

Can the concept “political opportunity structure” inform M4D research?

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Mobile phone acquisition and usage in Sub-Saharan Africa has seen a tremendous growth over the past decade. In the wake of this expansion, the technology has often been ascribed the role of a potential transformer in diverse areas, such as governance and democratization, civil society mobilization, transparency and anti-corruption. A reoccurring theme in much of the literature, is a taken for granted causality between access to mobile technology and civil society participation and ultimately empowerment of the same connected citizens.

Although social movement theory have long recognized the importance of the political context as a key determining factor for the emergence of social movements, their impact and their longevity, few scholars have paid attention to the concepts of "political opportunity structure" in relation to M4D.

The following paper will explore how this concept can inform our understanding of when and where, i.e., under what socio-political conditions mobile technology seem to become a mobiliser and tool to claim space to participate in political process. The paper will attempt to conceptualize how perceived political opportunity, and indeed constraints could be understood in relation to M4D. The paper departs from an assumption that mobile phones contains a transformative potential, but argues that whether it become enlisted as a tool by social actors is dependent on their understanding of the medium *and* parameters such as, but not limited to, the receptiveness of the formal political system, the existence of allies within government or the formal political system, the expected monetary and personal costs for social mobilization as well as likely outcomes of collective action. The research argues that existing political institutions should not be treated as epiphenomenal, but rather seen as important structures warranting attention, in order to understand mobiles as a tool for participation.

About the Authors:

Jakob Svensson and Cecilia Strand work at the Department of Informatics and Media. Both have PhD in Media and Communication Studies. Jakob Svensson studied citizen participation and processes of local governance in his PhD dissertation (2008). Cecilia Strand's dissertation (2011) focused on media discourses on HIV/ AIDS and sexual minorities in the Ugandan, Basotho and Namibian contexts.