The internet alone will not set Africa free

Iginio Gagliardone explores the surprising technopolitics of two competing visions of the internet, US and Chinese, in Ethiopia.

The [KONY 2012](#) campaign, a Youtube sensation with over 70 million views, asks global citizens to take action against Ugandan warlord Joseph Kony. It is a popular example of the patronising power of the many online and [Facebook groups](#) purporting to be saving the children of Africa through free expression on the internet. This is just part of a wave of attempts to use technology to fix intractable challenges affecting Africa, and developing economies more broadly. In *[The Politics of Technology in Africa](#)*, I have attempted to disentangle some of the complexities and contradictions that have come to characterise technology-for-development programmes.

The vast majority of these programmes have assumed that the internet would be passively received in African countries and propel economic development. Users in Africa have become accustomed to being paternalistically encouraged to go online to improve their educational opportunities, launch the next e-commerce website to sell their crafts, or overthrow corrupt regimes, rather than being expected to make their own sense of the chaotic complexity of what is available and can be created online.

There has been a welcome rise in technological realism in recent years and criticism towards these

programmes has mounted because of their lack of contextual understanding. Populists and nationalists have however used some of the arguments advanced by technological realists to restrict free expression. Governments have learned new ways to attack forms of transnational solidarity by waving the flag of national security and non-interference. This is especially the case where free expression between people of different countries does not fit their agendas. In 2014 for example, a group of Ethiopian tech-savvy bloggers were arrested and detained for more than a year with the charge of "working with international human rights organisations and taking part in digital security [training](#)".

Is it possible to continue nurturing scepticism about the role of these technology-led development solutions, without allowing those in power to turn it against citizens who disagree with their own governments? How can transnational solidarity be saved so that internet usage is not perceived as an attempt to impose external standards, but as a collective effort to make the best use of shared resources? A partial but powerful contribution to answering these questions can be found by critically investigating the politics of technology and development. As Hillary Clinton famously remarked, "on their own, new technologies do not take sides in the struggle for freedom and progress, but the United States does".

The idea of technopolitics was first explored by Gabrielle Hecht. Technopolitics "refers to the strategic practice of designing or using technology to constitute, embody, or enact political goals". This therefore covers a broader remit than outlined by Hillary Clinton. Initially, technopolitics meant the use of 'technologies of freedom' to 'liberate' the world. Technology would do the job, without much help from politicians explaining on which side of the rift they wanted technology to be. Not all politicians however seek to use the technology to 'liberate' people.

The concept of technopolitics is more than just recognising that the internet can have good and bad uses and users. It becomes particularly valuable concept because it often reveals that information technology can create shared interests of apparently conflicting agendas. The US and China, for example, are considered bitter competitors in Africa, in terms of influence and their share of a growing market. They also clash when it comes to conceptions of the internet: one and global for Washington; plural and tied to national sovereignties for Beijing.

The Ethiopian government, with the support of US corporations, has been able to use the internet to create a complex system of videoconferencing enabling political cadres in the capital to control the activities of the lowest level of the administration across the country and use schools as spaces for political indoctrination. And yet, the Ethiopian government has been able to combine the weaknesses and contradictions of US policy and the strengths and contradictions of China's ambition to produce a unique system that could serve its political interests.

Willing to retain complete control in a market where international organisations and Western donors demanded liberalisation, the Ethiopian government appealed to China's policy of non-interference and ability to provide loans and technical expertise, to retain its monopoly over the

telecommunications sector while expanding internet and mobile access. Ethiopia has at the same time, exploited its position as a strategic US ally in a volatile region, as well as the US-backed anti-terrorism agenda, to justify the persecution of political opponents. It used software produced in Italy and in the UK to spy on users living beyond Ethiopia's borders.

The result is a system built with Chinese technology and resources, but conceptually justified by leveraging the contradictions in the Western agenda.

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