

Social media, violence and migration in Somalia and the Horn of Africa

Venerdì 23 settembre / Friday 23 September 16.15-18.00

CONVENOR: Iginio GAGLIARDONE (University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg – South Africa)

ABSTRACT: This panel seeks to examine how social media are transforming violent conflict, and in particular how they affect the flows of information and of people in and out of conflict zones, with a particular focus on Somalia and the Horn of Africa. The majority of migrants coming to Europe are from countries at war or from repressive regimes where individuals might experience violence. Going in the opposite direction, people leaving Europe to join those very conflicts have attracted increasing attention and fed a narrative of refugees as potential threats, as individuals who are or can be radicalized and bring conflict to host nations. In the absence of solid and publicly available evidence on the role social media play in these processes, anecdotes and prejudices have shaped not only public opinion, but also policy making. Focusing on the case of Somalia and the Horn of Africa, the panel aims to address two interrelated questions in particular: Are social media changing how people flee from conflict? Are social media transforming access to conflict, allowing participation ‘at a distance’, or, in some cases, migration towards conflict? The panel privileges interdisciplinary approaches combining qualitative and quantitative methods to understand longer-term patterns of violence and migration, how these get reproduced online, and with which consequences.

PAPERS:

Iginio GAGLIARDONE, *Hate speech online in Ethiopia: A comparative perspective*

ABSTRACT:

Anecdotal evidence suggests social media are increasingly used by individuals and groups wanting to incite hatred and violence, yet empirical evidence is lacking to understand how pervasive this phenomenon is. Relying on the analysis of more than 3,000 statements posted on Facebook between 24 February and 24 June 2015, three months before and one month after Ethiopia’s elections, which took place on 24 May, the paper offers an unprecedented opportunity to examine the nature of online debates surrounding a critical event and the prevalence of extreme forms of speech as part of those debates. The findings highlight two interrelated phenomena that allow understanding 1) how old and new forms of participation merge in cyberspace, especially with reference to how the state seeks to expand its influence online; and 2) how in a highly controlled and surveilled online space users may still use the Internet to contest and challenge power.

Comparing these findings with existing studies on online hate speech in Kenya and in Somalia, the paper concludes by suggesting new paths to map events that have regional (and global) relevance, and are often deeply intertwined, such as the fight against Al-Shabaab.

PROPOSER’S ACADEMIC PROFILE:

Iginio Gagliardone – University of the Witwatersrand

Gianluca IAZZOLINO, *Navigating through troubled waters – Young Somalis, social media, and crisis management*

ABSTRACT:

This paper examines how the diffusion and the appropriation of ICTs have redefined the structure and the agenda of Somali student associations in East Africa. As mobile telephony, mobile web and social networks have made inroad among young Somalis, strategies to cope with crises have gone through profound changes, particularly regarding mobility patterns and emerging networked organizations. Since the eruption of the Somali civil war and the onset of the refugee crisis, Somali networks have adapted to situations in which, far from being a temporary interruption of normality, crisis is a chronic condition. Living 'on shifting ground' (Vigh, 2009), people 'navigate' through uncertainty by seeking to anticipate changes in the political and economic context. They do so by participating into the local communicative ecology to acquire information which plays out in the shaping of migratory projects and other coping strategies. This paper discusses how these coping strategies were enacted against the background of Operation Usalama Watch, launched by Kenyan security forces in 2014 as a response to an escalation of Islamist terror attacks, and the threat of forced encampment and repatriation to Somalia.

PROPOSER'S ACADEMIC PROFILE:

Gianluca Iazzolino – University of Oxford

Nicole STREMLAU, *Manufacturing Peace: ICTs and Elections in Ethiopia and Kenya*

ABSTRACT:

Ethiopia's 2015 elections and Kenya's 2013 elections were both dominated by government calls for peace, unity and warnings about the dangers of divisive politics and airing longstanding grievances during elections. In Ethiopia, the approach to electoral competition is rooted in ambitions to have a 'developmental democratic state', a political ideology that has been extensively articulated by Meles Zenawi through his publications and party documents. In Kenya, this has been referred to as 'peaceocracy', perhaps a less articulated and more spontaneous approach to efforts to consolidate political power than in Ethiopia but still has had significant impact on public discourse and debate.

This article explores how efforts to manufacture peace have extended online during the election period. We consider key aspects including the techniques and practice government/ruling party engagement with online communities and efforts to cultivate consensus around political narratives of peace and unity. We ask what this tells us about Kenya and Ethiopia's broader political projects and the role and nature of political authority within the countries.

The comparison between Ethiopia and Kenya offers a unique entry point into understanding how ICTs are both shaping contemporary elections and, in turn, being shaped by political conflict. Ethiopia and Kenya share many similarities: terrorism has a strong role in political calculations; both have emerged from previous elections that were marred by violence (Ethiopia in 2005 and Kenya in 2007); and both countries have committed themselves to the ambitious deployment of ICTs in politics, albeit with very different strategies. While Kenya prides itself on being 'silicon savannah', Ethiopia has launched one of the most ambitious e-government initiatives on the continent. The very different uses and contexts of ICTs and social media in the elections provide insights into the range of ways ICTs are transforming electoral processes in Africa.

This article provides insight into the "markets of electoral materials". Our study will draw on interviews we have recently conducted with government and political party leaders and communications officers, as well as analysis of online texts and images, particularly on social media (the messages themselves). We ask questions about how political parties attempted to shape online debates, project authority and advance

their vision within the overarching framework of 'peaceocracy' and 'developmental democracy' and what this means for the overarching role of ICTs in the construction of the state.

PROPOSER'S ACADEMIC PROFILE:

Nicole Stremlau - University of Oxford