familiar "ways of speech" and knowing, a preponderance of narrative intertextuality, and the use of popular cultural forms such as satire and humor as strategic "techniques of evasion" (Bayart 1993; See also Street 1997). These strategies creatively adopt and reframe Twitter's standard vernaculars such as hashtags and memes as to make them much more open to political inflections and popular appropriations thus facilitating broad participation. I discuss some of these practices below.

Researching Twitter, of course, presents significant methodological challenges (Bruns and Burgess 2013). Although now a site of increasing scholarly interest, there is no single approach in social media research

that has been widely adopted. Twitter datasets are notoriously large, requiring a big financial investment in appropriate analytics software. Other challenges include "the self-selecting nature of social media users, inequalities in access to social media platforms and data, the difficulty of obtaining meaning from heterogeneous data of variable quality and provenance, and a dependence on observing and interpreting what is 'out there' in a way that differs from traditional sampling approaches" (Taylor and Pagliari 2017: 3). This discussion is however more conceptual than empirical and focuses primarily on a close reading of Twitter hashtags as a way of understanding the instrumentalization of disorder as a form of political practice. The hashtags are purposely selected from 2016 to 2020. I focus only on hashtags that trended in Kenya during this period and only those whose focus was primarily political.

Hashtags and the Politics of the Everyday

Subversion through popular cultural forms has traditionally been a defining characteristic of oppositional cultures in Kenya. From popular music to visual art to theater productions, sites of dissent have long existed outside the formal institutional structures. The subversion of the state and its policies particularly through the creative use of humor has been one of the most distinctive features of Kenya's political cultures and the subject of many scholarly works (see Ligaga 2012; Ogola 2010). Kenya's post-independence governments have historically invented a particular majesty of the state, enforced both symbolically through mythologies (Ogola 2010) and through violence. To puncture this majesty, citizens have in the same way invented ways of unraveling this majesty, fundamentally through cryptopolitics, where, for example, humor becomes a powerful stick with which to undress and beat the state. To borrow and paraphrase the words of the Ugandan writer John Ruganda, in Kenya the truth has always been told laughingly (Ruganda 1992: 20). These are traditions that have now been reconstituted and appropriated by KOT in their political instrumentalization of Twitter hashtags.

Hashtags provide several communicative possibilities ranging from facilitating user interactivity, organizing publics around specific issues or debates, to framing debates. In technical terms, hashtags are metadata tags used to index particular topics to make them discoverable by users hence facilitating their virality. On KOT, hashtags commonly draw from the "disorder" that characterizes everyday life. For illustration, I want to use one popular hashtag #*BoraUhai*, arguably one the most

famous hashtags that have been used on social media in Kenya for a few years now, but which continues to retain its discursive relevance and agency. I examine the *#BoraUhai* hashtag to demonstrate how Twitter is used as a discursive space for the instrumentalization of conversational "disorder" and how this discursivity informs its politicality.

Bora Uhai is a Kiswahili phrase meaning "so long as there is life" or "as long as life prevails." Although it has a much older history in popular lore, its appropriation in everyday (online) speech can be traced to the relatively recent impact of the gambling industry in Kenya. The phrase was commonly used by punters whenever they lost their money while gambling. Punters used the phrase to wish away their losses, exclaiming that such material loss was incomparable to the gift of life. The appropriation of this phrase online however has seen it invested with a broad range of meanings, both literal and metaphorical, its power and popularity lying precisely in its ambiguity. It is a term that refuses definitional capture and its constructed meanings are as varied as its uses. It is creatively used online to anchor narratives on national politics and to reflect on individual anxieties in equal measure, its narrative possibilities are endless.

The looseness of the discursive boundaries of *#BoraUhai* is typical of such everyday phrases adopted as hashtags on the Kenyan twittersphere. They create a strategic disorder that is conducive to the disruption of hierarchies in online conversations and help in challenging various presumed norms of order. On her Twitter account, @Niwachera, for example, writes, "the Slogan [*bora uhai*] consoles Kenyans emptiness . . . . The trending of this 'Bora Uhai' slogan depicts an underlying serious, psychological problem in Kenyan society! It means a good number have given up on their dreams . . . All they value is being alive to see a day at a time." The phrase here is layered in meaning. It can be interpreted literally but also as a direct indictment of the poor state of the nation and the sense of desperation that has engulfed many Kenyans.

This flexibility in interpretation enables users to adopt the hashtag in anchoring and facilitating multiple discussions; from the expression of individual and collective angst and apparent despair to using it as a shorthand for various narratives of political protestations. These features make it particularly difficult to police. This is an example of how narrative that seems to be in disorder is instrumentalized especially politically. It congregates people around particular issues and creates important pockets of indiscipline. Thus, for example, retweeting a tweet from the Liberian President George Weah following his announcement that tuition fees would be free for all students at the University of Liberia and all other public universities in Liberia, @sonkokelem

tweeted: "Some people are lucky to have working leaders in the world, *sisi tu ni borauhai* [trans: for us it is as long as life prevails] #nawekilawakati [trans: may He [God] be with you all the time]."

Note here that the country's leader is not named but is in fact pointedly inferred by his very absence from the tweet. The subject of the criticism is obvious and particularly coming at a time when a number of university students were struggling to raise university fees or get loans from the state. Such direct comparisons would not have been made in straight news stories in the local media. Twitter users exploit an important strategic narrative style; the use of silences, a notable feature of conversations on KOT. These are what Scott (1990) describes as "strategies of resistance" and what Bayart calls "techniques of evasion and pretence" (1993: 254).

#BoraUhai primarily manifests as a hashtag but functionally does much more. As a hashtag it is used to refuse narrative closure. This is because it is not specific to the discussion of a particular subject or topic. Instead, it is open to appropriation by users to discuss multiple issues, indexing them to congregate publics around such discussions. It is further used to link apparently unrelated stories in a manner that encourages intertextuality. For example, a story about Liberia is used to critique the state in Kenya. Drawing upon experiences and examples from the international circuit both dramatize the criticism and more importantly, lends it legitimacy. In addition, this constructed ambiguity, the fact that the subject of the criticism is not named, protects users from possible state reprisal.

In another example, @dotmusya commenting on the controversial 2018 Finance Bill, a piece of legislation that led to an increase in fuel taxes in the country, writes; "Not much surprised by the turn of events, after all, the loans have to be paid, budget funded and corruption money factored too. #KOT tighten your belts, we will know the real meaning of the phrase *#borauhai* #2018FinanceBill#TaxVoteKe."

This is an open rebuke of the government and the observation that corruption is now endemic, even budgeted for. The writer worries about the level of fiscal indiscipline and hence raises concerns about the inevitable impact of these practices on the lives of Kenyans. The *#borauhai* hashtag in this instance also provides further scope for the discussion with the addition of two other hashtags #2018FinanceBill and #TaxVoteKe. Other users following or participating in these two hashtags are invited to this particular discussion through the *#borauhai* hashtag, broadening the "imagined" public and widening participation.

Following the passing of this bill, Okiya Omatata, a well-known Kenyan political activist, now a member of parliament, who has taken the government to court numerous times, often to the chagrin of the state, Parliament, and the Kenya Law Society went to court. A Kenyan human rights activist based in the United States quickly organized an online fundraiser for Omtata to help him pursue the case. Using the hashtag #OmtataNiWetu, Kenyans were asked to send their contributions to a mobile money number (M-Pesa) included in the hashtag. Hundreds of thousands of Kenyan shillings were raised. @Mwachondahuey thus wrote; "I hope anthropologists are documenting Kenyans in #OmtataNiWetu conversations this #OmtataFriday. The apologists, the naysayers, the #BoraUhai specialists, the #SioUshawiNiMaobi crew, the apologists for the thieves stealing our future. The clueless #UhuRuto and crew." The hashtag #UhuRuto is a contraction of Uhuru and Ruto, the surnames of then Kenya's president and his deputy, now president The textual hybridity in the tweet appears complicated yet is quite easily accessible to Kenyans. Here @Mwachondahuey is expressing the power of Kenya's online community to mobilize not only discursively around national issues such as the 2018 Finance Bill but also to pool together financial resources to fight unfair government policy.

Other notable protest hashtags illustrative of these political practices include #Wanjikuamechoka trans: Wanjiku is tired) and #Pundamechoka (trans: the donkey is tired often used interchangeably. Wanjiku is a female Kikuyu name (Kenya's most populous ethnic community). The name was however invested with subversive political meaning in the 1990s. During the agitation for constitutional change in Kenya in the 1990s, then President Daniel Moi dismissed the calls for change and popular participation in the constitutional process saying: "Wanjiku haelewi mambo ya constitution. Katiba haitaongezi sufuria ya ugali kwa jikoni ya Wanjiku" (trans: Wanjiku does not understand these things about the constitution. The constitution will not add a pot of ugali to Wanjiku's kitchen). In what was a subversive rebuke to the president, Kenyans began referring to the common wo/man as Wanjiku and around her are now conversations and debates that generally speak against the government. The hashtag #Wanjikuamechoka thus indexes the cries of the common citizen standing up against the tyranny of the state. The hashtag is used to expose and criticize government failings and mobilize common citizens to speak up against government oppression in its various manifestations. For example, @brian_kavuwa writes: "It's no longer important, even if we vote or not, the elites will steal. The best thing for Kenyans is total abstinence toward actual voting. The

elites can marshal their relatives to vote for them #wanjikuamechoka." The author of this tweet despairs at the failure of representative politics in Kenya. In another condemnation of the failure of representative politics in the country, @DuniaNiDuara writes, "@StateHouseKenya we are waiting for the Bunge [trans: Parliament] to be dissolved asap. God has a way of saving His people if they repent. He has heard Wanjiku prayers #WanjikuAmechoka thank you." @Classic105Kenya provides similar criticism, writing: "I guess it's a wake-up call to Kenyans that we should not vote for someone coz they are popular or they come from ur tribe. Each and every corrupt individual should go. #Wanjikuamechoka."

Meanwhile, protesting against the tax burden on ordinary Kenyans, @kelvin_ngondi writes: "The debt burden on Wanjiku will soon become unbearable, we cannot continue with the trend of borrowing money to enrich a few corrupt people while the majority remain unemployed and lack the basic needs #WanjikuAmechoka." In support, @koosano writes, "I am tired of paying taxes that then get stolen #WanjikuAmechoka."

As noted above, the hashtag #Wanjikuamechoka is commonly used interchangeably with #Pundaamechoka. Ordinary Kenyans here are metaphorically compared to a donkey, historically the beast of burden. @MukamiWaEmbu writes: "We must #ReduceParliament to have (1) At most 100 MPs, (2) Reduce Constituencies to 100, (3) Scrap off (sic) Women Rep post, (reduce women representatives posts) (4) Reduce Counties to 25, (5) Elect 25 Governors, (6) Elect 50 Senators (2 from each County), (7) Reduce Wards to at most 500. #WageBillFromHell #PundaAmechoka." Meanwhile, @Mutugian_K calls for a revolution against the government, writing: "The only #KenyansForKenya we need is taking to the streets with the Mother of All Demos and show the reality of #JubileeTumechoka and #PundaAmechoka." A similar call is made by @ClariseLizarazu who writes: "When I imagine Uhuru being in power for another 14 years I'm frightened and shaken to the bone #DespotsMustFall #PundaAmechoka."

Criticizing a government housing scheme to which many Kenyans were compelled to contribute to @VitalGideon complains: "A govt that wants to build affordable houses in Kenya using our salaries but can't build enough classes since 1963 #PundaAmechoka."

The collective fury in these hashtags is palpable. The hashtags provide possibilities for engagement with many topics at different levels. But what is perhaps most notable is the fact that they give citizens narrative agency, helping them develop and shape the narrative beyond the closely monitored parameters of such discussions in traditional public communication platforms such as mainstream media.

Twitter Hashtags and Political Performance

We may further draw on Robert Entman's (2004) work on "framing" to understand how hashtags are employed politically by Kenyan Twitter users. For Entman, communication practices are essentially framing exercises. I want to argue that to engage the political, hashtags are increasingly framed performatively by Kenyan users. Two narrative styles are usually adopted. Users frame certain hashtags to emphasize or validate a commonly agreed position (emphasis frames) or deploy a framing strategy that destabilizes a contested position or narrative, what is normally referred to as equivalence frames. Entman argues that "emphasis frames" are "messages constructed in such a way as to help people make a judgement" (Entman 2004: 20), normally encoded in the message. Hashtags framed in this way typically direct the contours and boundaries of a discussion by focusing on the development and validation of a singular narrative or supporting a preferred argument. The scope for the contestation of such a position is minimal. On #KOT, hashtags employing this "emphasis frame" typically focus on the symbols and examples of state failure. The targets of censure are usually state institutions or its sanctioned practices, and the political and economic elite. These hashtags have a pre-determined agenda, emphasized through the affirmation of a statement around which the hashtag is constructed. For illustration we can cite the hashtags discussed above #Pundaamechoka or #Wanjikuamechoka. Another illustrative example is #lipakamatender (trans: pay promptly like a [government] tender), a hashtag that was created during a crippling doctors' strike in Kenya in 2016. The hashtag was framed in support of Kenya's striking doctors. The hashtag mobilized public opinion to force the government to pay doctors their dues. Beneficiaries of government tenders, often individuals with connections to government bureaucrats tend to be paid promptly and generously. The hashtag makes that contradiction quite apparent. Other examples include #systemyamajambazi, #mtuwetunonesense, and similar. In the case of #systemyamajambazi, local slang that loosely means a "system of thieves," there was an implied invitation of users to focus on the predatory nature of the Kenyan state. Through examples, publics convened around the hashtag were not expected to contest the validity of the declaration but rather to provide evidence to confirm that the system is indeed one that thrives on predation. Contributions to the hashtag included the following examples: @isaiahmusindi writes, "#SystemYaMajambazi MPs Cut SRC [Salaries Remuneration Commission] Budget After it Blocked Their 250,000 monthly house allowance."

Commenting on the huge wealth disparities in the country, @KenyanHorn writes: "Jubilee folks contributed billions within two hours to fund its campaign. Why don't they come together now and contribute to help starving Turkana Residents? *Ama wanangoja* [trans: or they are waiting for] 2022 [election year]? #SystemYaMajambazi."

Meanwhile @ColloSalasya criticized government leaders for normalizing a culture of cheating in the country. This was in response to allegations of cheating in the national O-Level examinations of the Kenya Certificate of Secondary Education (KCSE). She thus writes, "If Waiguru and the likes of Mailu [Waiguru and Mailu were former cabinet secretaries] stole NYS and Health money but govt tells us they didn't, yet Kenyans know. These students are only copying their leaders. Kenyan leaders are rotten. What do u expect kids to do if not emulating that #systemyamajambazi #KCSEExamCheating."

When the government decided to employ Cuban doctors at far better salaries than Kenyan doctors, @jumaf complained: "With Sh 10.5B stolen from NYS [National Youth Service] and Sh 1.7B potentially missing from MoH [Ministry of Health], these two ladies are now moving on to "Health Specialists" from Cuba. And then we will all gasp and be horrified when those scandals land. #UhuruAppointees #SystemYaMajambazi #GangstaRegime." In the examples above, the government, its institutions, and the political class are variously criticized through the hashtag #systemyamajambazi.

Hashtags, Discursive Openness, and Political Indiscipline

While "emphasis"-framed hashtags focus attention on the development and validation of a particular argument, the non-declaratory frames or equivalence frames tend to be open-ended and encourage the discussion of multiple topics. To do so, they are styled to encourage the appropriation of other narrative forms for political engagement most notably humor. These types of hashtags work through much looser discursive boundaries thus allowing for multiple, even contradictory narratives, using disorder that is deliberate, for through such ambiguity, political "indiscipline" is encouraged. Some illustrative examples include hashtags such as #babawhileyouwereaway (trans: father while you were away), #whatwouldmagufulido, #thingsjesusdidnotdie4, and the hashtag discussed above, #borauhai.

The hashtag #babawhileyouwereaway, for example, was created in the aftermath of Kenya's contested 2017 elections. The country's charismatic opposition leader, former Prime Minister Raila Odinga (commonly

referred to as *baba*) left the country for a relatively long overseas trip. On his return to the country, taking on a familiar filial trope, Kenyans on Twitter exploited the opportunity to discuss the state of the nation. In Kenya, it is widely agreed that on returning home from work, children often tell their father (*baba*) what happened at home in their absence hence the creation of the hashtag #babawhileyouwere away. Exploiting this trope, the hashtag was used to anchor many political issues to dramatize state failure under President Uhuru Kenyatta. Some illustrative examples include: @Purity_Bisieri writes, "#BabaWhileYouWereAway We were sold to China and 'Ochieng' became 'O Chi Yeng.'" This was a pointed reference to the government's appetite for Chinese loans, whose repayment was being seen as a burden to ordinary people. The ultimate surrender of sovereignty was dramatized in the alleged name change of "Ochieng" to a Chinese-sounding name "O chi Yeng." @InsecurityKE writes, "#Babawhileyouwereaway Kenya police service was ranked the worst in the World." This was in response to a report that indeed ranked the Kenya police service as one of the worst in the world.

Meanwhile, @kmwanzia writes, #Babwhileyouwereaway Zimbabwe reached Canaan before us #railareturns." This tweet was a reference to the ouster of Robert Mugabe in Zimbabwe. During election campaigns, politicians often draw on religious symbols and metaphors to validate their suitability for political posts. Raila had used the metaphor of Moses leading the Israelites from Egypt to Canaan [the Promised Land] to make his case for wanting to be Kenya's president. His "promised land" was a Kenya in which as president he would tackle the many ills and challenges ordinary Kenyans were facing. The Bible in Kenya is at once a spiritual book, a reference text for making sense of the everyday, but also a political text that provides politicians and the public alike a common vocabulary for political engagement. To be sure, Christianity has always occupied a central place in Kenyans' popular imagination. The appropriation of biblical hermeneutics in political debates in the country is thus common. Through these hashtags, such Christian discourse is effectively utilized to generate conversations and provide a familiar archive for political interpretation.

Conclusion

The political instrumentalization of Twitter hashtags in Kenya opens them up to various discursive possibilities. Discussions on Twitter are reputedly chaotic and characterized by narrative disorder, yet through the creative use of hashtags, we see how a new order is created, one in

which narrative agency is reconstituted and reconfigured by users. We see a near elimination of traditional hierarchies of political order both concerning who gets to define and speak politically and also what constitutes the political. Mainstream media have strict gatekeeping processes that help sustain particular orders in conversations. Who speaks and what is said is determined by a set of structural and professional rules, which more often than not privilege the dominant economic and political voices in society. Within the context of Kenya in which the visible and invisible tools of control ensure the pre-eminence of the state in defining and setting the parameters of political discourse, social media has become notably disruptive. It is therefore eminently arguable that social media has provided new possibilities for Kenya's political practices especially as far as communication is concerned. Even as we take note of its material and discursive limitations, we cannot ignore the uses to which platforms such as Twitter have been put by users. Indeed, these limitations have made users narratively much more inventive.

This discussion has attempted to demonstrate how Kenyans on Twitter, well aware, for example, of the hierarchies that have emerged on the platform, have developed less vertical narrative strategies and discursive practices that are much more inclusive. These employ familiar everyday idioms to expand publics, encourage participation and anchor various narratives by way of either legitimizing commonly agreed positions or disrupting those that are contested.

It is important however that we look at the use of social media platforms such as Twitter in Kenya as part of a historical evolution of Kenya's political practices. Users have stylized the platform to capture present realities and challenges and exploited its affordances while appropriating and reconfiguring older forms of political practices. This discussion further demonstrates the need to reflect on the dominant even teleological analytical paradigms used to study politics in Africa that elevate the significance of formal political institutions and processes. The case I make here is that the loci of political practices and ultimately of power in Kenya, as in many parts of Africa, is much more dispersed than we often acknowledge. Sites such as social media and the practices they facilitate can no longer be ignored or Othered.

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Notes

1. See full census reports at www.knbs.or.ke/. The Kenya Bureau of Statistics conducts population census every 10 years.
2. See full census reports at www.knbs.or.ke/.
3. See www.ca.go.ke/. The Kenya Communications Authority is the regulatory body for the communications sector in the country.
4. See www.ca.go.ke/.

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