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# Social Media Users and Use in East Africa

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**Abstract**

Social media presents novel ways for international development actors to reach out to beneficiaries and gather data about their thoughts, preferences, etc. However, much of the prevailing understanding of social media is informed by US/Western-oriented presumptions. By focusing on one region – East Africa – I hope to build an understanding of how local context impacts social media use and thus social media data.

**Author Keywords**

ICTD; HCI4D; social media; East Africa.

**ACM Classification Keywords**

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**Introduction**

With the increasing availability and affordability of internet capable mobile phones in many countries in the Global South, social media use – like many other facets of the internet – is on the rise. East Africa<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The East African Community (EAC) is made up of Kenya, Tanzania, Uganda, Rwanda, Burundi and South Sudan. Ethiopia, Somalia and the eastern provinces of the Democratic Republic of Congo are sometimes considered part of East Africa as they share borders with the six EAC countries and their political and economic environments are intertwined.

stands out both for record usage and encroaching government restrictions. Kenya's high concentration of technology start-up companies (earning it the nickname, "Silicon Savannah") and Nairobi's ranking as one of the most active cities in Africa on Twitter [1] show that East African users should no longer go "unimagined" [4] as technology users. Yet, in neighboring Uganda and Tanzania, recent government decisions to limit social media and internet use through taxes and registration fees (for blogs) [11, 14] are a reminder that local political context affects use and useability as well. East Africa is also notable for having a concentration of international development actors and agencies (UN HABITAT and UNEP are both headquartered in Nairobi, while UN Global Pulse has one of three labs in Kampala).

### **Research Area**

I am interested in exploring the practices of using social media – in particular Facebook, Twitter, and WhatsApp – in East Africa. From my experience living in Kenya, and working in and adjacent to the tech sector, I have seen evidence of practices that are different from the assumed or intended uses as defined by US/Western-oriented designers and companies. I have also seen how misunderstandings of these practices lead to problematic research and international development projects.

For example, in Kenya (in 2015-16) most smart phone users did not turn on the GPS in their phone or (at least) did not activate it for social media posts. Reasons given to explain this behavior varied from preserving phone battery or "data bundles" (pre-paid internet access) to avoiding surveillance by government and personal connections (ie. spouse/partner). During the

same period, at least two research projects that I was aware of (including [1]), by researchers not based in Kenya, conducted research about Twitter that used geolocation as the only means for determining if a tweet originated in Kenya. Research that misinterprets, and thus misses, these African users can have negative political, social, and economic impacts, especially given the increasing weight given to data by international development actors [13].

To one not familiar with Kenya, not activating GPS for apps like Twitter and Facebook might be classified as "misuse" or a sign of the user "not understanding" how to use these tools. However, I would argue that this is one example of use adapted to local context (*context* here encompassing national/regional socio-political conditions and personal circumstances). (For other contextualized approaches to social media research, see [15, 17, 18].) In focusing on instances of "wrong" uses or "misuses", I hope to build on previous research in ICTD and HCI4D that has explored non-use [2], unexpected or unplanned uses (including breakage and repair) [5, 12], and "unimagined" users [4].

### **My Positionality**

I come to HCI from a background in International Development and City Planning. In those fields I favored critical [6, 7], participatory [8, 9], and political [13] lenses. I came to research social media through previous work on participation, crowdsourcing and civic technology [16]. While I still feel new to HCI, critical [3] and post-colonial [10] approaches in the field feel familiar and compatible with my past perspectives. In addition, I hope HCI will support the analysis of the politics, biases, and assumptions embodied in social

media platforms, their data, and the discourses promoted by their creators.

As a white, privileged American, working from a prestigious US institution, I am cognizant of the power imbalance and historical implications of my working in East Africa. This is part of the reason that maintaining a critical perspective is essential, why I strive to do research that is grounded in local context and challenging US/Western-dominant perspectives. However, the region I where I work is not accidental. East Africa is not merely a field site for me; it is a region where I have spent nearly a third of my life and have close friends and family connections. These personal connections motivate my work and keep me accountable to more than academic audiences.

### **Solidarity**

My research aims to challenge who are considered to be the “normal” or “default” users and what are considered to be the “normal” or “correct” uses of social media (and thus technology). While I focus on East African users and practices, I hope that my insights contribute to elevating marginalized groups and challenging the presumption of one dominant user.

I try to work in solidarity, first, with the people and places that I research. This means being careful in how I represent them, understanding that my position as a foreigner and my affiliations with US institutions can confer on me more “expertise” than is fair, and give more weight to any recommendations or criticisms I make. Often this entails considering local and international politics and how they may affect the reception or interpretation of my findings or argument. Working with and crediting local partners and East

African scholars is another way to diffuse some of this “expert” status, or at least use it to highlight others. Finally, and perhaps obviously, it is important to spend as much time as possible *in* the region where I focus my research.

Second, I hope to be in solidarity with many others – as friend, colleague, or ally. I care deeply about social justice issues even if they do not immediately intersect with my areas of research. I believe that all research and academia are driven by power and politics. Therefore, supportive spaces – like this workshop – where we can come together to learn from and support each other are essential to encouraging a multiplicity of critical, intersectional, justice-oriented research.

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