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**Panel:** Digital technologies and the politics of data in Africa

**Conveners:** Charlotte Cross and Anna Colom (The Open University, UK)

**Paper:** Internet and electoral observation in Mozambique: voices and experiences<sup>1</sup>

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## **Abstract**

This paper aims to understand the political impact of social networking platforms on the general elections in Mozambique, held in October 15, 2014. It focuses on how electoral observation was carried out in Mozambique using online tools. The study is based on an ongoing research project exploring political of young people in politics through the Internet in Mozambique. It will adopt a qualitative approach (interviews and digital ethnography) to sketch out the landscape of online electoral observation in Mozambique. The positions here are the result of abstraction and generalization – the particular positions of individuals or groups will only ever approximate such generalized positions, which are reconstructed from the complexity of everyday situated experience. As a preliminary conclusion, we have noted that the Internet allows the ‘emergence of new perspectives’ in the case of the political participation in Mozambique, despite the reduced access to the Internet.

**Keywords:** political participation, electoral observation, social networks sites

## Introduction and approach

Since the panel mention “data” as the central concept, it’s worth stressing that there are some significant and insightful studies currently being done that involve (big) data, but we should still ask critical questions about what all this data means, who gets access to what data, how data analysis is deployed, and to what ends (Boyd, 2014). For example, in the case of social media data, there is a ‘data cleaning’ process: making decisions about what attributes and variables will be counted, and which will be ignored. Data introduces two new popular types of social networks derived from data traces (*ibid.* 2014: 671): ‘articulated networks’ (those that result from people specifying their contacts through technical mechanisms like email or cell phone address books, instant messaging buddy lists, friend lists on social network sites and follower lists on other social media genres) and ‘behavioral networks’ (networks that derives from communication patterns, cell phone coordinates, and social media interactions – these might include people who text message one another, those who are tagged in photos together on Facebook, people who email one another, and people who are physically in the same space, at least according to their cell phone).

We should also note that the Internet has now become a more popular means of communication than the traditional print and electronic media were in recent times (Lee et al. 2012). It has also been argued that the Internet has generated enormous interest about whether and how digital platforms, including social media, have any impact on the politics. As a result, today we can rely on the increasing body of research evidence that focus on the multiple relations between social media and politics from different perspectives (Calderaro, 2018: 781). Equally, Dahlberg (2011: 1) has noted that for well over a decade there has been widespread enthusiasm about the possibility of digital media technology advancing and enhancing democratic communication, which comes from a surprisingly diverse array of political interests, ranging from government officials to anti-government libertarians.

In addition, the growing use of digital technologies has intensified the production and circulation of digital data in Africa. A wide range of data are collected openly, often through digital surveys and increasingly so, discreetly via technologies such as mobile apps, text messages, satellite data, and smart captors. Far from simply following trends established in the West, the Global South, and Africa in particular, has become a place where game-changing projects are experimented, from mobile money to the implementation of national biometric identification systems. Several scholars have already suggested that those practices constitute new forms of quantification, control and surveillance over people's lives.

Despite the premise whereby the Internet opens ‘political conversation’ (Stromer-Galley, 2003), we observe that the expansion of this debate is far from mechanical and unambiguous. It often appears rather limited, unequal and dependent on traditional media. For example, in an article published in 2008, Farrell and Dresser found that, American political blogs generally draw only a fraction of the online audience that traditional media enjoys. As Bimber (2005: 365) has pointed out, recently, an array of actions in which technologies of information and communication are central has proven theoretically and empirically intriguing from a collective action standpoint. Self-organizing online groups, rapidly assembled networks of protesters, “meet ups,” new structures for interest groups, and “viral” e-mail lists are all examples of collective behaviors employing advanced communication and information technologies.

In addition, we observe that the Internet has not only been investing in disseminating information and debating public affairs, but it has also been invested by civil society actors to renew the forms of civic engagement. This is the current context in which Mozambique can be framed. The emergence of the online citizen’s platform, such as *Txeka*, that started as a simple tool for social networking which aimed to create a space for the transmission of a message to express popular views on the country’s political or social context. Its use was specifically reinforced during general elections in October, 2014 as one of the main tools for electoral mobilization. In Mozambique, Internet access only reaches 18% of the population (Hootsuite, 2019), mostly living in the urban area of the country.

However, despite this lack of access, there is a growing tendency to use information and communication technologies as a tool for political participation and engagement, especially by young people as the ‘creators of a new popular culture’ (Boeck, 2016). However, during several demonstrations in which social network tools were used as tools of social and political mobilization in Africa (Honwana, 2014), political actors tend to control these spaces through instruments as was the case in Tanzania and Uganda. In 2018, to prevent students from cheating on high school exams Algeria’s government shut down the internet intermittently and since May 2018, Chad’s Internet has been blocked by its government. According to these examples, Devermont (2019) argues that mobile phones and the Internet can’t create a democracy out of an autocracy<sup>2</sup>, but they can facilitate the necessary first steps – as the Internet can be used to fuel democracy, it can also be used to disrupt it.

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<sup>2</sup> There is no single definition, but it can be considered as dictatorship – typically viewed as brutally repressive regimes where power lies in the hand of a single individual – it has been assumed that totalitarianism emerges in

In this paper, we aim to analyze the electoral observation process in Mozambique made through the use of the digital platform called *Txeke* (“Watch it”, in English). This platform was created by young activists in the run up to the 2014 general elections and has operated by sharing localized information (maps and social network tools) on the elections. Regarding this, Nyabuga & Mudhai (2009) cited by Mare (2015), investigating the use of new media technologies by mainstream political parties in Kenya during the disputed 2007 election, have argued that while new media has the potential to strengthen the process of monitoring elections as well as to mobilize political activities and possibly encourage political engagement, it can also reinforce positions of those in power and are susceptible to manipulation by human agents.

Therefore, this paper will also be focused on how digital platforms such as *Txeke* have influenced electoral observation in Mozambique, during the 2014 general elections. To this end, this paper will first provide a theoretical discussion on the role of digital media in elections, followed by a review of prior research on the impact of digital media, for example and not only Mudhai (2013) and Dwyer (2019). Based on my own practical experience and information collected on social media from *Txeke*’s publications on its Facebook page, as well as in-depth interviews made between July-August in 2017 with the core team of *Txeke*, we hypothesize that this platform has served as a permanent mechanism to generate significant information on the electoral process. However, it should be noted that the increase in awareness does not necessarily imply any more civic engagement in the political debates at large in this specific case. Concretely, our analysis of *Txeke*’s Facebook page was made based on three assumptions:

- (1) As a communicative medium (used to communicate with the participants across time and distance).
- (2) As a data source (including the participants’ status updates, message contact, photos).
- (3) As a context (a shared, observable space that fed into and framed data collection).

After the introduction, we will firstly take a broad look at the discussion about political participation in the digital era in Africa. We will then go on, to focus on some theoretical perspectives on electoral observation and the Internet in Africa. We will then look

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places where the rigors of extreme levels of individualism in capitalist societies draw people to a totalitarian ideology [Erica Frantz, 2016 – Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Politics].

at the results regarding the *Txeke* experience as on-line platform of electoral observation, before finally suggesting some conclusions and research proposals.

### **Political participation in the digital era in Africa**

It is important to note that according to Dimitrova (2011:100), the impact of digital media on voters may, however, differ depending on the type of digital media under examination, that is, different forms of digital media, which carry different primary functions, may lead to differential effects on voters. Indeed, consulting political news web sites may be qualitatively different from blogging or connecting with a politician or with like-minded others on a social networking site. As digital media has evolved, the sites of political candidates and political parties have become more interactive and begun to incorporate more multimedia and interactive features (Foot & Schneider, 2006). Newer digital media forms, including blogs, online video sites such as YouTube, and social networks such as Facebook, provide even more opportunities for connecting politicians and voters.

Furthermore, Rodotà (1999) argues that political communication across social network sites, while allowing politicians to use filters and diversion tactics, exposes them considerably to the public. What is important is the possibility for citizens to be in direct and continuous contact with politicians, and this transform the identity of the political party profoundly. Loader (1999), notes that a variety of models, experiments and initiatives are emerging in response to the challenge of (re)invigorating democratic institutions and practice by utilizing ICTs. These initiatives are variously grouped in the literature under the umbrella of ‘electronic democracy’, ‘teledemocracy’ and ‘cyberdemocracy’.

When we talk about political participation, it’s important to note that within the field of political science studies, the elections are the first demonstration of interaction between politicians and citizens (Braud, 2014). Acts directed against all political, societal, media or economic actors (or elites) could be classed as “political participation” (Teorell et al. 2007, 335-336; Norris 2002, 193). Teorell et al. (2007) suggest a more extensive typology, encompassing five dimensions. Electoral participation is the first of these. Consumer participation covers donating money to charity, boycotting and political consumption, as well as signing petitions (in a manner of speaking, it taps into the role of citizens as critical consumers) is the second dimension. The third dimension is party activity: to be a member of, active within, do voluntary work for or donate money to a political party. Protest activity is the fourth dimension, which covers acts like taking part in demonstrations, strikes and other

protest activities. Contacting organizations, politicians or civil servants represents the fifth dimension, contact activity.

The expanded conception of participation, sometimes referred to as civic participation, not only increases its scope to include communal forms of engagement, but also privileges a view of the community, rather than elected office, as the central locus of political mobilization and action. In this paper, we adopt the expanded view of political participation because we would argue that expressive political participation in the online domain for such societies may operate as a precursor to other forms of participation, including voting, donation activities, and community volunteering in the offline domain. Regarding digital media in Africa, Huet (2017) shows that the continent is breaking new ground with new uses and is completely revolutionising everyday solutions. The author identifies five elements that have allowed Africa to skip development stages vis-à-vis other continents: telecommunications, mobile financial services, e-commerce, e-government and the economy of collaborative platforms. From Egypt to South Africa, Nigeria to Ethiopia, a new force for political change is emerging across Africa: popular protest. Widespread urban uprisings by youth, the unemployed, trade unions, activists, writers, artists, and religious groups are challenging injustice and inequality.

According to Devermont (2019), mobile phones played a powerful role. He notes that Sub-Saharan Africa in 2008 had about 800 protests – in 2018 there were just under 4,000 protests – and part of that escalation can be chalked up to more phones and internet users ‘lowering the barriers to organizing’. Drawing on interviews and in-depth analysis, Branch and Mampilly (2015) offer an insightful assessment of contemporary African protests, situating the current popular activism within its historical and regional contexts. For example, Bruijn (2019) notes that the changes brought by the Internet are met with huge optimism for Africa and source of glory and revolution. But practice, however, reveals other sides. In fact, increasingly, academic publications show that Africa is facing a new form of digital divide, in which the continent is (again) at the margins.

### **Internet and electoral observation in Africa**

The relation between electoral observation and the Internet in Africa has been studied by many scholars in recent years (Dzisah, 2008; Ifukor, 2010; Mudhai, 2013; Ndavula et al. 2014 and Salgado 2016). Reframing digital democracy from an African perspective, Nyabola’s (2018) ground-breaking work opens up new ways of understanding our current

global online era. This author explores the drastic efforts being made by elites to contain online activism, as well as how ‘fake news’, a failed digital vote-counting system and the incumbent president's recruitment of *Cambridge Analytica* contributed to tensions around Donald Trump’s election. From the upheavals of recent national elections to the success of the #MyDressMyChoice feminist movement, digital platforms have already had a dramatic impact on political life in Kenya – one of the most electronically advanced countries in Africa. While the impact of the Digital Age on Western politics has been extensively debated, there is still little appreciation of how it has been felt in developing countries such as Kenya, where Twitter, Facebook, WhatsApp and other online platforms are increasingly a part of everyday life.

Dwyer (2019) in the book entitled ‘Social media and politics in Africa: democracy, censorship and security’ drawing from over a dozen new empirical case studies – from Kenya to Somalia, South Africa to Tanzania –, explores how rapidly growing social media use is reshaping political engagement in Africa. But while social media has often been hailed as a liberating tool, the book demonstrates how it has often served to reinforce existing power dynamics, rather than challenge them. For the author, the smartphone and social media have transformed Africa, allowing people across the continent to share ideas, organize and participate in the realm of politics like never before. While either both activists or governments have both turned to social media as a new form of political mobilization, some African states have increasingly sought to clamp down on the technology, introducing restrictive laws or shutting down networks altogether.

The presidents of Rwanda and Kenya, Kagame and Kenyatta respectively, are among a growing group of African politicians using social media to leverage their communications with citizens<sup>3</sup>. From Egypt, Zimbabwe, Zambia, Nigeria, Ghana, The Gambia to South Africa, as well in many other African countries, election candidates are increasingly taking to Twitter, Facebook, Snapchat, WhatsApp and other platforms to generate viral messages whose influence and scope are yet to be examined. It is important to consider the results and impact of spreadable or viral messages from traditional and social media on elections in Africa in relation to changing political, economic and social contexts. There are many issues involved, including those of the cost of access for users, politics of ownership of the networks

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<sup>3</sup> Paul Kagame (President of Rwanda) has more than 1.400.000 followers on Twitter. Uhuru Kenyatta (President of Kenya), being the most followed African leader on Twitter, the blackout sparked speculation that his handle, @UKenyatta with 3.62 million followers, may have been debarred by the microblogging site. The verified Twitter account was the first to be suspended. Search for UKenyatta returned a ‘‘Sorry, that page doesn’t exist!’’ response, and the President's Facebook account was suspended shortly afterwards.

and the impact of viral media cultures on power relations in the democratization process<sup>4</sup> – what some scholars call “the digital divide” (Dahlberg, 2005; van Dijk, 2012). According to the Alliance for Affordable Internet – A4AI (2019), the biggest barrier for people getting online today is the cost of data. While people in high-income countries typically pay less than 1% of the average monthly income for 1GB data, the figure in Africa is 9%. However, it’s important to note that including Mozambique, Facebook has encouraged, in the name of connectivity and overcoming the digital divide, a number of ways for mobile phone users to use Facebook at little or no cost, including via cheap SIM cards and Facebook’s “0” service, both of which enable users with basic mobile devices to connect to a text-based Facebook interface (Leistert, 2013).

The guidelines for African Union electoral observations and monitoring missions, states that the observation involves gathering information and making an informed judgement and the monitoring involves the authority to observe an election process and to intervene in that process if relevant laws or standard procedures are being violated or ignored. Electoral observation and monitoring have become an integral part of democratic and electoral processes in Africa. International, regional and national observers have yet come to play important roles in enhancing the transparency and credibility of elections and democratic governance in Africa and the acceptance of election results throughout the continent.

Talking about Zambia, Laslie (2002: 116) has pointed out that “(...) a number of civil society organizations with emphasis on the civic education of citizens have sprung up as part of the campaign for democracy. Although only a small handful of these reorganizations have access to the Internet...”. According to Surman and Reilly (2003), most civil societies in the US have yet to learn the many strategic uses of these technologies, by moving beyond e-mail and basic web sites. In Mozambique, legislation allows local organizations such as political parties, associations, NGOs and citizens to observe elections. This process is open to foreign observers as well as to journalists. In electoral law nothing is mentioned about the use of the information and communication technologies as observational tools, but in the 2018 municipal elections, the National Council of Elections has introduced new tools to consult electoral lists and results through Internet platforms.

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<sup>4</sup> Symposium organized by the Africa Media Centre, Communication and Media Research Institute (CAMRI).

## ***Txeka*: using online platform to observe elections in Mozambique**

*Txeka* was funded by the Canada Fund for Local Initiatives, the Canadian High Commission in Maputo partnered with non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in Mozambique and Kenyan to develop a Portuguese-language web-based application that empowered ordinary citizens to use their smartphones to report on election irregularities in the lead-up to the election. On the day of Mozambique's national election, which was held on October 15<sup>th</sup>, 2014 this social platform was made available for Android phones via Google Play and for Apple phones via iTunes. Users across Mozambique were able to download the app for free. Through this app, citizens sent reports, and shared photos and videos with the *Txeka* team of 20 analysts in Maputo who were trained by teams of Ushahidi<sup>5</sup> specialists. Certified election observers also receiving training on how to use *Txeka* and were deployed across Mozambique. Ushahidi Kenyan representatives were on hand on election day to help process the data that came in.

During the lead-up to the election, the *Txeka* team in Maputo uploaded information they received on irregularities to an online live map of Mozambique on the *Txeka* its website. Citizens without smartphones (hence without the *Txeka* app) sent text messages directly to the *Txeka* team<sup>6</sup>. On election night a "situation room" was set up in Maputo by Mozambique's largest television network with participants from the Government of Mozambique, the National Elections Commission, civil society organizations, the main political parties, and the media. The *Txeka* map was a key feature in gathering together providing real-time data that allowed stakeholders to discuss the concerns of citizens on the fairness and transparency of the electoral process.

The *Txeka* team received more than 3,000 messages from Mozambicans from across the country and was followed on Facebook by 14,000 users. Analyzing two electoral moments (before and during elections), we have noted that the Facebook page has published many posts (see the screenshots 1 to 6) using the hashtag #Txeka to promote online electoral observation. Our interview with Zandamela<sup>7</sup> – one of the members of *Txeka*, explained that

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<sup>5</sup> The organization uses the concept of crowdsourcing for social activism and public accountability, serving as an initial model for what has been coined as "activist mapping" — the combination of social activism, citizen journalism and geospatial information.

<sup>6</sup> According to statista (the statistics portal) 67,92 people per 100 habitants were subscribed to use mobile cellular in Mozambique in 2014. We consider these numbers as important to understand how the Mozambicans were connected using mobile phones.

<sup>7</sup> Interview 22/07/2017, Maputo – Mozambique

this was the first Mozambican platform of electoral observation which was created for young Mozambicans to show their disapproval regarding to politics:

I believe that every young person who uses a smartphone has at least Facebook and WhatsApp. There is a fringe of young people who don't use social network tools to share information about their own life, but they use some to manifest what they like or dislike about the Government. In 2014, there were few civil society organizations covering elections, but *Txeke* appeared as the first one. Today there are many online platforms that also want to do the same and we will have more online platforms doing the same process during next elections (Zandamela, Maputo – 2017).

On the other hand, Nhampossa and Queface<sup>8</sup> – also members of the *Txeke* team (situation room), explained that the electoral discussion between the members of different political parties on the Internet during the general election was radical and ideological. They also recalled that the *Txeke* uploaded the main electoral manifestos (Frelimo, Renamo and MDM – political parties) and electoral legislation to promote online debate during general elections, but some Facebook pages appeared to discredit the work of the *Txeke*. However, Nhampossa noted that this was to expected, because the moment of tension:

Each citizen's comments were motivated by their ideologies. However, we can highlight three groups: the first group which was seen as neutral, the second that identified as partisan, and last but not least the third group that only commented to disrupt the process. We cannot say so much about the debate on electoral manifestos, there was only debate about the behavior of the political parties or even about the candidates. What happened was that those who raised questions about the manifestos were only the academics (Nhampossa, Maputo – 2018).

Our interviews suggest that *Txeke* was an important channel of communication through which political communities or individual citizens as simple members of the public community provided information about their activities, publicized their positions on specific topics, shared information coming from multiple sources, as well as reported about issues surrounding them at a specific time (Calderaro, 2018: 783). However, we have noted that this process was not uniform because the debate was polarized and fragmented and made by specific actors – members of political parties – who are already engaged in politics. In other words, *Txeke* was a space to practice 'politics as usual' (Margolis & Resnick, 2000).

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<sup>8</sup> Interview 18/07/2017, Maputo – Mozambique



[Screenshot 1: *The use of social networks for political propaganda and citizen participation has had a major impact on the 2008 presidential elections in the United States and in 2013 in Kenya. In Mozambique, Txeka proposes to create an environment in which citizens can participate in elections by using the media to dialogue and share information about the electoral process. #Txeka | September 22, 2014*]



[Screenshot 2: *The Fifth General Elections in Mozambique that will take place in October 2014 differ absolutely from the First General Elections of 1994. Today we are all from Rovuma to Maputo, from Zumbo to the Indian Ocean connected instantly and electronically over the internet and cell phones. Information on the Internet is disseminated instantly, making election information available faster than traditional media | September 23, 2014*]



[Screenshot 3: *In addition to free, fair and transparent elections, all forms of violence must be avoided. If you check any situation of electoral violence, please let us know. #Txeka | September 24, 2014*]



[Screenshot 4: *Mozambique has one of the lowest rates in terms of access to the Internet access in Africa (4.85%). How can technology platforms bring about impact on a country with low internet access? #Txeka will allow those who do not have internet access to share information via SMS. All information will be analyzed and forwarded to institutions such as the CNE, Order of Lawyers, Police and others. Thus, the citizens will not be the informants, but will also be creating the conditions for the immediate intervention of the institutions related to the electoral process in the resolution of the reported situations | October 3, 2014*]



[Screenshot 5: To interact with Txeka, use the Twitter #hashtags whenever you are posting information about the elections: #Txeka #EleicoesMoz, #Mocambique2014 #Mozambique2014. You can also email [txekamoz@gmail.com](mailto:txekamoz@gmail.com) or go to [www.txeka.org.mz](http://www.txeka.org.mz) to submit information about the elections on the Txeka platform. Tell us everything that is happening in your neighborhood and community about the elections. Whenever you share information with Txeka, do not forget to mention the location. All information will be treated anonymously | October 10, 2014]



[Screenshot 6: There is shooting in Nampula city – in the school of Tiacane. According to the citizen report, there is no electricity, what hampers the situation | October 15, 2014]

These publications show us that *Txeke* can be considered in relation to what O'Really (2003) summarized as *the power of social media to (1) create and (2) access self-generated contents* which empower people to become the sources of information. At the same time, social media facilitate the proliferation of information through channels that are becoming easier to use and more accessible to a variety of online sources. On the other hand, *Txeke* can be viewed as *as a platform for political discourse* (Nguyen, 2011) – which reflects the increasingly interactive nature of the web, where people can not only receive but also add information. In fact, the web has become scalable in sense that people can personalize the kind of information they wish to receive and they can spread their own information amongst other people in their social network. The emergence of *Txeke* also appears to signal a change in the practice of electoral observation in Mozambique, which in previous elections was anchored in a model where only television and radio were the main channels. In addition, it is well known that the process of electoral observation carried out by civil society organizations is a crucial step in giving credibility to the electoral process, even being mentioned in the final ruling of the Constitutional Council on the proclamation of the electoral results in 2014.

However, as we pointed out regarding the quality of debate, we think that the *Txeke* cannot be generalized as an open space for all. This is mainly due unequal access to the Internet and existing constraints such as the absence of reflexive communication the domination of online attention by corporate interests and ongoing state surveillance and censorship – '[a] fragmented public sphere of insulated 'deliberative enclaves' where group positions and practices are reinforced rather than openly criticized' (Boyd, 2007: 828). Asymmetries in offline social, cultural and economic capital lead to asymmetries between voices online (Murdock and Golding, 2004). In addition, based on a study about Brazil, Baquero (2017: 11) has noted that the increase in one's Internet contacts or joining social networks do not necessarily increase political sophistication among young people nor do they lead to a more assertive political culture. Having equal access to the Internet does not mean that everyone gains equal benefit from it. Growth in basic user statistics does not necessarily mean that everybody is taking advantage of this technology in similar ways.

## Conclusion

Considering *Txeke* as digital communication initiative, it should be emphasized that this electoral observation platform is a counter-public activism movement made by young enthusiasts through information and communication technologies (ICT). This is particularly so in the case of the Internet, as digital democracy advocates and activists begin to challenge its increasing colonization by the state and its corporate interests (Jordan, 2007). In fact, we think that *Txeke* was the first empirical experience that challenged the long history of electoral observation made by traditional media (radio and television) in Mozambique. This result seems to be consistent with other research which has found that in recent years, electoral observation missions have been turning to ICT for the timely collection of data and easy processing, which also allows Electoral Management Bodies to quickly identify the problems and take actions to resolve them (EISA, 2019).

We can note that through initiatives such as *Txeke*, democracy can mean much more than voting or providing better public information to the citizens. Democracy has at its heart self-determination, participation, voice and autonomy. Taking the same point of view with Loader et al. (1995: 7), this paper argues that there is a need to consider *Txeke* as political culture that includes a wide range of realms for self-development and mutual collective expression. As Calderaro warns (2018: 788), if there are still questions about the direct impact of social media tools on politics, there is agreement on the fact that social media tools allow citizens to be not only receivers of information, helping them to form a voting preference or to inspire them to join a campaign or participate in a demonstration, but also to use the Internet to spread information, create new spaces to debate on politics, form affinity groups, and run grassroots campaigns.

However, the nature of Facebook as a mostly private network limits what can be learned from it. In fact, the majority of Facebook activity is still private and available only to Facebook itself. Even with just publicly available data, researchers face ethical and privacy concerns when deciding what to publish (Barthel, 2015). Finally, with regard to ethical implications underpinning the “big data” phenomenon, this paper concludes that there are three basic questions one must ask when undertaking research on big data and social media tools. These are: (1) what is the status of so-called ‘public’ data on social media sites? (2) can it simply be used, without requesting permission? (3) what constitutes best ethical practice for researchers?

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