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**The Maasi and the Internet: Online Civil Participation and the Formation of a Civic Identity in Rural Kenya**

**Stine Ringnes Wilhelmsen**  
MSc in Media, Communication and Development

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**The Author can be contacted at: [stinerigneswilhelmsen@gmail.com](mailto:stinerigneswilhelmsen@gmail.com)**

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# **The Maasi and the Internet:**

## **Online Civil Participation and the Formation of a Civic Identity in Rural Kenya**

**Stine Ringnes Wilhelmsen**

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### **ABSTRACT**

This dissertation explored the relation between ICT-facilitated forms of civic participation and the formation of a civic identity as experienced by members of a rural community in Kenya. Thus, this research sought to address the lack of media research focused on the implications of gaining access to ICT in non-western, non-urban social contexts. Evidently, a wider understanding of the factors enabling or preventing rural communities from benefitting from ICT is vital to prevent further marginalization in the digital era.

The empirical observations that formed the basis for the presented findings were collected by conducting 22 semi-structured interviews with five female and seventeen male Maasai studying at the Koiyaki Guiding School in Masai Mara, Kenya. Thematic analysis was used to conceptualize the interview responses in relation to the theoretical framework. To enhance the validity and reliability of the interpretation, thematic coding was incorporated in the analysis.

The empirical evidence strongly suggested that having access to ICT encourages both passive and active forms of online civic participation. Further, the analysis indicated a clear association between ICT-facilitated forms of civic participation and the formation of a civic identity within the researched population. Importantly, having access to ICT appeared to encourage subjective notions of efficacy and the internalization of democratic principles such as accountability and transparency.

Importantly, the analysis demonstrated that the participants' subjective motivations for online civic participation mainly derived from a feeling of responsibility towards helping their community and their nation. This revealed how sociocultural dynamics inherently shape indigenous appropriation of ICT. Thus, the empirical evidence confirmed the importance of conducting qualitative research in different social and cultural contexts to accurately assess the democratic potential of ICT.

## INTRODUCTION

Since their introduction in the early 1990s, the democratic potential of Information and Communication Technologies (ICT's) has been a topic of debate. The term ICT refers to technologies that "utilize computerization in the generation, reproduction and transmission of digitized content," which includes the telephone, computers and digital networks such as the Internet (Chikonzo, 2006; Yar, 2012, p. 249). Arguably, the Internet constituted the most notable innovation in terms of democratic potential as this offered unprecedented opportunities for global dissemination of information and cross-border horizontal communication (Carpentier, 2009; Dahlgren, 2005; Githaiga, 2013; Reilly & Surman, 2003). The advent of Social Media Sites (SNS) was similarly significant as these sites allow users to actively engage with and create content. Subsequently, these innovations encouraged perceptions of digital media as facilitating the emergence of an 'online public sphere', which could potentially reinvigorate the democratic process by encouraging increased civic participation (Calhoun, 1992; Castells, 2007; Habermas, 1989 (1962); Lunt & Livingstone, 2013; Thompson, 1993). However, opposing perspectives challenge this by asserting that the increasing role of ICT in modern society might lead to further marginalization of disadvantaged social groups (Livingstone, 2004; Meijer, 2012; Mitullah, 2013; Mouffe, 1992; Wasko, Murdock, & Sousa, 2011; Willems, Forthcoming, 2014).

To qualitatively contribute to this debate, the present dissertation seeks to explore the implications of gaining access to digital media as experienced by a rural minority in Kenya. As such, the present study is situated within a wider analytical shift away from focusing on conventional political activity to rather explore the 'micro-dynamics' of democracy (Banaji, 2009; Couldry, 2014; Dahlgren, 2006; Tufte & Vidali, 2014). By focusing on how members of the Maasai tribe use ICT to participate in the civic process, the objective is to contribute to the understanding of the relation between ICT and the socialization of citizenship as this evolves in a rural context. Clearly, a deeper understanding of the factors that enable or impede rural appropriation of ICT is necessary to prevent further marginalization of these communities (Jorba & Bimber, 2012). Thereby, the focal point for the present research is highly relevant, particularly considering the lack of empirical research focused on subjective motivations for using ICT in non-western, non-urban contexts (Comaroff & Comaroff, 2012; Curran & Park, 2005; Dirlik, 2004; Wyche, Schoenebeck, & Forte, 2013).

To reach the research objective, a set of qualitative interviews was conducted with members of the Maasai community, a rural minority representing approximately 2 % of the Kenyan

population.<sup>1</sup> The interview subjects were purposefully selected due to their experience with having access to ICT. Over the past 18 months the interview subjects have been studying at the Koiyaki Guiding School, an educational institution located in Masai Mara, Kenya. The KGS offers access to eight computers and a WIFI network, which makes the media environment at the school strikingly different from the surrounding areas. Thereby, the KGS students presented a highly interesting population to involve in a research project seeking to explore the relation between ICT-facilitated forms of civic participation and the formation of a civic identity. Presumably, the opportunities available at the KGS entailed that the empirical observations collected here might indicate future trends as access to ICT continues to spread. Also, the KGS attracts students from across the Masai Mara region, which meant that the sampling strategy allowed access to a wide range of opinion. Additionally, the focus on Maasai aged between 20 and 25 offered an interesting focal point as young people are often framed as disengaged from political processes, yet constituting the ‘pioneers’ in new media usage (Banaji & Buckingham, 2010). Thereby, the potential for online civic participation may appear particularly potent within this social segment. Finally, the focus on youth is highly relevant seeing as 75-80% of the Kenyan population is below the age of 35.<sup>2</sup>

Evidently, this dissertation offers a valuable contribution to the understanding of the democratic potential of ICT (Dahlgren, 2000; Tufte, Wildermuth, Hansen-Skovmoes, & Mitullah, 2013). To situate the present research, the following section provides a critical review of relevant academic literature. This is followed by a statement of the conceptual framework and the research objective informing this dissertation.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **ICT and Democracy**

It is worth noting that seeing ‘new media’ or ICT as potentially reinvigorating the democratic process constitutes a fundamental shift away from seeing ‘the media’ as undermining democracy by creating a society of apathetic individuals numbed to complacency by the all-powerful “culture industry” (Adorno & Horkheimer, 1972; Livingstone, 2010). In striking contrast to this traditional perspective, it is increasingly argued that ICT, and the Internet in particular, might bring “new, more participatory forms of civic and political engagement to

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<sup>1</sup> Maasai Association, About the Maasai, <http://www.maasai-association.org/>, accessed 26.08.2014

<sup>2</sup> UNDP, Kenya’s Youth Employment Challenge, Discussion Paper, January 2013, [http://www.undp.org/content/dam/undp/library/Poverty%20Reduction/Inclusive%20development/Kenya\\_YE\\_C\\_web%28jan13%29.pdf](http://www.undp.org/content/dam/undp/library/Poverty%20Reduction/Inclusive%20development/Kenya_YE_C_web%28jan13%29.pdf), accessed 13.08.2014

the masses” (Castells, 2002, quoted in Livingstone, 2010, p. 2). With regards to the political inclusion, it has been suggested that digital media provides opportunities for minority and disadvantaged social groups to benefit from “the informational, social and economic capital of the social networks from which they have historically been excluded” (M. Makinen, 2006, p. 386; Mbure, 2013; Somolu, 2007). In a similar vein, it has been suggested that the introduction of ICT might encourage increased political interest among the younger generation, thus potentially securing the future of democracy (Banaji & Buckingham, 2010, p. 21; Livingstone, 2008b; Livingstone, Bober, & Helsper, 2005; Livingstone, Couldry, & Markham, 2007). Truly, youth activism on sites such as Facebook and Twitter appear to have played a significant role in expediting social and political change on some notable occasions, for instance during the Arab Spring or the 2011 London Riots (Christensen, 2011). However, external factors that prevent such ‘Twitter revolutions’ from taking place have to be acknowledged when assessing the democratic potential of the Internet (Cammaerts, 2012; Diani, 2000; Reilly & Surman, 2003; Scott & Street, 2000; Shepherd & Landry, 2013). Importantly, the democratic implications of the ‘digital revolution’ remain undetermined, particularly in low and middle-income countries.

### *ICT in Africa*

Unsurprisingly, the widespread dissemination of ICT in Africa seen over the last decade generated much “optimism and speculation regarding its effect on economic and social development” (Ling & Horst, 2011; Rodrigo, 2011, p. 1). Similarly, the rapid spread of mobile technology in Kenya has been accompanied by enthusiastic claims regarding the empowering potential of ICT (Donovan, 2012; Kariuki, 2009). However, the vast digital divide that perpetuates between, and within nations, should not be ignored (Cammaerts, 2012; M. Makinen, 2006; Mbure, 2013; Willems, Forthcoming, 2014). The barrier separating low and middle-income countries from more affluent countries is clearly demonstrated by Internet Penetration Statistics ranging from 81% in the United States to 21.3% in Africa.<sup>3</sup> Worryingly, evidence suggests that the majority of Africans, and particularly those living in sub-Saharan Africa, are unable to benefit from digital media due to poverty, limited free time, low education and lack of access (Ifinedo, 2005; Owiny, Mehta, & Maretzki, 2014). This is particularly troubling considering predictions that the new knowledge economy will exacerbate the marginalization of low and middle-income countries (Garnham, 2011; W. H. Melody, 2011; Molla, 2000). The likelihood of increased stratification is equally pertinent within low and middle-income countries, as digital literacy skills are increasingly becoming a

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<sup>3</sup> African Internet users per 31.12.2013: 240 million, 21.3% of population. Source: InternetWorldStats, <http://www.internetworldstats.com/africa.htm>, accessed 13.08.2014.

requirement to secure employment or achieve social mobility (Livingstone, 2003; Livingstone et al., 2005; W. H. Melody, 2007; Odongo, 2012; Rodrigo, 2011). Similarly in Kenya, research suggests that marginalized groups are continuously prevented from benefitting from ICT due to factors such as “lack of awareness, skills, training, a shortage of capital resources for sustainability and maintenance, and the low provision of appropriate content, both in terms of language and subject matter” (Belcastro, 2005; Kinuthia, 2009; Kituyi-Kwake & Adigun, 2008, pp. 129-130; Wims & Lawler, 2007; Wyche et al., 2013). Thus, more qualitative research on rural experiences of ICT has to be conducted to fully comprehend the implications of the ‘digital revolution’ as experienced by all layers of society (Fallon, 2007; Kariuki, 2009; Larsen, 2014; Mbarika, Jensen, & Meso, 2002; Owiny et al., 2014; Tufte, 2014).

### *ICT in Kenya*

In recent years, academics have showed a heightened interest in the Kenyan media climate. Particularly following the 07/08 post-election violence, academics increasingly focused on the rise of ‘networked journalism’ in Kenya and the vibrancy of the Nairobi blog-sphere (Bunce, Forthcoming, 2014; Goldstein & Rotich, 2008; Maarit Makinen & Kuira, 2008; Mudhai, 2011). The tendency to focus on urban experiences is unfortunate seeing as an estimated 75-80% of Kenyans live in rural areas, where access to network is less available<sup>4</sup> (Mbarika et al., 2002). In fact, estimates suggest that more than half of the Kenyan population live outside the ‘digital divide’. <sup>5</sup> As the strength of a democratic society is hardly measured by the experience of its elite, but by the experience of all its citizens, more focus on rural experiences is necessary to accurately assess the democratic potential of ICT in Kenya.

### **Digital Literacy**

As seen, uncertainty regarding the democratic potential of the Internet persists, particularly as evidence suggests that the majority of online activity is not used for democratic deliberation, but rather for consumerism, entertainment and for maintaining social relationships (Dahlgren, 2005; Livingstone, 2004; Livingstone et al., 2005; Rodrigo, 2011). Clearly, providing people with the means for accessing political websites do not necessarily mean that they will (de Zuniga, 2012; Livingstone, 2008a). Considering that both quantitative and qualitative studies indicate that online civic participation largely depends on

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<sup>4</sup> UNICEF, Kenya Overview 2013, [http://www.unicef.org/kenya/overview\\_4616.html](http://www.unicef.org/kenya/overview_4616.html), accessed 13.08.2014.

<sup>5</sup> Kenyan Internet users per 31.12.2013: 21 million, 47.3% of population. Kenyan Facebook users per 31.12.2013: 2 million, 4.8% of population. Source: InternetWorldStats, <http://www.internetworldstats.com/africa.htm#ke>, accessed 13.08.2014.

offline political interests, a focus on subjective motivations and experiences is necessary to “make specific claims about the political potential of the Net” (Dahlgren, 2005, p. 151; Livingstone & Helsper, 2007).

The notion of digital literacy offers a useful framework for exploring how and why individuals use ICT (Livingstone, 2004). An extension of the term media literacy, digital literacy refers to the “ability to access, understand, critique and create information and communication content online” (Livingstone, 2008b, p. 110). Evidently, digital literacy skills are equally necessary for people to “gain an informed opinion” and for people “to express their opinion individually and collectively in public, civic, and political domains” (Livingstone, 2008b, p. 111; Mbure, 2013, p. 97). As “citizenship in a sense of active participation” is determined by individual motivations and abilities, the notion of digital literacy forms an inherent part of assessing whether the spread of networked technology encourages people “to become informed, find common causes, and participate in public life” at a greater level than before’ (Bidwell, 2011, p. 618; Karpf, 2010; Livingstone et al., 2005; Livingstone et al., 2007; M. Makinen, 2006, p. 383). This emphasis on subjective abilities and motivations for engaging with digital media constitutes an analytical shift away from focusing on conventional political activity to rather explore how civic participation evolves in everyday life (Dahlgren, 2006; M. Makinen, 2006; Tufte & Vidali, 2014). Focusing on subjective experiences with ICT is important as evidence suggests that having access to ICT may potentially increase opportunities for political inclusion for minority groups and rural communities (Mbure, 2013; Mitullah, 2013). As such, greater understanding of the factors that might enhance or impede this participation is necessary to improve opportunities for political inclusion in the future.

### **Online Civic Participation**

The focus on subjective experiences and motivations introduces the notion of ‘the civic’, a term taken to mean a number of different things depending on the context (Banaji & Buckingham, 2010; Dahlgren, 2012; Tufte & Vidali, 2014). Clearly, how we conceptualize ‘civic subjectivity’ has consequences for how we interpret democracy (Dahlgren, 2013, p. 86). Here the term ‘civic’ is used in reference to something closely affiliated to citizenship, meaning a “kind of engagement that is about collective rather than individual identifications” (Tufte & Vidali, 2014, p. 6). Thus, the term civic participation - or civic engagement - is taken to mean the extent in which individuals participate in the social and political processes of their surroundings (Dahlgren, 2005).



A fundamental assumption informing this understanding of civic participation is the perception that in order to act as a citizen a person must first feel like a citizen (Dahlgren, 2000). In other words, for a person to feel motivated to participate in civic life, he or she must first internalize a sense of self as a meaningful member of society. Subsequently, exploring subjective motivations for online civic participation is inherently related to an understanding of how individuals come to see themselves as civic subjects (M. Makinen, 2006). Thus, this allows for a consideration of “how the social uses of information and communication technologies enhance processes of civic engagement and strengthen citizenship” (Tufte & Vidali, 2014, p. 38).

Importantly, within this framework, online civic participation may refer to passive forms of participation, such as online news consumption or following political developments through SNS, as well as more active forms of participation, such as commenting on political issues or writing on politicians Facebook “walls” (Dahlgren, 2005; Tufte & Vidali, 2014). As such, both of these forms of online civic participation may be seen as constituting the formation of a civic identity or “the enactment of citizenship understood as forms of social agency” (Dahlgren, 2005, p. 158).

#### *Passive Forms of Online Civic Participation*

It is often asserted that being able to access relevant knowledge and information forms a crucial part of becoming engaged in societal developments as learning about the outside world creates a sense of belonging to something greater than the self (Livingstone & Helsper, 2007; M. Makinen, 2006). Subsequently, providing access to relevant knowledge and information constitute core parts of a functioning democracy as the strength of a democratic society ultimately depends on having an informed and engaged citizenship (Dahlgren, 2000; Livingstone, 2010). Arguably, then, news consumption may indicate the socialization of citizenship in two interlinked ways. Firstly, an interest in societal developments indicates a sense of belonging to something greater than the self, which forms a core part of becoming a civic subject. Secondly, this sense of self arguably forms the basis for further civic engagement. As such, being able to access information through the Internet has been claimed to facilitate the transformation “from passive to active, from recipient to participant, from consumer to citizen” (Livingstone, 2008b, p. 111).

### *Active Forms of Online Civic Participation*

Beyond creating opportunities for accessing information, ICT also provides access to communicative spaces through which individuals can express their opinions or interact with others. Arguably, the ability to express one's opinion is necessary for an individual to feel like a meaningful member of society as this evokes "subjective notions of efficacy" (Dahlgren, 2000; Mitullah, 2013). Following Dahlgren (2013), this constitutes a fundamental part of a functioning democracy as "life of democracy requires that people be informed, and that they discuss and deliberate, but also that they be emotionally engaged, aroused to involvement, and at some point made to feel that they are sufficiently empowered to make a difference" (p. 73). As such, focusing on how and why individuals use online communicative spaces offers a useful framework for understanding the democratic implications of ICT. Evidently, focusing on the relation between ICT and the formation of a civic identity is particularly relevant when conducting research in social contexts where opportunities for voicing ones opinion have been limited in the past (Dahlgren, 2013; Wildermuth, 2013).

### **The Formation of a Civic Identity**

#### *Associational Interaction*

Importantly, the availability of online communicative spaces not only encourages subjective notions of efficacy, but also provides opportunities for associational interaction to take place between likeminded individuals. This is significant seeing as "democracy resides, ultimately, with citizens who engage in talk with each other" (Dahlgren, 2006, pp. 272-276). Evidently, associational interaction forms a fundamental part of the formation of citizenship as this "helps individuals to develop socially, to shape their identities, to foster values suitable for democracy and to learn to deal with conflict in productive ways" (Dahlgren, 2005, p. 148, 2006, p. 272; Mouffe, 1992). As such, being able to communicate online may foster a sense of 'digital citizenship' by evoking 'group loyalty' and strengthening 'civic commonality' (Cammaerts & Van Audenhove, 2005; Couldry et al., 2014, p. 8; Dean, 2003; Haythornthwaite, 1996; Langman, 2005; Tomlinson, 1994). Again, ICT-facilitated opportunities for associational interaction may prove particularly advantageous for rural communities who live dispersed across large geographical areas (Wildermuth, 2013).

### *Internalization of Democratic Principles*

Within the framework of online civic participation and the formation of a civic identity it is often suggested that a core component of the socialization of citizenship is the internalization of democratic principles, such as efficacy, accountability and transparency (Dahlgren, 2000). Arguably, participating online with the objective of upholding these principles signal the socialization of citizenship in the sense that internalizing a ‘civic identity’ presupposes a minimal shared commitment to “the visions and procedures of democracy” (Dahlgren, 2000, p. 337). Clearly then, a discussion on the relation between online civic participation and the formation of a civic identity contributes significantly to the understanding of the democratic potential of ICT, particularly in a context where confidence in the democratic process may be low due to lack of political representation in the past (de Zuniga, 2012, p. 321).

### **Conceptual Framework**

The conceptual framework for this dissertation draws on available literature about online civic participation and the formation of a civic identity. Within this conceptual lens, passive and active forms of online civic participation are treated as indicative of the formation of a civic identity as both of them signal a subjective sense of belonging to something greater than the self.

Further, this framework conceptualizes acts of online civic participation as indicative of the internalization of democratic principles such as efficacy, accountability and transparency. As such, the framework is useful for exploring the relation between ICT and the socialization of citizenship. Considering the contextual scope of this research, the notion of digital literacy also informed the conceptual framework.

As outlined in the introduction, the present research focuses specifically on the Maasai, a pastoralist minority that face severe developmental challenges including low literacy rates and high infant mortality (Akama, 1999; Hughes, 2006). Arguably, this makes the Maasai a particularly interesting community to focus on when exploring the democratic implications of ICT. Presumably, exploring how a historically marginalized community come to see themselves as meaningful members of society forms an essential part of measuring the democratic potential of ICT in a given political context (Dahlgren, 2013). As such, exploring the relation between having access to ICT and online civic participation within this sociocultural context may propose how political inclusion of marginalized social groups can be ensured in the future (Mitullah, 2013; Tufte & Vidali, 2014).

Focusing on an indigenous population living in rural Kenya is highly relevant as most available research centres on areas where “Internet access is seemingly unlimited, unconstrained and where users rarely consider the costs associated with accessing it” (Wyche et al., 2013, p. 2). Clearly, a wider understanding of the sociocultural particularities that shape ICT appropriation is essential to accurately inform ICT development, transfer and training (Bidwell, 2011; M. Makinen, 2006; Soerensen & Petuchaite, 2013). Thus, the conceptual framework and contextual focus of this empirical research is important to take appropriate and informed measures to prevent increased marginalization of rural minorities in the digital age (Bidwell, 2011; Owiny et al., 2014).

### **Research Question(s)**

Drawing on the conceptual framework, this study will seek to qualitatively answer the following primary research question:

*In what ways does the introduction of ICT encourage online civic participation in a non-western and non-urban context?*

This question will be further supported by the following sub-question:

*In what ways do ICT-facilitated forms of civic participation relate to the formation of a civic identity, as experienced by a rural community?*

The objective of the present dissertation is thus to address the lack of empirical research focused on media use in non-western, non-urban contexts. Following calls for more research focused on the ‘micro-dynamics of society’ this dissertation focuses on ICT-facilitated online civic participation and the formation of a civic identity as experienced by a rural minority.

As the research question focuses on personal experiences and subjective motivations, qualitative interviewing appeared the most appropriate method for operationalizing the research. The empirical data that form the basis for the interpretation was collected by conducting twenty-two semi-structured interviews with a purposefully selected group of Maasai. As the primary objective of conducting this research was to give ‘a voice’ to a rarely considered community, both the data collection and the analysis were conducted with a firm commitment to “learning from the users themselves” (Livingstone, 2004; Molla, 2000). Thus, to present an interpretation that remained firmly embedded in the subjective experiences of the participants, thematic analysis was used to interpret the empirical data. To

ensure the validity and reliability of the interpretation, thematic coding was incorporated in the analysis. To enhance the transparency and transferability of the study, every step of the research process is outlined in the following section. The hope is that this will encourage and benefit future research in comparable social settings.

## **METHODOLOGY**

The following section will provide the rationale for using qualitative interviewing and thematic analysis to reach the outlined research objective.

### **Rationale**

As the outlined research question focuses on subjective experiences and motivations, qualitative interviewing appeared an appropriate method for operationalizing the data collection. Qualitative interviewing is increasingly seen as a valuable method for gathering knowledge about how people experience a particular process or phenomenon as this allows the researcher to situate oneself within the 'life-worlds' of the respondents to gain a more 'sophisticated understanding' of "the situated nature of participants' interpretations and meanings" (Bauer & Gaskell, 2000; Ezzy, 2002, pp. 80-81; Holstein & Gubrium, 1997).

Several methods were considered as alternatives to qualitative interviewing. As the research objective was to explore how and why people use media, rather than focus on media content itself, content and discourse analysis were deselected. Considering the novelty of the focal point, surveys or questionnaires seemed less useful as the rigid format prevents unpredicted elements from emerging (Robson, 1993). As the interview subjects were from the same social milieu using focus groups was considered (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006). Though useful for exploring group dynamics, focus groups appeared less appropriate in a culture structured according to a hierarchy of age and gender. Thus, conducting individual interviews was seen as necessary to gain access to the full range of opinion, including the experiences of the female students (Berger, 1998; Kvale, 2010).

### *Semi-structured Interviews*

Eventually, a semi-structured interview format was deemed the most appropriate for this specific research. Evidently, a certain degree of structure is important when conducting research with a limited scope and timeframe as using a topic guide enables the researcher to

explore the full range of the conceptual framework (Guest, MacQueen, & Namey, 2012). Still, the flexibility of semi-structured interviews allows unpredicted elements and themes to emerge, which makes this format useful for conducting research in a rarely explored sociocultural context. Finally, the flexible format allows the researcher to adjust the structure of the interview conversation to suit the empirical observations. Thereby, this format is useful when seeking an interpretation that is firmly embedded in the subjective experiences of the research participants (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006).

### *Limitations*

There are some limitations that need to be acknowledged when conducting qualitative interviews. Importantly, conducting, transcribing and analysing interviews require a considerable amount of time. Thus, only a limited number of interviews can be conducted. This entails that no broad generalizations should be made on the basis of qualitative interviews (Kvale, 2010). Further, as interviews constitute ‘social processes’ where meaning is actively constructed through dialogue, the researcher must reflect on his or her biases, preconceptions and prejudices at every step of the research process. Similarly, any external factors that may influence the interpretation, such as social norms or cultural taboos, must be considered throughout (Bauer & Gaskell, 2000; Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006; Guest et al., 2012).

Regardless of these limitations, supporters maintain that qualitative interviewing remains the foremost method for understanding “the situated knowledge and practices of social actors within a sampled population” (Ezzy, 2002; Kvale, 2010, p. 120). Thus, semi-structured interviews appeared appropriate for operationalizing the present research.

### *Thematic Analysis and Coding*

Thematic analysis was chosen to interpret the empirical data as this analytical approach allows for an exploratory and interpretative analysis, which takes local contextualities into account. Thus, thematic analysis is suitable for research seeking to “describe and understand how people feel, think, and behave within a particular context relative to a specific research question” (Guest et al., 2012, p. 13).

When using thematic analysis, coding is a useful analytical tool to structure and systematize the analysis (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006; Guest et al., 2012). Coding involves a process of identifying and cataloguing important elements, topics or ideas that relate to the

overarching themes of the research. These ‘codes’ are categorized into a ‘codebook’, which simplifies the process of interpreting the responses in relation to each other and the relevant conceptual framework. Coding enhances the transparency of the analysis, and subsequently the reproducibility of the interpretation (Guest et al., 2012). Importantly, theory plays an inherent role in thematic analysis as a firm understanding of the conceptual framework guides and structures the data collection, the coding and the subsequent interpretation (Kvale, 2010).

## **Research Design**

Following on from this methodological justification, the following section outlines how the research was designed, organized and executed.

### *Pilot Study*

To verify the appropriateness of the chosen method, a pilot study was conducted. To make the experiences transferable, three students at the KGS were interviewed using a topic guide structured according to the overarching themes of the research question. Due to logistical constraints, the pilot was conducted a few days before the extended research. After conducting and transcribing the interviews, the transcripts were coded and analysed. The pilot study confirmed that external factors, such as social norms or cultural taboos, would not significantly impede the research. On the contrary, the participants seemed eager to share their experiences with the researcher. Additionally, the pilot study proved useful for adjusting the structure and terminology of the topic guide, and for planning the timeframe of the extended research.

Importantly, rather than treat the pilot study as an independent part of the research, these interviews were incorporated in the actual analysis. Additionally, this iterative approach was retained throughout as the topic guide was reviewed and redrafted following each interview. Similarly, preliminary findings were discussed with people familiar with working in this sociocultural context throughout the interview phase. This was deemed important considering the different cultural background of the researcher and the interview participants.

### *Ethical Considerations*

Extensive ethical considerations have to be made when conducting research that involves humans (Bauer & Gaskell, 2000; Holstein & Gubrium, 1997; Robson, 1993). Subsequently, much thought was given to whether participating in this research would compromise the personal safety or wellbeing of the respondents. Also, how the cultural background of the researcher might impact the research was carefully considered. Before embarking on the research, any ethical concerns were discussed with the Dissertation Supervisor and an ethics checklist was submitted.

Importantly, before approaching the students directly, the KGS management was approached to obtain the school's permission to conduct the research. The support offered by the Principal of KGS, Mr. Julius Kisemei, was important to successfully complete the data collection. With his permission, a presentation of the research project was given to the students where they were informed that participants could remain anonymous and stop the interview at any time. The desire to record the interviews was explained during the presentation and later repeated in the individual sessions. Following approval from the Dissertation Supervisor, it was decided not to ask for a written consent as many Maasai remain hesitant about signing formal documents. Rather, the participants' oral consent was recorded on tape alongside their interviews.

All the interviews were conducted in English as using a translator was seen as potentially obstructing the natural flow of the interview conversation. This seemed reasonable seeing as English is an official language in Kenya. In addition, the researcher has an adequate understanding of the local dialect after having worked in the area previously. Further, the semi-structured interview format meant that the researcher could ask for clarifications when necessary.

As none of the participants wanted to remain anonymous, their real names are included in the presentation.

### *Sampling*

When planning the research, the initial intention was to conduct 10 to 15 interviews. However, after arriving at the KGS, it became clear that this selective sampling was problematic in a culture structured according to a social hierarchy of age and gender. Considering the demography of the group (17 men/5 women), it was therefore determined to



interview all students present at the time of research. Though this placed additional pressure on the researcher, this was deemed necessary to gain access to the full range of opinion, including the experience of the female students.

Eventually, 22 in-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted. All interviews were conducted in the computer lab at the KGS, a location proposed by the students themselves. This setting was suitable as it provided an undisturbed environment in which the students felt comfortable.

### *Topic Guide*

To explore the full range of the conceptual framework, a topic guide developed on the basis of the overarching themes of the research was used to structure the interview conversations. An example of this can be found in Appendix 1. Nonetheless, the interview conversation was kept open to allow the interview subjects to address the issues in the order and manner that came natural to them. To ensure that the interview conversation accurately represented the experiences of the researched population, the topic guide was reviewed and redrafted following each interview. This reflexive approach proved highly rewarding, particularly as using local terminology encouraged the participants to converse more broadly about their experiences. Furthermore, allowing the participants to ask questions often resulted in fruitful discussions, which provided additional insights into their experience of using ICT to engage in civic life.

### *Conducting the Interviews*

As interviews constitute social processes, it was natural that the interviews varied greatly both in length and depth. Whereas the longest interview lasted for 1 hour and 17 minutes, the majority of the interviews lasted between 30 and 50 minutes. However, a couple of interviews dwindled out after 20 minutes, despite the researcher's attempts to introduce new topics or to re-phrase questions. The shorter interviews were nonetheless included in the analysis as these were useful for verifying, dismissing or extending the preliminary hypothesis formed on the basis of the more in-depth interviews. Broadly speaking, the earlier interviews were useful for gaining a wider understanding of the context and topics at hand, whereas the later interviews were useful to further explore identified themes. Thus, all the interviews informed the interpretation, which ultimately served the objective of presenting a picture of the context which is as accurate and broad as possible.

### *Transcription*

Following the interview phase, the recorded interviews were transcribed. Due to the large sample size this required a considerable amount of time. Unfortunately, a technical default left the recording of the interview with Emmanuel unusable. Already during the transcription the researcher focused on identifying interesting elements, surprises or patterns. Listening to the interviews over and over again made it easier to remember not only what was said, but also how it was said. Evidently, mannerisms, hesitations or silences are equally revealing of how an individual relate to a particular phenomenon. Thus, the researcher preferred transcribing the interviews personally, rather than using an online service.

To verify the accuracy of the researcher's transcriptions one of the interviews was professionally transcribed using the online service [www.rev.com](http://www.rev.com).

### **Thematic Analysis and Thematic Coding**

After transcribing the interview recordings, thematic analysis was used to analyse the responses. To structure and systematize the analysis, a combination of inductive and deductive coding was used. In line with the exploratory nature of the research, this entailed that some codes were derived from existing literature, whereas others emerged directly from the data (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006).

To code the data, the researcher read and re-read the transcripts while paying extra attention to repetitions, deviations, or any interesting indicators of the participant's sense of logic or way of perceiving the discussed phenomenon. Identified codes were schematized into an Excel spreadsheet, or codebook, in which each code acted as a 'summary marker' for an important element, theme, idea or sentiment in the data (Guest et al., 2012, p. 10). Considering the amount of data collected, a codebook proved very useful to ensure that the interpretation accurately captured the nuances and subtleties in the subjective experiences of the participants (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006).

During the coding it became clear that a deep understanding of the subject matter was necessary for detecting significant elements in the responses and for re-contextualizing these within broader frames of reference (Kvale, 2010). As a comprehensive understanding of cultural and contextual particularities was necessary to accurately interpret the significance of the participants' responses, no computer software was used to code the data.

The coding process revealed itself to be a cyclical rather than a linear process, as codes were added, subtracted or combined throughout. As an example, the code 'self-control' was appointed following the interview with Vincent as he repeatedly mentioned the importance of controlling personal media use. As Vincent was the first student to be interviewed, similar accounts were expected to appear in subsequent interviews. However, after reviewing the codebook it became clear that only four other students shared the same degree of self-control as Vincent. This example demonstrates how using coding enhanced the accuracy of the thematic analysis by structuring the identification of patterns and deviations in the empirical data.

After noticing that additional readings did not reveal any new elements or alter the codebook, the coding was deemed completed.

Subsequent analysis aimed to “synthesize, summarize and extend the significance of the codes” in relation to the relevant conceptual framework (Guest et al., 2012, p. 75). In line with the qualitative nature of the research, single insightful reflections or comments were treated as equally significant as reoccurring elements (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006). To identify themes or patterns in the data, associated codes were combined together in sections and sub-sections, which related to the overarching themes of the research. As the respondents were from the same social milieu, repetitions and parallel accounts were common. Rather than undermining the value of the sampling, such patterns seemed indicative of trends or processes within the researched population.

Eventually, interrelated codes were clustered together to form three thematic sections. Two of these seemed related to the research question and subsequently formed the basis of the interpretation.

The first thematic section combined references to *online civic participation*. This was further divided into two sub-sections: *passive forms of online civic participation* and *active forms of online civic participation*. Whereas the former category included references to online news consumption and the use of ICT to stay updated on politics, the latter included references to more active use of ICT, such as liking, sharing or commenting online.

The second thematic section combined responses that related to the participants' subjective motivations for participating online. These indications of the *formation of a civic identity* were divided into three sub-sections: *efficacy*, *accountability* and *responsibility*.

The final thematic section encapsulated references related to the indigenous use of ICT, particularly the use of ICT to preserve indigenous knowledge and cultural heritage. Unfortunately beyond the scope of this research, the symbiosis between indigenous culture and ICT appeared to be a highly interesting focal point for future research.

## **RESULTS AND INTERPRETATION**

The following section presents the main findings deriving from the thematic analysis of the empirical data. This is followed by a deliberation on the significance of these findings for the understanding of the conceptual framework. Finally, some recommendations are given on how to encourage increased online civic participation among rural communities.

### **The Maasai and the Internet**

To gain a basic understanding of the sociocultural context, the interview subjects were asked some introductory questions regarding their personal media use. This allowed insight into some of the ways the introduction of ICT has impacted the lives of the participants and the Maasai community in general. Notably, all the participants emphasized that having access to ICT was significant both for their personal wellbeing and for their professional development. The most important aspects appeared to be the ability to communicate with family and friends, as well as the ability to access a wide range of information. Interestingly, all the participants said they owned a mobile phone and that this was common for most of their friends and family back home. The majority of the participants claimed to own a “smartphone”, a term they used if their phone was able to access the Internet. Most of the students that did not own a “smartphone” explicitly mentioned that they aspired to buy in the future. With regards to more advanced technology, only two participants said they had access to computers or laptops at home. Still, all the participants said they used the school computers during term and that this was useful for their academic development. Illustrative of the notion of a digital divide, the quality of network seemed to differ greatly across the region as the students who lived closer to urban centres enjoyed easier access than those who lived in more remote areas. Even with the KGS Wi-Fi, the students repeatedly mentioned how network access was ‘a challenge’. Regardless, all the students expressed great enthusiasm about the opportunities provided by the introduction of ICT for themselves and for their community.

## **Online Civic Participation**

In line with the conceptual framework of this research, questions were posed in a way that could reveal aspects of the participants' subjective motivations and experiences of using ICT as a platform for civic participation. As outlined in the literature section, the term civic participation is understood as encapsulating both passive forms of online civic participation, such as online news consumption, and active forms of online civic participation, such as commenting, posting or sharing online content.

### **Passive Forms of Online Civic Participation**

#### *Access to Information*

As outlined, access to relevant knowledge and information constitutes a fundamental part of the formation of a civic identity. Arguably, providing the means for people to become informed about societal developments creates a sense of belonging to something greater than the self, which subsequently stimulates further engagement in civic life (Dahlgren; Tufte; Livingstone). Thus, whether the interview subjects use ICT to read news and follow political developments may suggest how having access to ICT relates to the socialization of citizenship within the researched population (Schudson, 1998, quoted in Dahlgren, 2012, p. 35).

The analysis strongly suggested that the introduction of ICT encourages an interest in societal developments as all the participants said they read or watched news as often as possible. Contrary to common perceptions of the Maasai as disengaged and disinterested, the participants interviewed here expressed great interest in and awareness of current affairs. Considering the remoteness of the area, recurrent references to how 'news is everywhere' (Simon) suggested the transformative impact the introduction of ICT has had in the researched context. Whereas the students confirmed that TV and radio remained important sources of information for the illiterate population, the majority indicated that they preferred using the Internet to read news. A closer semantic exploration of these statements showed that the students frequently referred to online news consumption as 'cheaper', 'easier' and 'faster' than other forms of media. The following quote from Vincent is revealing of this:

Vincent: "Through the Internet I can know what is happening around Kenya and the world. I can know what is new ... I don't read newspapers, because all I need I get through the Internet."

The thematic analysis revealed that Facebook was by far the most popular application for news consumption. In general, the participants seemed to prefer to use Facebook because this application required less bandwidth, which made it easier and cheaper to use. The preference for Facebook is clearly demonstrated by the below statement:

Simon: “I follow the news on Facebook. Every day I access the Facebook and I get the news. I don’t have to watch the TV. I can just like a page on Facebook.”

An additional affordance was introduced in the interview with Sosio when he referred to how Facebook allowed the reader to access a wide variety of information. This supported the interpretation that having access to ICT encourages a broad interest in societal developments.

Sosio: “We use the Internet to see news. To see what is going in the country. The national media have their own page on Facebook. So if you like that page you will get everything they update. You just get it. That has been very useful for me. I get a lot of stories about politics, on what is going on in the country, about the economy, how it is growing, and many other things about Kenya.”

Furthermore, the value of being able to determine when and where one accessed news was frequently mentioned when referring to online news consumption. For instance, Abdi referred to the value of being able to ‘store’ news for later, whereas Vincent mentioned how he enjoyed being able to ‘watch news in private’. Such references indicated that the amount of agency given to the user represented one of the main reasons for preferring to use ICT. This emphasis on agency supported the claim that having access to ICT facilitates the transformation from passive recipient to social agent that value being in control over one’s surroundings (Livingstone, 2004). Noteworthy, a couple of the interview subjects explained how they had activated features on their phones to have news sent to them directly. Interestingly, the purpose of doing this was that it cost them less ‘air time’ than opening an Internet browser to read news. Such capacity to manipulate ICT to suit personal circumstances signalled a higher degree of digital literacy than had been expected prior to conducting the empirical research.

*Interest in Politics*

When asked more in-depth questions about their online news consumption, most of the participants referred to the importance of staying updated on political developments. Even those that did not explicitly state that they used ICT to follow politics nonetheless demonstrated an astonishing awareness of ongoing political affairs. Whereas Ann said that news were “all about politics”, Simon noted how access to ICT meant that “there is no way you cannot know about politics or what is going on with the politicians.” Such references were striking considering the lack of access to information available in this area before the introduction of ICT. The majority of the participants similarly referred to how ICT allowed ‘easy’ and ‘direct’ access to what was going on with politics in the country. The extract from Sophy below signals this perception:

Sophy: “Nowadays, if you want to know about politics or what is happening in parliament, you just go to Google. Through the Internet you can get the view of each politician directly.”

The emphasis on using ICT to follow political developments was striking considering common perceptions of the Maasai as disinterested in politics. Beyond confirming that the Maasai use ICT to follow political developments, the empirical evidence also suggested that having access to this information might encourage the development of a more evolved political consciousness. The interview with Sosio, for instance, revealed how the interview subjects used the newly available information to assess the credentials of politicians.

Sosio: “I follow politicians on Facebook. They have their own pages. There they update what is going on. By following the news and watch the debates you can see who you should vote for. You can see who is talking facts and who is an honest person.”

This connection between online information and greater capacity for evaluating politicians was important considering that the Maasai have historically voted according to tribal affiliations. In the following extract, Mike similarly links having access to ICT with the evolvement of a more acute political consciousness.

Mike: “Today, it is easier to follow what politicians are doing. I like the page of the Governor, and there I see what he is doing. This affects how I vote in the election, whether I vote for him or not.”

Similar connections were made by Francis when he addressed how having access to ICT had impacted the Maasai community.

Francis: “Before, in our Maasai place, we did not know about politics. We chose who to support due to their tribe. Through the Internet, through the news, the Maasai are now able to choose who to support based on who is the better politician.”

These sentiments suggest a close connection between having access to political information through ICT and the development of a critical political mind. In line with the conceptual framework, the ability to critically evaluate political leadership constitutes a core component of the socialization of citizenship (Dahlgren). As such, the findings indicate that the participants used ICT to stay informed about political developments and to make decisions on how to cast their votes. Thereby, the empirical evidence suggested an association between gaining access to ICT and the formation of a civic identity.

### **Active Forms of Online Civic Participation**

The second form of online civic participation outlined in the literature section referred to active forms of online civic participation such as liking, posting or commenting online. Indicatively, the vast majority of the participants mentioned that they used ICT frequently to share information, voice their opinion, or to discuss politics. Interestingly, the participants repeatedly referred to ICT as a possible avenue for engaging with social and political developments. The interview with Edward summarises this:

Edward: “If [the politicians] do something that impresses me I ‘like’ it. When they post something good, I comment positive. When they do something bad, I comment to tell them ‘this is not right’”.

Similar references to active forms of online civic participation were identified across the sample, including accounts of liking other people’s posts, expressing ones political opinion online, or writing on a politicians Facebook “wall”. The variety and virility of this activity strongly signalled that the Maasai use ICT as a platform for participating in civic life. Subsequently, the empirical observations indicated an association between having access to ICT and subjective motivations for online civic participation. In line with the conceptual framework, the motivation for online civic participation indicated a belief in the possible outcome of this activity, which subsequently indicated subjective notions of efficacy. To better understand the participants’ subjective motivations for engaging online, the interview



subjects were asked questions regarding the possible outcome of this participation. When analysing the responses three main themes emerged, which were categorized in three interdependent sub-sections. These were efficacy, accountability and responsibility.

## **The Formation of a Civic Identity**

### *Efficacy*

According to the conceptual framework of this research, in order for a person to act as a citizen he or she must first come to feel like a meaningful member of society (Dahlgren). In other words, for a person to internalize a sense of self as a 'civic subject' he or she must first be led to believe that his or her actions might potentially influence social and political processes. Subsequently, subjective notions of efficacy form an inherent component of the formation of a civic identity.

Arguably, signalling the motivation for participating in civic life suggests a belief in the possible outcome of this activity. Subsequently, attempting to communicate with politicians through the Internet inherently suggests a belief in the possible outcome of this communication (Dahlgren). As such, exploring how individuals perceive the possible effect of online participation may offer insight into the relation between ICT and the socialization of citizenship. Hence, the participants were asked questions related to their perceptions of the possible effect of this participation.

Noteworthy, the majority of the participants seemed convinced that communicating with politicians online could potentially influence the political process. Wilson, for example, referred to ICT as bridging the gap between the people and the political leaders.

Wilson: "Politically I will not say that there is that big gap between the leadership and the locals. It is like a two way travel; the locals will post anything, request anything or suggest anything to the leaders. If you see a leader responding to that positively or at least giving guidelines on the same you will feel appreciated. I feel that there is a clear platform for communicating with the leadership there."

When probed further about what the possible consequence of this 'clear platform for communicating' could be, Wilson signalled a belief in the possible outcome of online civic participation. Interestingly, he seemed convinced that communicating with politicians online could make them adjust their politics, as the following extract highlights.

Wilson: “Many [politicians] make empty promises. Through this media or the internet there will be that direct link between us and the leaders. So even if you can’t go and visit him, the media has shortened the distance and you just post something to him or even just throw out your view, and ask him, what about the road you promised? What about the schools? What about the bursaries?”

Researcher: “Yes. And then what happens?”

Wilson: “At least people will have a chance to come and voice their different views and that will go directly to the politician.

Then, he has to try, at least to secure his chances in the next election, try to do the things he promised. [Posting] is a way of making a reminder to the politician that, you said this, what about it? It is actually positive in the political affairs.”

Similar connections between online communication and efficacy were identified throughout the interview responses. The analysis revealed that the participants regarded the Internet as offering unprecedented opportunities for protecting the democratic rights of the Maasai people. As such, the evidence suggested that the participants felt that having access to ICT might improve opportunities for political inclusion. This belief in the democratic potential of ICT was noteworthy considering the lack of political representation enjoyed by the Maasai in the past. Sophy, for instance, seemed convinced that having access to ICT would eventually improve the political situation of the Maasai community, particularly by allowing for a ‘digital citizenship’ of Maasai to emerge.

Sophy: “In my opinion, the media has helped the Maasai people air out their issues. Through the media we have been able to connect with other Maasai, all over the country. When Maasai raise different issues to political leaders, this has an effect. They can no longer just tolerate that problem after it has been voiced by all those people. The Maasai can air their issue out through the media and they are being helped. It has really been something very nice for our people. We can give out our opinions, and then we are being represented by the Maasai in parliament.”

The above quote signals how having access to ICT was seen as potentially extending individual and collective opportunities for political inclusion and political efficacy. Similar sentiments emerged throughout the interview responses. Subsequently, the empirical

observations indicated a connection between the introduction of ICT and a sense of efficacy within the researched population.

### *Accountability*

The second sub-theme related to subjective motivations for online civic participation related to the motivation of holding politicians accountable. Interestingly, references to accountability emerged both when the participants were discussing the importance of staying informed about what politicians were doing, as well as when they were discussing the importance of telling politicians when they failed to fulfil their democratic obligations. As the below quote suggests, Abdi seemed to believe that having access to ICT made it easier to ensure that politicians kept their political promises.

Abdi: “Now we have access to information through the Internet, the TV and the radio. If [the politicians] do not fulfil their promise, we can know and we can use the media to tell them. Therefore they have to deliver their promises.”

The following quote by Josphat similarly suggest how the researched population connected having access to ICT with enhanced opportunities for transparency and accountability.

Josphat: “It is not easy for politicians to get away with things nowadays. You can raise issues and people all over the country will hear what is being said. This has helped a lot.”

Similar references to how it was ‘easier’, ‘faster’ and ‘cheaper’ to ‘put pressure on politicians’ (Edward) after the introduction of ICT were identified across the interview responses.

The majority of the participants referred to accountability in similar ways in their interviews. Thus, the empirical observations suggested that holding politicians accountable constituted one of the main motivations for using ICT. This related to the formation of a civic identity in two interlinked ways. Firstly, the emphasis on accountability signalled awareness of the social contract envisioned to exist between leaders and citizens in a democratic society. Thus, the recurrent references to accountability suggested that the introduction of ICT facilitates the internalization of democratic principles (Dahlgren). Secondly, the emphasis on using ICT to hold politicians accountable signalled a belief in the possible effect of online civic participation. Thus, the emphasis on accountability seemed inextricably interlinked to

subjective notions of efficacy. Evidently, both these elements determined the participants' subjective motivations for participating online.

Interestingly, the participants referred to ICT not only as enhancing opportunities for efficacy and accountability, but also as benefitting the political leaders by giving them a way of communicating with their people. This added an interesting element to the understanding of how ICT facilitates communicative links between the people and the power holders in society (Dahlgren). Echoing Wilson's notion of a 'two-way travel', quoted above, Samson referred to ICT as providing politicians with a way of staying in contact with the people.

Samson: "The politicians cannot meet all the people, so it is good for them to be able to be in contact with the people through the Internet. It is a way of keeping in contact with people."

Interestingly, several of the students seemed convinced that online pressure would eventually lead politicians to change or to fulfil their promises. The participants did not necessarily see this as a result of the character of the politician, but rather as a result of the need to retain public support to win votes in the next election. The perception that politicians would accommodate public opinion to stay in power suggested a belief in the democratic process, which seemed noteworthy considering the lack of political representation enjoyed by this community in the past. Illustrative of this was Edward's reference to online communication as a way of 'collecting data from the people'. Similarly, Francis described Facebook as functioning as a 'voting ballot', which politicians could use to stay informed about public opinion. Similarly, Sophy stressed how politicians used SNS actively as a platform for communicating with the public. This clearly suggested that the sampled population believed that having access to ICT had enhanced opportunities for transparency and accountability. An additional element of this was introduced in the interviews with Joseph S. and Ann. As aspiring politicians, they both emphasized how important it was to deliver political promises and 'act in a clear manner' (Ann) after the introduction of ICT as this had given the public a way to stay informed about their achievements.

Thus, the empirical observations suggested an association between having access to ICT and the internalization of subjective notions of efficacy, firmer determination for holding politicians accountable, and ultimately greater confidence in the democratic process.

### *Associational Interaction*

Across the sample references to the affordance of being able to communicate with other Maasai about issues related to their community was identified. This strongly supported the argument that ICT extend opportunities for associational interaction to take place between like-minded individuals or groups, which strengthens civic commonality and evokes group loyalty (Couldry et al., 2014). As outlined in the literature section, this associational interaction constitutes a key element of the socialization of citizenship (Dahlgren). Interestingly, the participants mentioned several ways in which ICT was used to establish connections between different Maasai communities. For instance, the participants mentioned how specific Facebook groups and pages had been created for the purpose of discussing community matters or preserving elements of their culture, like the Maa language. Suggestive of the formation of a 'digital citizenship' (Couldry et al., 2014) the participants described these sites in terms of 'creating bonds' and 'bringing people together.' The following quote offered by Sosio demonstrates this.

Sosio: "On Facebook we have created very many pages about community. We use them to communicate about our culture and issues important to our community. For example, we have a page where we share Maasai proverb ... This is a direct way of preserving the knowledge from our parents and grandparents. When we communicate on the internet we learn more about our culture."

Evidently, opportunities for associational interaction form a vital part of sustaining a collective identity. Thus, this specific affordance of ICT appeared particularly important for a rural community that live in areas with poor infrastructure and transport links.

### *Responsibility*

In relation to these opportunities for sustaining a collective identity, another aspect of the participants' subjective motivations for online civic participation emerged which had not been predicted prior to collecting the empirical data. Interestingly, when discussing the issue of insecurity in Kenya, Josphat firmly asserted how it was the responsibility of the people to deliberate and find solutions when political leaders failed to fulfil their obligations. The reference to ICT was notable as Josphat seemed convinced that it was through online spaces that these solutions could be found.

Josphat: “The political leaders are blaming each other and pointing fingers. So, we discuss on Facebook with friends, to try to find what the resolution to the insecurity issue can be. By expressing these issues all over the country, from all the different people, sharing these ideas with your fellow citizens and local leaders, then we can find an easy and very quick resolution. We, as the citizens, will find an answer. We, the people, we can find the resolution among ourselves.”

Similar emphasis on the responsibility of the people was expressed by all the participants, in different ways. Subsequently, the empirical observations suggested that the foremost factor inspiring subjective motivation for online civic participation was a sense of responsibility. This materialized either as the responsibility of helping other members of the Maasai community, particularly the illiterate population, or as a responsibility of guiding political leaders. As the phrasing in the following extract suggests, online civic participation was referred to not merely as a right, but as a responsibility.

Josphat: “You see, I myself added the Security Minister as my friend in Facebook. After I see what is going on in the country regarding the insecurity, I have to send him my opinion, my ideas. As the head of security, I tell him, he has to do this, this and this.”

Importantly, the recurrent references to responsibility appeared both in relation to passive and active forms of online civic participation. In terms of passive participation, the students stressed the importance of following current affairs to be able to share this knowledge with their community and to give informed advice to their leaders. In terms of active participation, the responses indicated that the students mainly posted, shared or commented online with the objective of guiding or informing others. The following comment from Sosio demonstrates how the responsibility to help others greatly influenced subjective motivations for online civic participation.

Sosio: “In Facebook if I see something I know something about I like to comment or give my opinion. It is nice to share your mind. Maybe that might help that person.”

The following extract from the interview with Vincent further signals the emphasis on using ICT to help the community.

Vincent: “I use the Internet to empower my community, both economically, but also by helping people know how to know. When I

graduate from KGS, I am really looking forward to using the Internet to do good things.”

As such, the findings suggested that the sociocultural emphasis on the community translated onto how and why the researched population use ICT. The following extract from the interview with Josphat further signals how online civic participation derived from a desire to positively influence the social and political process.

Josphat: “If I have an idea from following the political happenings on Facebook and the media, I can post my idea to the Interior Minister. I post my idea because it might be helpful to him.”

Researcher: “What do you think commenting might lead to?”

Josphat: “It will help them to solve their problems. Having ideas from different people is very good for them. It is very nice to talk to them. Maybe I don’t have their phone number or the opportunity to call them. But on Facebook I can communicate with them. This is very important because I might have an idea that can push Kenya forward.”

The majority of the students made similar references to how it was their responsibility to participate in order to guide the social and political process. Not only did this support the interpretation that the participants believed in the possible effect of their actions, it also suggested that the formation of a civic identity evolves differently in a culture where collective interests are placed above individual ones. Subsequently, the empirical evidence strongly suggested that sociocultural particularities greatly influence subjective motivations for online civic participation. Thus, the findings affirmed the importance of conducting qualitative research in different social and political contexts to accurately assess the democratic implications of ICT.

As seen, the empirical evidence strongly suggested that the researched population use ICT to communicate with politicians with the objective of positively influencing the political process. (Dahlgren) Importantly, the optimistic perspective on ICT as providing opportunities for horizontal communication appeared adequately balanced by an awareness of the external circumstance that prevent online participation from resulting in political or social change. When referring to the value of being able to communicate ‘directly’ with political leaders, the majority of the students seemed aware that politicians did not personally read or compile online content. Despite rarely or never receiving a response, the students seemed determined

to continue to engage with politicians through SNS. In line with previous findings, the motivation for civic participation seemed to derive from a sense of responsibility towards the community rather than from actual results. This hypothesis is supported by the following extract from the interview with Josphat.

Researcher: “Even if you do not get a response, you are still motivated to write to the politicians?”

Josphat: “Yes, I am still motivated to do it because it is painful to see innocent people dying, and the government is supposed to protect the people. That motivates me to continue to comment. To continue to insist that they do something.”

Such sentiments suggested that subjective motivations for civic participation and the formation of a civic identity in this context evolve independently from offline social and political change.

### *Self-censorship*

Indicating promising levels of digital literacy, all the interview subjects demonstrated awareness of possible negative side effects of ICT. When referring to the possible misuse of ICT, the majority of the participants emphasized how it was their responsibility to help the illiterate population avoid negative content such as abusive speech or pornography. Interestingly, the analysis revealed that most of the interview subjects felt there was a need to restrict online behaviour, either to avoid repercussions from the government, to avoid offending future employers, or to prevent offending their community. The fear of negative consequences, and the subsequent need for self-censorship, suggested that the interview subjects participated online despite feeling that this might jeopardize future job opportunities or even personal safety. For instance, Sophy expressed how she used Facebook actively to dissuade the Maasai community from practising female circumcision despite feeling that this might result in her being excluded from her community. This affirmed how subjective motivations for online civic participation derived from a sense of responsibility rather than from personal ambitions.

Noteworthy, similar emphasis on responsibility resurfaced when discussing the challenge of the digital divide. The participants repeatedly mentioned the importance of sharing the affordances of ICT with the illiterate population. As the quote from Wilson below suggests,



the participants seemed to feel that by acting as the 'gatekeepers' of information they might counteract some of the challenges of the digital divide.

Wilson: "They will get information too. Just after a short time compared to a person that has direct access to the Internet. The other people, the other locals, they will get the same news through a direct source like me."

The emphasis on sharing the affordances of ICT suggests that the introduction of ICT in this locality might involve more than those with direct access. Evidently, how the participants involved in this research perceived and experienced ICT was greatly influenced by the fact that they belong to a culture where the collective is placed above the individual. Thereby, the empirical evidence asserted how quantitative indications of the digital divide are insufficient to grasp the complex process of indigenous appropriation of ICT. Rather, this research confirmed the importance of considering sociocultural particularities when exploring the democratic implications of ICT in a given social and political setting.

## **CONCLUSION**

The objective of this dissertation was to explore the relation between ICT-facilitated forms of civic participation and the formation of a civic identity, as experienced by a rural community. To reach this objective, a set of qualitative interviews were conducted with a purposefully sampled population of young Maasai who have enjoyed access to ICT for a period of time. Following the data collection, the empirical data was analysed in relation to the overarching themes of the research question. To enhance the validity and transferability of the findings, thematic coding was incorporated to structure and systematize the analysis.

The empirical findings strongly suggested that access to ICT does encourage online civic participation within the researched population. This materialized both as passive forms of online civic participation, such as using ICT to follow current affairs, and active forms of civic participation, such as using ICT to voice political opinions, educate others about current affairs or attempt to communicate with political leaders.

Following on from this, the empirical evidence suggested that ICT-facilitated forms of online civic participation encourage the formation of a civic identity within the researched population. This interpretation was based on indications of subjective notions of efficacy and

firm commitments to upholding democratic principles such as transparency and accountability. Thereby, an association between having access to ICT and the internalization of democratic principles was established. The amount of confidence in the democratic process appeared notable considering the lack of political representation enjoyed by this community in the past. Thus, it seemed fair to assume that having access to ICT encouraged the researched population to see themselves as meaningful members of society.

Beyond indicating that opportunities for online civic participation encourage the formation of a civic identity, the findings suggested that the participants' subjective motivations for engaging in civic life mainly derived from a deep sense of responsibility towards their community, and to society. This sense of responsibility extended onto both passive and active forms of online civic participation. Further, the sense of responsibility seemed to trump the awareness of possible negative consequences and the inclinations towards self-censorship online. Thus, the conducted research had significant implications for the understanding of the conceptual framework as the findings illustrated the extent in which sociocultural particularities determine the process of online civic participation and the formation of a civic identity. As such, the findings affirmed the importance of widening the analytical gaze of media research to include non-western, non-urban appropriation of ICT.

### **Future Research**

This research highlighted several ways in which the introduction of ICT has impacted the Maasai culture. Notably, the respect given to the 'digital literate' members of community indicated that the social hierarchy of the Maasai is being restructured. Additionally, the research revealed interesting ways in which the Maasai used ICT to preserve elements of their cultural heritage. As this was beyond the scope of the present research, how ICT is used to protect indigenous knowledge appeared a highly interesting focal point for future research in this context.

### **Recommendations**

The underlying aim of conducting this research was that the presented findings would be useful for actors or organizations seeking to implement measures to improve the political inclusion of minority groups, such as the Maasai. Thus, some reflections are offered that might inform such endeavours.

Firstly, the findings suggested that providing 'pioneers' or 'role models' within communities with access to ICT may potentially benefit a wider proportion of the community than those

with direct access. This appeared particularly likely in cultures where the collective is placed above the individual. However, much attention has to be given to internal power relations when attempting to enhance opportunities for political inclusion within social groups.

Further, in contrast to earlier findings, the empirical data collected here suggested that motivations for online civic participation evolve independently from offline political interests and tangible results. Thus, this suggests that facilitating access to ICT and improving digital literacy skills is a suitable way of enhancing participation in a broader sense. Finally, the fact that the students preferred using their phones to access the Internet, as well as less bandwidth demanding applications, such as Facebook, suggested that the immediate attention should be placed on extending network access and increasing digital literacy skills, rather than providing more costly technology such as personal computers

### **Final thoughts**

Upon completion, the research was shared with the respondents and staff at the KGS. It was hoped that the research could be useful for the institution when contacting possible sponsors and for developing future curriculums. Also, as the underlying goal of this research was to give ‘a voice’ to the Maasai community, it seemed important to allow the participants a chance to ‘hear their own voice’ and use the research to their own advantage.

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## **Appendix 1**

### **Interview Topic Guide**

*In line with the reflexive nature of this research, the topic guide was reviewed and redrafted following each interview. Additionally, the flexible structure retained during the interview conversations allowed the interview subjects to discuss the themes and topics in the way that seemed natural to them. Still, the researcher benefitted from having reflected on a topic guide to ensure that the overarching themes of the conceptual framework were explored. The following example outlines the sort of questions raised during the interview conversations.*

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### **Interview Topic Guide**



**Location:** Computer Lab, Koiyaki Guiding School, Naboisho Conservancy, Masai Mara, Kenya

**Date:** June 2014

**Introduction**

- Discuss oral consent
- Ask for consent to record conversation

**Background:**

- What is your name?
- How old are you?
- Where are you from?
- What did you do before coming to KGS?
- Have you worked in tourism before?
- What would you like to do after you graduate?
- What has been the best thing about being at KGS?
- What has been the most challenging thing about being at KGS?

**Background:** Media use

- What type of media do you use in your daily life?
- What kind of mobile phone do you have?
- When did you get a mobile phone? Is it the first one you have had, or did you have one before?
- What did you think when you first got a mobile phone?
- What do you mainly use your phone for? (Calling friends, accessing the Internet?)
- Do you use your phone differently/similarly when you are at KGS, and when you are at home?
- How would you compare your own mobile phone usage to how other people use their phones? (other students at KGS/ family and friends at home)

**Background:** Internet use

- Do you access the Internet?
- How do you access the Internet? Do you use the school computers? Or do you access the Internet using your phone?
- How often would you say that you access the Internet?
- Would you like to access the Internet more than you do now?
- If so, what challenges restrict you from accessing the Internet? (lack of time, lack of network etc.)

**Background: KGS**

- Did you know that the KGS had a computer room and a WIFI network when you applied to come here/before you arrived?
- Had you used the Internet or a computer before coming to KGS? Do you have access to the Internet/computers in your home area?
- Was it difficult to understand how to use the computers? How did you learn?
- Do you miss having access to the Internet/the computers when you go back home?
- Do you use the computers,/the Internet in your studies or to prepare for exams? What is the advantage of this? What is the challenge of this?
- How do you know whether the things you read online can be trusted? Do you feel that online content is reliable?

**Background: Social Media Sites**

- Have you heard about Facebook? Do you use this?
- When did you first hear about Facebook? How did you first hear about Facebook?
- How about Twitter, Instagram, YouTube, etc. – do you use any of these pages?
- Why do you use x, and not x? What are the difficulties with using x, rather than x?
- Would you say that the sites you use are the same that those your friends or colleagues use? Would you say that most of the Maasai community use x? Do most of the Maasai know about x?

**Background: Facebook**

- Do you think Facebook is easy or difficult to use? What makes it easy? What makes it difficult?
- Can you access Facebook on your phone? Or do you use the computers? If so, can you access Facebook when you are not at the KGS?
- What are the most important aspects of social media, such as Facebook, for you? What are the least important?

**Passive Participation: News Consumption**

- Do you follow the news? How do you do this? Do you watch TV, read newspapers, or read on the Internet?
- In what ways can you use the Internet to read news?
- How often would you say that you do this? Why do you use the Internet to read news? What does the Internet offer that other media do not?
- What kind of news do you mainly focus on? (Local, Kenyan, International)
- Have you always followed the news in the same way that you do now, or has there been any particular change in your news consumption over say the last year?
- Do you read any blogs, or alternative media, outside of Facebook? What do you think that these offer?

**Active Participation: Liking, Posting, Commenting**

- Have you ever written anything on the Internet yourself?
- What kind of things do you post about?
- Why do you do this? What reaction do you get to what you post?
- Do you ever 'like' news stories, or something that someone else posts?
- What is the reaction to this?
- Why do you do this?
- Do you ever comment on what other people write, or in any specific groups?
- What stories/post would you comment on?
- What do you think/hope is the outcome of this?

**Civic identity: Political Mind-set**

- How do you feel about Kenyan politics?
- How do you learn about politics? How do you learn what is going on in the local county and in the country? How do you learn what is happening outside of Kenya?
- Do you follow any politicians on social media (Facebook)? Who do you follow (local, national, international)?
- How do you feel about being able to see what politicians are doing through the Internet?
- Who do you think is in charge of managing the politicians' social media sites?
- Do you comment on what politicians post? Do you write to them directly? What is your motivation for doing so? What do you think is the result of this? Do you get a response?
- How do other people react when you do this? Do they comment? How do their comments make you feel?

**Civic identity: Associational Interaction**

- How do you use the Internet to communicate with others? (email, Facebook, chat rooms)
- Do you mainly communicate with other Maasai, or other Kenyans? Or people in other countries?
- Do you have many contacts on Facebook? How do you know you 'Facebook friends'? Do you know them in real life, or through the Internet?
- What do you talk about with your online contacts? What topics do you discuss? Do you feel that the Internet is a good space for sharing your opinion? Or are there any challenges with using the Internet in this way?
- Do you discuss issues you read on the Internet with your colleagues here at the KGS? Or with your family or friends at home?

**Culture/Digital Literacy**

- Do you feel that the Maasai culture is changing? What do you think is causing this?
- Are there any elements of the culture you think should change? How can this be encouraged?
- Are there any elements of the culture you think should not change? How can this be prevented?
- Many Maasai seem to wear their traditional costumes in Facebook - do you do this? Why do you do that?
- In your community, do you ever discuss the Internet, or things that you read on the Internet?
- How do the elders feel about the Internet? How do the younger generation feel about the Internet?
- What is the best thing about having access to the Internet? For you as an individual? For your community?
- What is the worst thing about having access to the Internet? Are there any negative side-effects? What can be the result of this?
- How can the negative side-effects be controlled/limited? How do you see your own role in this?

**Conclusion**

- Do you have anything else to add?
- Do you have any questions for me?

**Thank you very much.**

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