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2009 Scott Kloeck-Jenson Pre-Dissertation Travel Grant Report

During summer 2009, I conducted preliminary dissertation research in Kenya. With the support of the Scott Kloeck-Jenson Pre-Dissertation Travel Grant, I continued researching how information and communication technologies (ICT) are incorporated into social justice and human rights work. The goal of this research is to explore how new media technologies, specifically Internet and mobile phones, affect human rights and social justice work. Specifically, I research how local human rights and social justice organizations use new media technologies in their work. The purpose of my research is to understand how new media technologies have been used in Kenya, particularly during the 2007–2008 post-election crisis, and to investigate the future of new media in social justice work, human rights reporting, and peace-building and reconciliation efforts. My main research questions, which have been fine-tuned as a result of this trip, are: What role do nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) see ICTs playing in their work? How do NGOs incorporate ICTs into their work? Do organizations change their mandates when ICTs are incorporated into their mission? If so, how and why? Building case studies, using multiple qualitative methods, including interviews and observations with NGOs, I have and will continue to investigate these questions in Kenya.

Because one of my goals is to research how new media technologies were used during the post-election crisis, I include Ushahidi<sup>1</sup> as one of my main cases. Ushahidi is a website that was developed during the post-election period to map reports of violence and peace efforts during the crisis. The site took citizen reports from people on the ground through e-mail, web and text message. The text-messaging feature is one of the most innovative and important aspects of this site. Since its launch in January 2008, Ushahidi has undergone dramatic transformation and the developers are working on the Ushahidi Engine, which “allows anyone around the world to set up their own way to gather reports by mobile phone, email and the web – and map them.”<sup>2</sup> During a trip to Kenya in January 2009, I attended meetings with Ushahidi developers and volunteers, met people who used the original Ushahidi to send reports and others that were considering partnerships with Ushahidi. Through this work with Ushahidi, I have developed relationships with other people and groups, which will serve as case studies for my dissertation. Two of these groups, Media Focus on Africa Foundation (MFAF)<sup>3</sup> and Voluntary Youth Philanthropists (VYP)<sup>4</sup>, continue to incorporate new media into their work. I continued to develop these two case studies during this trip—I interviewed MFAF and VYP personnel, observed meetings, attended workshops, including a peace-building mobile cinema workshop run by MFAF<sup>5</sup>. I also went to various Ushahidi meetings with other organizations and individuals who are using Internet and mobile technology in their work.

Through my affiliation with Voluntary Youth Philanthropists, I was invited to attend weekly meetings with members from various NGOs dedicated to youth development and empowerment. The committee was planning for an all-day event scheduled for August 12<sup>th</sup>, the United Nation’s International Youth Day. I attended the last month of planning, but unfortunately had to leave before the actual event. I have been told it was a great success! The event featured an experts’ seminar, a public discussion and music and entertainment from popular Kenyan artists. These meetings and planning of the event opened my eyes to the strength and diversity of the youth movement in Kenya and to the social justice work these groups do. Because of this experience, I plan to include youth groups in my dissertation research.

In addition to meetings, interviews and observations, I had the opportunity to attend two conferences and a course dedicated to mobile application development. The first conference, Mobile

Tech 4 Social Change<sup>6</sup>, was a one-day mini-conference focused on developing mobile applications for social change by both profit and non-profit organizations. The event featured developers and others in the mobile industry from Kenya, Rwanda, the Netherlands, and the U.S. The second conference, Mobile Boot Camp,<sup>7</sup> was a three-day event featuring leading mobile and web developers. This conference had a theoretical and practical component. At this conference, I learned about mobile and web development in theory and had hands-on training in writing JavaScript for mobile application development. Not only did I learn the basics behind writing JavaScript I also experienced the environment in which Kenyan college students learn. In a computer lab with 50 other young aspiring Kenyan developers, we spent two days listening to lectures on JavaScript, practicing, and battling the technology—it was not uncommon for the electricity to go out or for the computer to encounter errors. After this conference, I had the opportunity to attend a course offered by MIT's Africa Information Technology Initiative<sup>8</sup> and to see the future of mobile/web development in Kenya. Through this course, I met instructors and students who I plan to interview as part of my dissertation.

I spent considerable time observing and conducting informal interviews with people and organizations using new media technologies in their work. For example, I attended weekly meetings between Ushahidi, AIDSPortal, and the Kenya AIDS NGO Consortium (KANCO). The goal of this project is to map HIV/AIDS and TB services throughout Kenya. KANCO maintains a database of HIV/AIDS and TB services throughout Kenya, but currently that information is not available online. The mapping project will make the information available to the general public and will provide a visual of where the services are located. This project represents one of the many ways that ICT can be used to promote social justice by incorporating new technologies into existing organizational structures. I think this project has the potential to serve as a major case study for my dissertation work.

This trip was valuable for my current and future research in a number of ways. For one, I was able to strengthen existing relationships with people that I met in my earlier trip and to establish new ones. During this trip, I followed up with many of the local journalists, media personnel and NGO workers whom I interviewed about the post-election violence and human rights in their country in January. Also, during this trip, I established a university affiliation, a critical step for securing research clearance within the country. In addition to my research, I was able to experience the vibrant and diverse urban culture of Nairobi. Whether I was downtown at a screening of Kenyan short films or at a public discussion about peace building and reconciliation in the country or in Kibera, Nairobi and East Africa's largest slum, at a street festival or visiting local schools, I learned invaluable information about contemporary urban life in Kenya. This experience has prepared me for my dissertation fieldwork in Kenya, and for that, I am truly grateful to the Jensen family and Global Studies for this award. I will be returning to Kenya later this year to conduct my dissertation research with the support of a Fulbright-Hays Doctoral Dissertation Research Abroad grant.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.usshahidi.com>

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.usshahidi.com/about>

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.mediafocuserafrica.org/portal.php>

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.peace-caravan.org/about.html>

<sup>5</sup> <http://www.mediafocuserafrica.org/index.php?Division=Projects>

<sup>6</sup> <http://mobiletech4socialchange.pbworks.com/M4Change-Nairobi-June-2009>

<sup>7</sup> <http://www.strathmore.edu/aboutus.php?id=171>

<sup>8</sup> <http://aiti.mit.edu/>