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‘The politics of things’: digital media, urban space and the materiality of publics

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Recent characterizations of publics — as expressed through concepts like ‘networked publics’, ‘hashtag publics’, ‘adhoc publics’, ‘calculated publics’, ‘engineered publics’ — or notions describing processes of circulation — such as ‘virality’, ‘shareability’ and ‘spreadability’ — fail to appreciate that publics are not just digitally constituted but also manifest themselves in, and are intimately connected to, physical spaces. ‘The politics of things’ refers to the way in which things, objects, infrastructures and physical space remain crucial to political communication in a digital age as well as to the manner in which bodies, objects and urban space become politicized and digitally remediated. Drawing on fieldwork carried out during the 2011 and 2016 Zambian elections, this article proposes a material, mobile and spatial approach to political communication. It hereby extends the relevance of the recent material and infrastructural turn in media and communications in a political context. It examines the physical recirculation of digital content, the digital remediation of physical space, and the communicative role of bodies, objects and the built environment. Problematizing common dualisms between ‘online’ and ‘offline’ as well as ‘public sphere’ and ‘public space’, it argues for an exploration of publicness and processes of circulation across digital and physical spaces.

Keywords: Africa; digital media; elections; Global South; infrastructure; materiality; mobile media; political communication; urban space; Zambia

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Despite an earlier scholarly consensus “to treat Internet media as continuous with and embedded in other social spaces” (Miller and Slater, 2000: 5), the popular and polarized debate which emerged in the wake of the 2011 ‘Arab Spring’ still led commentators to emphasize either the crucial role of physical or digital spaces in the protests (Gladwell, 2011; Shirky, 2011). In arguing that online activism largely failed because of the lack of organizational structures and hierarchies and offline activism thrived because of the presence of the very same, this debate ultimately reinforced the dichotomy between digital and physical spaces that internet scholars had left behind a decade earlier. The sharp distinction drawn between ‘online publics’ and ‘offline publics’ fails to appreciate how publicness is constituted *across* different spaces — both mediated and physical (see also Tierney 2013), and how these spaces interrelate and mutually shape each other. The idea of separate sites of ‘publicness’, either constituted by physical space (debates on ‘public space’) or by different forms of technology (debates on ‘the public sphere’ or ‘publics’) has been reinforced by the separate nature of debates on the ‘public sphere’ in media and communications studies and political science, on the one hand, and ‘public space’ in urban studies and geography, on the other hand (Iveson, 2007; Cassegård, 2014).

Recent scholarship on publics and processes of circulation in media and communications continues to largely underplay the role of physical space in shaping political

communication as well as in conveying meaning. In endeavors to highlight novelty and technology, popular concepts such as 'networked publics' (Varnelis 2008; boyd 2010; Zayani 2015), 'hashtag publics' (Rambukkana 2015), 'adhoc publics' (Bruns and Burgess 2015), 'calculated publics' (Gillespie 2014) and 'engineered publics' (Tufekci, 2014; Holtzhausen, 2016) all point to the *digital* constitution of publics, while notions such as 'virality' (Sampson 2012; Nahon and Hemsley 2013), 'shareability' (Meikle 2016) and 'spreadability' (Jenkins, Green and Ford 2013) mainly draw our attention to the *digital* aspects of the circulation of information. In recent analyses, political communication during elections is often primarily made sense of through a digital lens, as demonstrated for example by the widespread global interest in the Facebook-Cambridge Analytica controversy, which was uncovered in March 2018 and highlighted the role of personal data extraction in attempts to influence voter opinion on particular political candidates in a number of different elections worldwide.

While these attempts to make sense of the growing digitization and datafication of political communication are helpful and much-needed, a key limitation is that these tend to locate publics and process of circulation almost exclusively in the digital domain. Ultimately, as this article argues, this fails to appreciate the growing *intersection* of digital and physical spaces. It underestimates the material circulation of digital content in offline contexts as well as the digital remediation of physical infrastructure, bodies and objects which can be treated as communicative in their own right. In this article, I examine publics and process of circulation *across* digital and physical spaces. As Iveson (2007: 13) has argued, "[t]he streets and the screens […] are distinct spaces for public action, but actions undertaken through these distinct spaces took shape in close relation to one another". Drawing on the case of the 2011 and 2016 elections in Zambia, the main aim of this article is to gain a better understanding of the way in which election campaign messages circulate in, and across, digital and physical spaces.

For Warner (2002: 66, 54), "a public […] comes into being only in relation to texts and their circulation" and is shaped by material limits such as "the means of production and distribution, the physical textual objects themselves, the social conditions of access to them". In this article, I understand publics as constituted both by discourses and modes of circulation. Circulation is not merely a discursive process of disseminating texts but enabled and constrained by infrastructures, bodies and objects, which altogether co-constitute publics. Access to digital media is shaped by a range of physical infrastructures, while digital media content often conveys messages about physical space, such as images of dramatic occupations, large political rallies, or impressive protest gatherings. On the other hand, infrastructures, bodies and objects do not merely enable messages to circulate but also convey meaning in their own right through the way in which they move through physical spaces and are remediated in digital environments. Sites of publicness may shift from digital spaces to physical locations, or vice versa, because of particular constraints in circulation associated with either domain.

Hence, digital and physical spaces should be treated as interdependent or co-constitutive which minimises a range of existing dualisms: between 'online' and 'offline', between 'public sphere' and 'public space'. In examining their intersection, this article contributes to the recent material and infrastructural turn in media and communication studies (Packer and Crofts Wiley, 2012; Gillespie, Boczkowski and Foot, 2014; Parks and Starosielski, 2015). It brings debates on materiality, infrastructure, mobility/embodiment and urban space into conversation with work on publics and circulation. While this turn has made a valuable contribution by demonstrating that materiality matters in processes of communication, this article extends its relevance in relation to political communication during elections. In the context of the emergence of social media, political communication has increasingly been treated as a largely digital, discursive, and disembodied process (see

also Kraidy, 2016). Instead, this article emphasizes the continued importance of physical space in political communication during elections *alongside* the digital.

Here, it draws on research on publics in the African context, which has examined the role of urban space in political deliberation and sociality through *radio trottoir* ('pavement radio') or 'street parliaments' (Ellis, 1989; Banégas, Brisset-Foucault and Cutolo, 2012) and has focused attention on the communicative role of objects such as bodies during political rallies and in politicized dance performances (Mbembe, 1992; Gilman, 2009), popular slogans on public transport vehicles (Lawuyi, 1997; Guseh, 2008; Agbiboa, 2017) and messages conveyed through colorful *kanga* cloths worn by women (Linneburh, 1997). While political communication scholars have neglected the importance of physical space, scholars examining African contexts have not as yet fully addressed the role of digital technology in its intersection with physical space. The following section clarifies the methodology deployed and justifies the analytical focus on two Zambian elections. The final section proposes the notions of materiality, infrastructure, mobility and urban space as analytical framework to make sense of publics and processes of circulation across digital and physical spaces.

Political communication during elections *from* Zambia

Instead of offering an in-depth understanding of the role of media in elections in Zambia, this article asks what the case of Zambia might tell us about the intersection of digital and physical spaces during intensely politicized periods such as elections. The subfield of political communication continues to be rather parochial, informed primarily by the experience of the United States and the United Kingdom (Ngomba, 2012), while work on media and communications in Africa, — and arguably the Global South more generally — often remains locked within an insular, 'area studies' paradigm (Waisbord, 2015). Hence, the urgent need "to write the world from Africa or to write Africa into the world" (Mbembe and Nuttall, 2008: 348), and to explore "[w]hat a theory of media would look like if it began from Nigeria [*or in my case, Zambia*] rather than Europe or the United States" (Larkin, 2008: 253).

Zambia is a landlocked country located in Southern Africa. A former British colony known as Northern Rhodesia, it obtained independence in 1964. Until the early 1990s, the political scene was largely dominated by the United National Independence Party (UNIP), led by Kenneth Kaunda who played a prominent role in the struggle against colonialism (Larmer, 2011). Zambia was effectively a one-party state ruled by UNIP until 1991 when the country held its first multi-party elections, which were won by Frederick Chiluba's political party, the Movement for Multi-Party Democracy (MMD). This changeover did not only pave the way for political liberalisation but also for economic reforms through the introduction of an IMF-led structural adjustment package (Fraser and Larmer, 2010). This resulted in trade liberalization, the abolishment of price controls, the elimination of foreign exchange rate restrictions, and the privatisation of state-owned enterprises. Local industries were forced to close down as they were unable to compete with cheaper imports. Zambia's economy strongly relies on copper mining, and structural adjustment saw state-owned mines privatised which gave rise to significant job losses. Ultimately, this led to a sharp reduction in formal jobs and a growth of informal (self)-employment (Hansen, 2004).

As elsewhere, politics in Zambia strongly revolves around elections and political parties. Trade unions have weakened because of the numerous job losses in the formal sector since the 1990s, and civil society largely comprises of donor-funded, urban-based non-governmental organizations which do not pose a direct threat to the status quo. Demonstrations and protests are rare but elections, on the other hand, are intensely contested. After having been in power for two decades, MMD's political dominance was increasingly challenged in the 2000s by the opposition Patriotic Front (PF), led by Michael Sata. Initially, PF's campaign mainly addressed the negative effects of economic liberalisation and critiqued

the way in which foreign investors — from China in particular — exploited Zambia's workforce (Larmer, 2007). The party's combined nationalist and populist agenda drew strong support from voters in urban areas. PF's later campaigns in the 2011 and 2016 elections toned down the attack on foreign investors and began to adopt a stronger developmental agenda, emphasising the need for improved infrastructure, i.e. roads, clinics, schools etc.

Eventually, the 2011 elections brought an end to the longstanding monopoly of the ruling MMD which was successfully defeated by the opposition PF (Cheeseman and Hinfelaar, 2010; Bwalya and Maharaj, 2018). The campaigning climate was relatively free despite a temporary ban on a number of private broadcasters shortly after election day, fuelling speculation on the election results on social media. The period immediately after the ballot was tense because of delays in announcing the election results, which to many Zambians suggested that the MMD was keen to cling to power. In the period between 2011 and 2016, the MMD quickly ceased to exist as a party of relevance, and the 2016 elections were largely a horse race between the incumbent PF, now headed by Edgar Lungu (after Michael Sata passed away in 2014) and the opposition United Party for National Development (UPND), led by Hakainde Hichelema (Goldring and Wahman, 2016). While the PF profiled infrastructural development and public service delivery as its main campaign issue, UPND proposed job creation and a change in direction of the economy. The 2016 elections saw significant incidents of political violence in the run-up to election day which severely hampered the ability of the opposition UPND to campaign in Lusaka because of fear of clashes between party supporters.

During both 2011 and 2016 elections, I carried out semi-structured interviews with Zambians in two different locations of the capital, Lusaka, which represent two sides of the bifurcated, postcolonial city (Myers, 2006) with different connotations in terms of class: the upmarket Arcades Shopping Mall located in a suburb of Lusaka and the informal Soweto Market close to the city centre. Capital cities are crucial symbolic and actual sites of power, and spaces where political campaigning is often concentrated. I carried out twenty-five semi-structured interviews in 2011 and in fifty-three in 2016; the majority in English and some in local Zambian languages such as *Chibemba* and *Chinyanja*. All interviews were transcribed and translated. In addition to interviews, I also participated as much as possible in 'the everyday life of elections' by getting a sense of the election mood in public transport, watching election results in public spaces, and attending a number of party rallies. This article draws on both my interview data and field notes from my observations albeit it does not offer a systematic analysis of the entire corpus of data. Instead, my main interest in this article is to derive a more abstract analytical framework that enables us to make sense of the intersection of digital and physical spaces in processes of political communication.

As Huat (2007: 3) has argued in the context of Asia, '[t]he modes and reasons of electioneering practices are never random but unavoidably embedded in and hewed from the local cultural milieu'. While analyses of political communication during elections in Western democracies often focus on television and increasingly digital and social media, what is crucial about Zambian election periods is the way in which they transform urban physical spaces. Because of the informal governance of large parts of the city (including Soweto Market), politics literally rules the streets with so-called 'party cadres' wielding control, plastering areas with campaign posters. Voters dress in party regalia and informal transport vehicles play party songs. Party rallies held in different parts of the city remain crucial gatherings to get a sense of the different party candidates. The growing uptake of digital technology and social media in recent years intersects with this temporary transformation of urban space in interesting ways. This article aims to make sense of the visual and sonic spectacle of elections, drawing attention to the way in which campaign messages circulate in

both digital and physical spaces, thereby dissolving frequent dichotomies between the 'discursive', online public sphere and 'physical', offline public space.

The advantage of examining two elections is not only that it allows for examination of a larger corpus of data but also that it enabled me to witness changes during a period of profound digital transformation. Internet access increased significantly between 2011 and 2016, largely because of the growing availability of smartphones and mobile internet. In 2011, the bulk of urban users accessed internet via internet cafes or USB dongles plugged into laptops. Accessing the internet in a café would cost ZMK 3,000 (equivalent to around $1.60 at the time) for every 30 minutes. Customers could either use the café's desktop computers, or could bring their own laptop and use the Wi-Fi hotspot. At the time, only 2.8 percent of the population could access the mobile internet but this rapidly increased to 32.3 per cent in 2016.[1] While internet cafés were lively spaces to follow political developments during the 2011 elections, many had closed down by 2016. Access to fixed broadband remained a luxury for only 16,415 subscribers in 2011 and 21,784 subscribers in 2016, roughly equal to a very small minority of 0.13 per cent of the Zambian population.[2] The growth in access to mobile internet has coincided with the rising popularity of social media. Facebook in particular was enthusiastically adopted by the main political parties in their campaign strategy during the 2016 elections. While in 2011, there were only 117,520 users in Zambia, this had increased over tenfold to 1.4 million in 2016. The growing availability and reduced costs of smartphones as well as subsidized access to social media platforms through so-called prepaid 'data bundles' has largely enabled the enthusiastic uptake of social media (Willems, 2016). Data bundles are relatively affordable in Zambia and offer unlimited daily, weekly or monthly access to social platforms such as Facebook, sometimes in addition to a data amount that can be used to browse *any* area of the internet.

Materializing publics

As indicated earlier, the 'Arab Spring' initiated a polarized public debate on the role of digital and physical space in the protests. Subsequently, this provoked a critical response from a number of scholars who began to re-emphasize the intimate connection between the online and offline world in political communication, between Twitter and the streets (Nanabhay and Farmanfarmaian 2011; Butler 2011; Sassen 2012; Lim 2012, 2014; Gerbaudo 2012). These accounts highlighted that social media were crucial in 'the choreography of assembly' (Gerbaudo 2012: 5) which enabled the physical occupation of urban spaces such as Tahrir Square in Cairo, Egypt. Hence, Facebook and Twitter do not replace face-to-face gatherings but instead complement them and make them possible, and in return, the 'spectacular' occupation of public spaces provoked interest from news media channels across the world (Al Jazeera in particular), which drew further attention both globally and locally (Nanabhay and Farmanfarmaian 2011). While social media were considered to have played an important coordinating role, the collective gathering of people in physical spaces such as squares was still seen as key to successfully challenging dominant forms of power (Lim 2014: 62). If physical spaces could not be accessed because these are controlled by corporate or state power, digital media could emerge as 'subaltern counterpublics' (Lim 2014: 58).

Overall, these analyses have made good attempts to 'spatialize' the digital and to offer a more nuanced perspective on the role of social media in protest and activism. By focusing not on "the internal world of Facebook with its vast numbers of subscribers, a billion and growing fast, but the larger ecology within which a Facebook action is situated" (Sassen 2012: 578, see also Tufekci 2017 on the notion of 'media ecology'), they avoided the technological determinism − and indeed media-centrism − that both popular accounts and scholarly analyses suffered from. However, whereas the argument that online/digital and offline/physical worlds are intimately connected and cannot easily be separated is useful (and

now quite familiar), few studies have offered a detailed analysis of the *intersection* of, and continuity between, digital and physical spaces and 'the physicality of citizenship' (Davis and Raman 2013). In examining publics and the intersection of digital and physical spaces, I draw on work on (1) materiality and infrastructure in media and communication studies; (2) mobile communication, embodiment and space; (3) the role of urban space in politics in urban (media) studies. The analytical framework that follows aims to *politicize* the recent material turn in media and communication studies (Packer and Crofts Wiley, 2012; Gillespie, Boczkowski and Foot, 2014; Parks and Starosielski, 2015) by extending debates on materiality, infrastructure, mobility/embodiment and urban space to political communication. Secondly, it stretches conventional understandings of media and communication by treating material objects and infrastructure as communicative in their own right.

Materiality and infrastructure

It could be argued that the field of media and communication studies has undergone somewhat of a 'material turn' in recent years given the significant number of books that have begun to address media technologies — and the process of communication — *as* material. For example, scholars have argued for the importance of examining "the materiality of discourse itself and the constitutive force of communication in the production of the real" (Packer and Crofts Wiley, 2012); "media technologies as complex sociomaterial phenomena" (Gillespie, Boczkowski and Foot, 2014); and "technological objects, geophysical locations, and material resources that network the world" (Parks and Starosielski, 2015). As Packer and Crofts Wiley (2013: 1-2) argue, "[s]trategies for materializing communication are diverse. One such strategy is to figure materiality as physicality. Infrastructure, space, technology and the body become the focus, a move that situates communication and culture within a physical, corporeal landscape. Another move is to examine the materiality of communication itself, focusing on discourse as inscription in the material strata of sound, optical media, the built environment, and the brain!".

Related to the 'material turn' is the growing body of work on infrastructure in media and communications, highlighting different types of infrastructure such as 'communication infrastructures' (Kim and Ball-Rokeach, 2006), 'media infrastructures' (Parks and Sarosielski, 2015) and 'internet infrastructures' (Sandvig, 2013). The relation between media, communication and infrastructure has been approached in a number of ways. Some scholars treat media and communication as infrastructures in their own right, including social media platforms which some argue are increasingly operating *as* infrastructures (Plantin, Lagoze, Edwards and Sandvig, 2018), or are investing in (internet) infrastructure such as Facebook's efforts to expand internet access on the African continent. Others are more interested in examining the relation between media and communication to other forms of infrastructure such as electricity or water provision (Parks, 2015). While the concepts of materiality and infrastructure have so far mainly been deployed to make sense of processes of circulation, I argue that these can also be usefully deployed in examining political communication. They are not only able to shed light on how political messages traverse through the city, as discourses or as objects, but also on how infrastructures in their own right can become important forms of communication during times of elections.

Despite the global celebration of the role of digital media in civic engagement in 2011, for less well-off residents in the informal Soweto Market in Lusaka, the capital of Zambia, 'the digital' was largely absent from their immediate life worlds and only represented a distant dream. For example, a young male market vendor, who I interviewed in 2011 and was unable to afford a smartphone but had a keen interest in technology (manning a second-hand computer stall), commented as follows on the mobile internet: "[i]t's still expensive but it means a lot when you have your phone with the internet because you are,

you are just with the world. You can talk on Facebook".[3] Despite the constraints in accessing social media at that time, Soweto Market, however, offered alternative modes of circulating digital content in the context of the elections. In the run-up to the 2011 ballot vote, a number of Zambian Facebook users shared photo-shopped, mash-up images of the two candidates in the presidential elections: the ruling Movement for Multi-Party Democracy (MMD)'s Rupiah Banda and the opposition Patriotic Front (PF)'s Michael Sata. Some images emerged as Facebook profile pictures and others were shared via photo albums. Interestingly, these internet memes also found their way into physical spaces such as political rallies, markets and public transport. For example, a copy-shop in Soweto Market sold black-and-white off-prints of a mock film poster showing PF's Sata with MMD's Banda depicted as baby in a sling. The same image was also pinned inside a bus and carried by PF party supporters during a campaign rally in Mandevu township in Lusaka. Similarly, one could find MP3 files of the popular PF 2011 campaign song 'Donchi Kubeba' for sale in Soweto Market. A stall aptly named 'We Put Music' transferred MP3 files onto customers' memory cards or USB sticks for a small payment. Many low-end mobile phones contained memory cards, which enabled users to play songs on their phone, and car owners were able to play songs on a MP3 player powered through either a USB port or a cigarette lighter socket.

Both modes of circulating 'digital content' — via hard copy off-print or via digital storage devices — occurred off-line without the need for internet access, thereby potentially including those excluded by the (urban) digital divide. This example clearly problematizes the sharp distinctions that are frequently drawn between digital and physical spaces, and demonstrates how content circulates across these spaces. Analytical separations such as the distinction made by Tierney (2013) between 'spatial publics' (face-to-face communication in urban space), 'mediated publics' and 'networked publics' fails to appreciate how publicness is constituted *across* different spaces and technologies.

Like market vendors, minibus drivers and conductors are an important political constituency and their representative associations frequently have direct links to specific political parties. In the context of the September 2011 elections, minibus drivers often explicitly showed their allegiance to the opposition by playing the main PF campaign song 'Donchi Kubeba', turning their vehicles into mobile soundscapes loudly blasting their support while moving through the city. These examples do not only demonstrate the analytical value of adopting a material approach to political communication but also highlight the crucial importance of physical spaces such as markets and public transport as 'communication infrastructures' through which political messages circulate. Hence, the circulation of digital content such as MP3 files is not only determined by digital technology but crucially shaped by physical objects such as vehicles as well as social networks of minibus drivers, suggesting that people should be seen as part of urban infrastructures (see also Simone, 2004).

Mobile communication, embodiment and space

Linked to debates on materiality and infrastructure are debates on mobility and mobile media which have also paid attention to the relation between digital media and urban space. The emergence of mobile media and location-based services such as Foursquare and Dodgeball provoked a body of literature that discusses the link between mobility, embodiment and urban space (Sutko and de Souza e Silva, 2010; Gordon and de Souza e Silva, 2011; Moores, 2012; De Souza e Silva and Frith, 2012; Farman, 2012; Wilken and Goggin, 2014; De Souza e Silva and Sheller, 2014). Amongst other issues, this group of scholars has examined the way in which users perform their identity via location-based services through association with certain physical places (Schwartz and Halegoua, 2014), how location-based services facilitate social connections and guide users' movement through urban space (Humphreys, 2007, 2010)

and how mobile media impact on urban sociability in public spaces more broadly (Sutko and De Souza e Silva, 2010; De Souza e Silva and Frith, 2012).

A key strength of this body of work is that it examines mobile media as embodied, spatial technologies, and acknowledges that 'uses of these technologies [demonstrate] an intimate relationship between the production of space and the bodies inhabiting those spaces' (Farman 2012: 4). Secondly, it appreciates the interactions between the built environment, mobile technologies and urban sociability without falling into 'spatial determinism'. As de Souza e Silva and Frith (2012: 33) argue, '[t]he built environment does partially determine how people live, but the way people live also shapes the built environment'. These debates are helpful in informing a more *mobile* analysis of political communication which draws attention to the way in which a range of mobile media — digital and physical — move through the city.

An embodied approach to political communication is not only useful to make sense of mobile digital media but it could also help stretch our understanding of mobile media by taking into consideration the important role of vehicles and bodies as mobile forms of political communication in urban political landscapes such as Lusaka, Zambia. During elections, vehicles covered with party adverts blasting party songs tend to circulate through the city, soliciting support from pedestrians and fellow drivers. Depending on one's access to financial resources, parties have vehicles covered with adverts during election campaigns so as to not only convey campaign messages but also to impress voters with their access to resources. Large convoys of vehicles ― hooting with enthusiastic, waving party supporters hanging out of car windows ― literally take over urban roads on their way to party rallies. For example, in the 2016 elections, PF deployed a range of branded vehicles which could be spotted all over the city. As the ruling party, PF clearly had sufficient resources to be able to heavily invest in the election campaign. However, even during the 2011 elections, when PF was an opposition party, they used vehicles to spread party messages and circulate campaign songs. As indicated in the previous section, non-branded commuter omnibuses were turned into mobile sonic media as they willingly (or unwillingly, forced by 'party cadres') played campaign songs of the ruling or opposition party to their passengers, depending on their political affiliation.

Apart from vehicles, bodies are crucial forms of communication in Zambian elections, confirming their political affiliation through t-shirts, *chitenge* cloths, caps and other forms of clothing. In relation to the Arab Spring, Kraidy (2016) has argued that "the essential medium of political expression was not cell phone texts or Twitter but something more fundamental: the human body". Similarly, in the context of Zambia, party regalia – and the bodies that dress them – are a hugely important and highly contested form of communication. This was aptly expressed in the popular 2011 PF party election anthem, 'Donchi Kubeba' ('Do Not Tell Them') by Zambian musician Dandy Crazy which recommended supporters not to tell the ruling party MMD who they were going to vote for but instead to pretend to be MMD supporters and grab all their fancy campaign merchandising such as t-shirts, *chitenge* cloths, caps, and flags. Party regalia are complex modes of communication; sometimes pragmatically treated as forms of clothing while at other times, explicitly used to demonstrate support to a preferred political party. For example, in both the 2011 and 2016 elections, I witnessed people either mixing party regalia of different political parties in one outfit, wearing *chitenge* cloths inside out (so that party messages would become invisible) or regularly switching between regalia of different parties over a period of time. Pragmatic uses of party regalia can also include wearing clothing of a particular party so as not to be harassed or in order to feel safe in a particular area of the city. For example, while it was possible to wear regalia of all parties freely in the 2011 elections in Lusaka, this was riskier in the run-up to the 2016 elections when it was often dangerous to identify as an opposition

supporter of the United Party for National Development (UPND), as 'party cadres' of the ruling PF controlled the city.

Bodies do not only move in physical spaces but also increasingly circulate in digital spaces. While political parties did not extensively use social media in their formal campaign during the 2011 elections, they fully embraced Facebook during the 2016 elections when a much larger proportion of Zambians had access to social media and mobile internet. Both PF and UPND maintained Facebook pages with regular status updates, live-streaming of party rallies and press conferences and extensive photo albums with images of rallies. Although the use of wide-angled images helped to amplify the size of crowds, the physical presence of bodies was of course still required in order to convince social media users of the popularity of political parties. Like the spectacle of party rallies, social media platforms such as Facebook are highly visual, with images and videos often part of its most popular content. Furthermore, a key part of 'social media logic' (Van Dijck and Poell, 2013) is the emphasis on popularity and visibility which is 'evidenced' by the number of friends, page likes, post shares and likes etc. Frequent page updates keep users hooked onto the platform and maximize their chances to be exposed to paid adverts, which Facebook's revenues ultimately depend on (in addition to the gathering of personal data). While the polarized debate on the Arab Spring often ended up emphasizing the relevance of either physical or digital spaces, the Zambian case demonstrates the continuum between the party rally and Facebook, mutually reinforced by the double logic of visuality and visibility which is crucial to *both* spaces.

Apart from converging with corporate logics of platforms such as Facebook, the visibility of bodies — as mentioned earlier —was highly politicized, particularly during the 2016 elections. Within this context, digital spaces then emerged as safer spaces to display one's political loyalty. For example, as one interviewee commented, while it would be dangerous to walk the streets of Lusaka in an UPND outfit, it would be less of a problem to post a selfie in party regalia on social media.[4] State surveillance of social media was not yet deemed a high risk in Zambia, and in any case, it was mostly 'party cadres' who were feared rather than the state or police as such. Ultimately, this again demonstrates the continuum between digital and physical spaces, with bodies not only moving through the streets showing off their party gear but also circulating in digital spaces via Facebook profile photos, friends' timelines or political party Facebook pages. The act of posting a selfie in party regalia was not just a political act but carefully curating one's Facebook profile page was also part of a youthful 'selfie culture' in which regularly sharing photos of everyday life has become a mandatory part of 'branding the self'.

The politicization of urban space

The role of cities in civic engagement and politics has recently received renewed attention in the context of a number of protests that have claimed a range of urban spaces *as* public (Butler 2011). Global movements such as Occupy, protests related to the so-called 'Arab Spring' in North Africa and the take-over of city squares by the Spanish '*indignados*' ('the outraged') movement all revolved around the occupation of urban spaces (Gitlin, 2012; Lynch, 2013; Graeber, 2013; Mitchell, Harcourt and Taussig, 2013; McMurray and Ufheil-Somers, 2013). Cities – and capital cities in particular − continue to wield much symbolic power, hosting seats of government or corporate head offices that represent global capital. For some, cities have always been associated with resistance and revolutionary politics, precisely because they are so pivotal in the control of resources (Harvey 2012). However, despite much discussion on the significance of public squares in recent protests, relatively little attention has been paid to the broader impact of physical space and urban planning on political communication. The global appeal of the 'rebellious square' has made it 'much simpler to frame the world in terms of "democratic" and "undemocratic" spaces than to

articulate what such spaces actually look like or to explain what about their physical form and urban social function makes them democratic' (Davis and Raman, 2013: 67; see also Parkinson, 2012). While literature on the public sphere and civic engagement has insufficiently taken into account physical space and the built environment, emerging work on media and the city is beginning to address the intersection of urban space, architecture, infrastructure and communication (McQuire, 2008; Georgiou, 2013; Tosoni, Tarantino and Giaccardi, 2013, Scott, 2016; Coleman, 2016 et al), while urban studies scholars debate the role of information and communication technologies in building more efficient and cost-effective 'smart cities' (Campbell, 2012; Townsend, 2013; Greenfield, 2013; Deakin and Al Waer, 2014). The bulk of this work has focused on urban centers in Europe and North America although some scholars have offered analyses of 'media infrastructure' in Nigeria (Larkin, 2008) and 'media urbanism' in India (Sundaram, 2010), emphasizing the crucial role of informality and piracy in the distribution of media products.

As part of the spatial approach to political communication proposed here, I argue that buildings, roads and other aspects of the built environment can be seen as communicative in their own right, not only because of the posters or flags that cover or mark them but also due to their symbolic meaning. The 2016 elections, in particular, revolved around what I refer to here as 'the politics of things'. A key part of the party manifestos – and PF's manifesto specifically – comprised of promises to construct new 'things', including roads, clinics and schools, or showed images of already constructed roads, clinics and schools. PF's campaign slogan 'Sontapo Epowabomba' ('Show What You Have Done') provoked the opposition UPND to show what sort of 'things' they would build should they win the elections. The visual evidence of the various types of infrastructure constructed was presented as a clear testimonial of PF's achievements. This became not only evident in Zambia's physical urban and rural landscape but was also powerfully remediated via campaign videos broadcast on television, uploaded on the party's YouTube channel, shared via Facebook photo albums and conveyed via printed party news bulletins handed out during rallies. Ultimately, this demonstrates that urban space does not only facilitate digital or interpersonal communication but should also be treated as communicative in its own right. Newly constructed roads, clinics and schools remind voters on a daily basis about the achievements of a particular political dispensation, while at the same time they remain silent on how the infrastructure was financed or how long it will last. Furthermore, it highlights that digital media content to a large extent remained dependent on the remediation of physical spaces given their significance as symbols of economic progress and development.

Conclusion

'The politics of things' refers to the way in which things, objects, infrastructures and physical space remain crucial to political communication in a digital age, and how objects such as party regalia and the built environment become politicized and digitally remediated in particular contexts. Engaging in recent debates in media and communications on materiality and infrastructure, mobile media/embodiment, and urban space, this article has developed an analytical framework to make sense of political communication through a material, mobile and spatial lens. I have demonstrated the importance of analytically situating digital technology within physical space and making sense of the remediation of 'the physical' in digital space. Online content such as memes does not strictly spread via digital infrastructure but is recirculated offline through range of physical infrastructure such as public transport and bodies. Mobile media do not merely comprise of digital forms of technology but encompass moving physical objects more broadly, which travel through both urban space and online environments. Infrastructure is not just instrumental in powering up digital technology

or a tool that enables discourses to circulate but should be treated as a crucial form of communication in its own right in both physical and digital spaces.

My proposal to materialize publics should not be understood as equivalent to dismissing the importance of 'the digital' but instead as a way of highlighting the continuum between digital and physical spaces which often mutually reinforce and constitute each other. While the debate on the role of digital media in the Arab Spring has been highly polarized – with some scholars highlighting the importance of the occupation of squares globally while others celebrating the advent of 'Facebook revolutions', this article has revealed how political communication takes place both online and offline, shaped by very similar logics such as visuality and visibility. Hence, publicness should not be associated with particular spaces or technologies but instead is constituted *across* the intersection of digital and physical spaces. Recent characterizations of publics — as expressed for example through concepts like 'networked publics', 'hashtag publics', 'adhoc publics', 'calculated publics', 'engineered publics' — or notions describing processes of circulation — such as 'virality', 'shareability' and 'spreadability' — fail to appreciate that publics are not just digitally constituted but also manifest themselves in, and are intimately connected to, physical spaces.

While in this article, politics mainly referred to the campaigning context of elections, my analytical approach could be similarly productive in examining wider definitions of 'politics' or 'the political'. Elections merely provided a useful backdrop against which to make sense of the more dramatic intersections between the digital and the physical. However, by no means, do elections exhaust what comprises political life (Willems, 2012). The 'politics of things' might be expressed in everyday contestations around a variety of objects or forms of infrastructure, such as the contention around the installment of prepaid water meters in Soweto, Johannesburg in South Africa, which effectively transformed water into a commodity (Von Schnitzler, 2008). The politicization of public spaces can manifest itself through political graffiti which marks buildings with particular messages (Christensen and Thor, 2017), for example to protest against the gentrification of formerly deprived areas such as the Prenzlauer Berg neighborhood in Berlin (Papen, 2012).

These examples do not only demonstrate the wider significance of 'the politics of things' outside election periods but also testify to the relevance of this approach in contexts outside Zambia, or the Global South more generally. For instance, the intersection between, and continuum of, digital and physical spaces has become evident in a number of recent global protests. Internet memes no longer only circulate online but are increasingly finding their way into demonstrations, while protest scenes are 'memefied' and gain a second life on social media. Cat and other animal memes became popular placards in the January 2017 Women's March events held globally.[5] Images of placards went viral on social media such as the widely retweeted photo of British actor, Sir Ian McKellen, holding a placard displaying the Captain Picard facepalm meme during the London march.[6] Bodies — and their recirculation on social media — are crucial in protests, as also evidenced by Colin Kaepernick's (a National Football League/NFL player) powerful kneeling protest around US police brutality against African Americans during a match in August 2016. A year later in September 2017, more widespread protests emerged after over 200 players kneeled in response to President Donald Trump's dismissal of NFL players 'taking a knee', resulting in the intensive recirculation of images of kneeling football players hashtagged with #TakeAKnee.[7]

In conclusion, these examples reveal that studies of Global South contexts such as Zambia should not merely be treated as 'case studies' as is common in the field of media and communications, or as colorful additions to the final sections of edited volumes, but that these can shed light on Global North contexts too (cf. Comaroff and Comaroff, 2012; Willems, 2014), ultimately proving the value of a truly global comparative approach.

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