RESEARCH ARTICLE

'The Opportunity Exists. Why Don't They Seize It?' Political (In)Competence and the Potential of ICTs for Good Governance in Niger Republic

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An increasing number of scholars, political activists, humanitarian workers, and peacebuilding strategists are now advocating ICTs for fostering democratic participation and good governance in Africa. For their part, governments are devising policies geared towards helping citizens controlling their own destiny through the use of ICTs. They are backed by international development organizations that are implementing numerous programmes and projects centered on the notions of e-government, e-governance, and e-democracy. All those concerned actors and development workers are particularly encouraged by the fact that digital devices are becoming increasingly available for public use on the continent. However, so far, we lack clear evidence that African citizens are actually using, in their everyday lives, digital tools for governance, political participation, and peacebuilding purposes. Based on the case of Niger Republic, this study seeks to contribute to answering this question through semi-structured interviews carried out with Nigerien social media users. It shows that many factors including illiteracy, and particularly digital illiteracy, lack of political will, inefficient methods and poor understanding of social media potential contribute to strongly mitigate digital activities when it comes to access, governance, political participation and peacebuilding.

Introduction

For a long time, the growing availability of digital devices, coupled with the development of an enthusiastic literature centred on the empowering potential of ICTs, have obscured the answer to the question of how mobile phones, the Internet and social media are actually being used by Africans, in everyday life, for governance and peacebuilding purposes. The answer was taken to

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be self-evident, resting on the notion that ICTs are, in themselves and for themselves, empowering tools, and that people will spontaneously take advantage of the existence and availability of those technical objects to defend and promote their democratic rights, in their best interests. However, as will be shown in this paper, it is not clear that ICTs are actually being used that way, even when and where they are apparently being used for governance or political purposes. In other words, it is not clear that those who are supposed to benefit from the empowering

effects of ICTs are actually taking advantage of the potential of social media and the internet to change the social and political landscape in a way that is favourable to them.

Based on semi-structured interviews, this study seeks to show Nigerien users' experience with social media, as well as their appreciation of governmental activities, as related to governance, democratic participation, and peacebuilding. The paper argues that many factors (illiteracy – and particularly digital illiteracy – lack of political will, inefficient methods and poor understanding of social media's potential) all contribute to strongly mitigate digital activities when it comes to access, governance, political participation and peacebuilding. Thus, social media are not always the 'liberating tools' they are claimed to be. In many cases, they are actually used by power holders to 'build political support…in exchange for jobs and other benefits' (Roniger 2004: 354), or to show loyalty, and mobilize militants for laudation, and expression of mutual obligations. In other words, they empower those who are already powerful and tend to disempower those who have less power.

Theoretical framework

This paper takes place within the bourdieusian framework of power struggles. It shows that social and cultural capitals, as well as political competence, are unevenly distributed among social media users and that some agents who are believed to be the beneficiaries of e-governance and technological empowerment policies are in fact endowed with very low levels of access to resources (including technological resources and the capacity to appropriate and use them) and therefore low levels of capacity to reshape the political field in accordance with their positions and interests. On the other hand, the government and political leaders may lack the will, the knowledge, the interest, the resources, and the capacities to implement effective policies geared towards empowering citizens. Indeed, where they are part of the public resources, social media can even

be used for particularistic ends by those who control the state apparatus.

Methodology

This study[1] took place in Niamey, the capital city of Niger Republic, between July and August 2014. Niger is especially important for the purpose of this study because only a few studies have addressed, so far, the problematics of ICTs use in that country, not to mention the problematics of social media use. Indeed Niger is among those African countries that are the least known and the least studied. Besides, the low level of access to ICTs in Niger makes it an unlikely object of study for new media scholars who usually highlight (and focus on) the fast pace of adoption of ICTs in Africa and consciously or unconsciously overlook cases that do not illustrate the idea that a technological revolution is going on in Africa. Yet, that is precisely what makes countries such as Niger important when it comes to fostering cautious approaches against a widespread journalistic and media hype hailing the potential of ICTs and social media in overcoming all kinds of obstacles on the path to development.

The population studied is composed of urban, educated social media users. The study principally took place amongst cybercafé users, as well as some other places such as The Abdou Moumouni University of Niamey's campus and governmental offices. Although most social media users say they access the internet through their mobile phones, we (the author and his assistants) chose to interview cybercafé users because cybercafés are places where users are likely to be found at times when they would be carrying out digital activities and would be more receptive to conversations related to those activities. Trying to interview just anybody on the street at any time would have resulted in a high number of refusals for lack of time or other reasons. Also, identifying and reaching the target population (social media users) is easier that way since the focus is narrowed down to a smaller set of people eligible for the interviews. This is

easier than trying to identify them from the wider general population. It is certain that a number of social media users no longer go to cybercafés because they have access to the internet by other means. For example, some users are owners of computers and use USB (Universal Serial Bus) flash drives to access the internet anywhere and others use their mobile phones. Those users certainly have characteristics of their own, distinct from those of cybercafé users and some of them may have not been captured in this study. However, given the cost of computers and the cost of USB flash drives to access the internet, those users are a minority and it is very unlikely that their behaviours have such an important impact that they change the general configuration of social media use in Niger. As for mobile phone users, they cannot be distinguished from cybercafé users since most, if not all cybercafé users also have mobile phones. Individuals go to cybercafés not just to have access to social media (which they can easily access using their mobile phones), but also for many other reasons such as sending emails, downloading papers, reading newspapers, reading and printing all kinds of documents; etc. or even socializing with other users.

Additionally, users were randomly selected without regard to socio-economic status, sex or age using a convenience sampling which consists in interviewing people available and willing to be interviewed. The target population was the population of social media users and no 'quantitative' representativeness (with regard to the entire population of the Nigerien users) was sought. However, the very characteristics of the target population (who are likely to be urban dwellers, educated and social media users) set them apart as a rather small group of people in a country where access to the internet is the lowest in the world. As such, we can be confident that any generalization made about social media users based on the responses from the people interviewed here has a high probability of capturing the opinions of that population.

The methodology used is therefore qualitative. The paper is based on semi-structured interviews[2] carried out in Niamey, the capital-city of Niger in July and August 2014, with 45 users of social media. The paper particularly focuses on the following aspects: Based on their own accounts, what do people primarily use social media for? More importantly, the research is centered on appreciations of e-Governance, political participation, and peacebuilding governmental activities. Thus, the interviews first provide information about how people use social media in Niger and, more specifically, on social media use as it relates to political participation, e-governance, peacebuilding and state building.

It should be noted that the questions devised in interview guides (*guides d'entretiens*) were not limited to these questions, although all the conversations revolved around them. The author tried, every time it was possible, to deepen the understanding of interviewees' views with new questions inspired by their answers that arose on the spot. In selecting individual users, the study was not seeking statistical representativeness but rather an in-depth understanding of the meanings and feelings associated with ICT use for sociability, governance and peacebuilding purposes amongst Niger's urban ICT users (particularly social media users).

The paper is divided in three parts. The first part examines Niger's political and economic systems, Niger's communication system and policy, as well access to ICTs in Niger. The second part is devoted to social media, particularly Facebook membership in Niger and virtual sociability, as opposed to traditional forms of sociability. The third part is devoted to political participation, e-governance, peacebuilding and service delivery.

Background: Niger's Political, Economic and Communication Systems

Niger, a land-locked country of 1,267,000 Km², is located in West Africa. Niger's population in 2014 is 17 million inhabitants subdivided in nine different ethnic groups. Niger is among the poorest countries in the world.

Political system

After independence in 1960, Niger inherited a model based on the French administrative system. This system is characterized by the existence of a unitary and centralized state that, due to the multi-ethnic composition of the population and the authoritarian regimes that successively held power, led to multiple crises and chronic instability. Thus, Niger is among those states that hold the absolute record number of aborted or successful coups. During its 54 years of independence, Niger has been led by only three civilians for a total of 19 years. Since 1965, when the first coup was foiled by the regime of President Diori Hamani (1960–1974), the military has never been far from the corridors of power. Of the nine presidents who have ruled the country between 1960 and 2010, six were military or former military. However, military coups and military regimes in Niger are only one of the manifestations of a deeper political instability since the country has also experienced four rebellions (Deycard 2011) as well as relentless student and worker strikes during the last two decades, sometimes leading to very long work stoppages by public service workers. It was only between 1991 and 1993 that Niger instituted a multi-party system and a democratic regime. Currently, the political class is mainly organized within four political parties: the MNSD-Nassara (*Mouvement National pour la Société de Développement* – National Movement for a Development Society); the CDS-Rahama (*Convention Démocratique et Sociale Rahama* – Social and Democratic Convention-Rahama–no website found); the PNDS-Tarayya (*Parti Nigérien pour la Démocratie et le Socialisme* – Nigerien Party for Democracy and Socialism-Tarayya); and the MODEN-Lumana (*Mouvement Démocratique Nigérien pour une Fédération Africaine* – Nigerien Democratic Movement for an African Federation). It is noteworthy that Nigerien political parties usually add a word that captures the values for which they are said to be fighting after their acronyms.

Thus, we have *Nassara* for victory, *Rahama* for prosperity and *Tarayya* for rally.

Going back to the instability of the political system, we can say that it was basically an issue of good governance that the ruling elites have begun to address recently by proposing and implementing a series of reforms designed to secure decentralization of power and to foster good governance.

Decentralization and Governance

The reforms which we alluded to above related primarily to create new territorial and political subdivisions to provide more autonomy in decision-making to local people. Thus, Niger now has eight administrative regions, 36 departments, 265 local governments with 52 urban districts and 213 rural communities. Municipalities have been accorded considerable autonomy regarding local economy, education, housing, etc. Also note that the leaders of local governments (mayors and councilors) are elected by the local population. Although the central authorities of the state still exercise a great deal of control on decisions made by local officials, the current system allows some level of representation and decision-making to the people.

Communication and ICTs in Niger

The widespread poverty affecting the country is evident in the lack of equipment in the communications infrastructure, including ICTs. Mobile-cellular subscriptions per 110 inhabitants were 39.3 in 2013 (ITU 2014, 243), is relatively high compared with the use of land line telephones, television or the internet, which all are among the lowest in the world. Niger is regularly ranked among the last few countries in the world when it comes to ICT development indicators (ICT Development Index). Only a few households can afford computers, and access to the internet is mainly an urban phenomenon with a large number of users using cybercafés rather than accessing the internet in their homes or on their own computers.

A growing number of young people are now using social media, particularly social networking sites such as Facebook, through mobile devices, particularly 3G phones (smartphones). However, the rate is still very low compared to many other countries. According to the Internet World Stats (2014), as of 30 June 2014, the number of Internet users in Niger stood at 298.310 corresponding to 1.75% of the total population. Seemingly, the number of Facebook users, as of 31 December 2012, stood at 63.500, corresponding to 0.1% of the total population.

Communication policy

The immediate aftermath of independence (1960) in Niger was characterized by a state monopoly on media. During this period and until 1991, the government's policies and interventions were structured around the notion of nation/state-building. After 1991, democracy was institutionalized, and freedom of press manifested through the creation of numerous private newspapers, radios and televisions. In the meantime, between 1995 and 2000, the internet and mobile phones were introduced in the country and their use rapidly grew amongst urban dwellers, young and educated people.

This led the government to adopt a national ICT policy. In this perspective the Government has set up a High Commissioner for ICTs and has developed, from January 2004, a corresponding National Development Plan called the NICI Plan (*Plan National de Développement des Infrastructures de l'information et de la Communication au Niger* – Plan for the Development of Information and Communications Technologies Infrastructures in Niger, Cabinet du Premier Ministre, Niamey, January 2004). This plan aims 'to remove all constraints related to ICT use in Niger and to implement an appropriate environment (meaning appropriate legal and regulatory framework, technology infrastructures, system capacity, etc.) for a sustained development of ICTs. This plan is part of the national strategy to fight against poverty,' (Cabinet du Premier Ministre: 7). The NICI Plan was developed around six strategic areas for the development of ICTs: 1) Infrastructure development; 2) Capacity building through training and content development tailored to the needs of the country; 3) Strengthening of the institutions responsible for regulation and control; 4) Content development in health, education, agriculture, etc. ; 5) E-government for the resolution of the 'problems related to the administration efficiency, decentralization, and involvement of people in decisions that affect them. It will include two subcomponents: e-government will facilitate procedures and information flow within the central and decentralized administrations, and e-governance to facilitate relations between the administration and users by allowing them to access a set of public services without being constrained by the distance' (Cabinet du Premier Ministre: 40); and 6) A strategy for poverty reduction through ICTs. As discussed below, ten years later, these goals are far from being achieved.

Access to social media: How did users discover the internet and social media?

If we judge from the information provided by the interviewees, the use of social media began to grow in Niger, particularly among young people, mainly from 2008 and 2009. This is explained by the fact that over the last four years significant technological improvements have been made for browsing. These improvements resulted in increased bandwidth, lower navigation prices at cybercafés and an increase in the use of mobile phones, especially new generation mobile phones (3G or 4G) that allow browsing the internet and whose prices have dropped, making them accessible to a larger number of users. Thus, many of the users interviewed in internet cybercafés say they mainly use mobile phones, particularly when it comes to Facebook and when they are at home or elsewhere. One said:

I use social networks since 2008 after a friend introduced me to them. At first I was using the computer mostly in cybercafés and other places. Now with the 3G connection, I mostly use my cell phone.[3]

Another said, 'I started using social networks since 2008. I often go to the cybercafé but since a year ago I mainly use my father's desktop computer.'[4] Another said, 'It is in January 2014 that I started connecting. I mostly use my cell phone.'[5]

When asked how they came to have access to the internet, most interviewees indicate having been introduced to it by parents or friends abroad who created their Facebook profiles and invited them to connect. This is the case for Ousseini, a 31 year-old student, who states:

I created my profile for the first time in 2009 with the help of a friend who lives and works in the United States. I created this profile because at the time I liked to see my photo appear on the internet. After that I stopped to login for three years. Then I raised my profile from 2013. The main reason was that I had made many new friends who lived outside Niger in the United States or in Europe. To stay in touch and interact with them, I've realized that the best way was Facebook.[6]

Most of the stories are similar and the main reason for using social media seems to be, especially among young people, the desire to share with friends (sociability), often living in foreign countries. Other motivations for connecting to social networks, including creating a Facebook profile, include modernity (Abdou, student), or the desire to conform with peers (Namata, student; Maliki, mechanic) or the influence of friends belonging to groups such as the common sociability groups called *fadas* (Hamissou, student). This

is also the case of Mourtala who was introduced to Facebook by a friend working in international organizations.

Women and social media use in Niger
Most of the users interviewed in this study are young, urban and educated.[7] There are no official ICT statistics related to gender, but it is possible to estimate, based on observations of daily cybercafé use, that the overwhelming majority of users are male. As most of the interviews conducted took place in cybercafés, it was often necessary to move to offices to find women to interview because very few of them go to cybercafés. There are of course many female users, but they form a minority.

The reasons for this are numerous: Niger is a Muslim country where women's rights (including free access to information, especially through ICTs) are severely limited as regularly acknowledged by UNDP's reports on human development in the world (UNDP 2014). Women marry at a very early age and are assigned to domestic tasks, especially in rural areas where they form the majority of the non-migrant population. Moreover, the low level of female literacy further restricts access to the internet (because you have to be literate to access the internet). Even in cities, the higher the level of education, the fewer women are represented. As the use of ICTs (including the internet) is highly correlated with school enrolment, access to ICTs is limited for women because of many cultural constraints and because of the control exercised over them by their husbands and parents. This largely explains the under-representation of women as ICT/internet users.

Nevertheless, there are many female users and some of them were interviewed even if there are some differences between these women and ordinary Nigerien women. For example, Constance, an employee at the Ministry of Social Development, is a daily user of the internet. However, Constance has a higher education level and her position as a civil servant easily provides her access to the

internet as the department where she works is equipped with computers and connected to the internet:

> It is in 2012, when I arrived at the Ministry, that I began to use ICTs. I use my desktop computer as well as the computer of the office where I work. At first I was interested in the news that I was getting from friends and also the daily information that I was finding in online newspapers.[8]

The under-representation of women is also due to the fact that once married, they are reluctant to stay on social networks like Facebook:

> I think men are more likely than women to be on social networks. I had many female friends who stopped using Facebook once they got married. There is also the fact that some feel bothered by men as soon as they are on Facebook. So they prefer to stay out.[9]

> When you say 'female users' it is better to specify 'female users who are girls.' Because women, they are many and varied. There are, for example, rural women who do not even know what the internet is. … These are the girls who are on the Net, but married women much less.[10]

The level of education (Kangueye, police inspector; Sanusi, civil servant), the 'reserve' of women or cultural reasons (Sanusi, civil servant), household occupations (Gani, civil servant) are some of the reasons given to explain the under-representation of women.

ICTs and Sociability: Fadas and Facebook

Most respondents belong to a *fada*, Facebook and/or some other social networks at the same time. *Fadas* are informal groups of sociability and discussion that usually gather people of the same generation on the basis of friendship, social solidarity (support groups in case of temporary or permanent financial or social difficulties), residence (*fadas* members may inhabit places located far from each other but they generally live in the same neighborhood), etc. These groups are usually male groups. There are female sociability groups called *foyandi* that have some resemblance to the *fadas* except that they are often groups of financial support and mostly meet on weekends.

Some people belong to several *fadas* at the same time, and members can have very different education levels and even very different social status. However, the level of education and social status play a role in the formation and differentiation of *fadas;* for those groups whose members went to French-style modern schools, the debates are usually held in French, while for those groups whose members have not attended a modern school,[11] the debates are held in local languages. If one ignores its pejorative meaning, it can be said that *fadas* are another version of the palaver tree (a stereotypical image of African villagers interminably discussing problems which importance or pertinence is not obvious under the shades of trees).

Over the last two decades, these traditional sociability settings and corresponding groups and networks have been regenerated in Nigerien cities with names and long-lasting relationships between members. People from all walks of life, including youth, belong to such groups and networks. The *fadas* could well be described as the equivalent of social media networks in the real world. However, compared with social networking sites (SNS) such as Facebook, *fadas* are first characterized by the fact that they take place in public spaces with participants that are physically co-present. Many factors explain why these groups are overwhelmingly present in Nigerien cities: the nature and the solidity of the ties created between friends and co-participants; the degree of intimacy, confidence and support; and the fact that belonging to a *fada* provides a sentiment of

inclusion in a community, bringing people closer together in a world that is fast changing and where traditional social groups are being disrupted or destroyed.

If we compare these traditional forms of sociability with Facebook, it does not seem that *fada* membership is being affected by the increasing use of Facebook among young people. A first explanation for this is because online sociability settings and face-to-face sociability settings do not exclude each other. One can belong to the two at the same time. However, *fadas* are grounded on local realities and only comprise local members, while members of Facebook groups belong to various countries and continents and form transnational communities.

Interviewees indicate that they use Facebook because it prolongs and expands *fadas* beyond the traditional boundaries or limits of face-to-face relationships. Young people who are members of the same *fadas* are likely to be members of the same Facebook network although Facebook's reach extends well beyond the reach of individual *fadas*:

> I think the difference between Facebook and *fadas* is minimal. Indeed, on online social networks, we talk as if we were in *fadas*. I think it's just the face-to-face talking in *fadas* that is missing from Facebook. But it happens sometimes that we give each other a rendez-vous in both cases and that we end up discussing at the same time. The other difference is that our exchanges are verbal exchanges in *fadas* and you feel more comfortable than when it comes to writing in French as is the case on Facebook.[12]

Another respondent said:

> I believe that there is not much difference. Often we discuss the same topics in *fadas* and on Facebook.[13]

Another said:

> The difference is that in the *fadas* there is a time when we part. On social networks like Facebook, you can meet friends at any time.[14]

And another explained the difference between *fadas* and Facebook:

> One difference is that people talk a lot more and longer in *fadas* than on Facebook.[15]

However, a clear line of separation exists between these two forms of sociability. Members of Facebook are exclusively people who know how to read and write, while membership in *fadas* does not depend on that capacity. Also, *fadas* offer young people many advantages that are not found in Facebook: financial support (during baptisms, weddings, celebrations, etc.); affective support (in case of death of family members or relatives or any other hardship event); political affiliations, gossip groups, etc.

Facebook membership

Facebook is the most used social network in Niger. One of the main reasons for this is that Facebook is integrated into the applications of most mobile phones imported into Niger. Facebook is also the social network site that is the most used by youth, to the point where it is associated, in the minds of most people, especially with youth. Thus, some of the interviewees reported that they are not members of Facebook 'especially because it's a matter of youth':

> Facebook is the network that I use the most. Recently, I also started using Twitter. But frankly, in any cybercafé you visit, you will find that people are mostly on Facebook when it comes to networks. It is Facebook which is the most used system. Then Viber on the phone.[16]

> From what I see, Facebook is the network the most used by youth.[17]

Facebook has become like a 'tacha' (the word for auto station in the local Hausa language). Everyone is on Facebook and we see all kinds of people and things on Facebook: children, sisters, uncles, etc. It shows anyone and anything.[18]

To justify this, interviewees say it is because it is the first social media known by Nigeriens or that it is the social network used by their friends. However, it may also be noted that in its design, Facebook has strong similarities with *fadas*. The success of Facebook is also due to the fact that it recreates some aspects of village sociability and is a factor of 'recommunalisation' of society that counters the negative effects of rapid urbanization, poverty and the loss of traditional benchmarks. Its success can be compared with that of the mobile phone, about which Geser said: 'The mobile phone can function as a powerful tool for re-establishing the fluid, casual modes of informal communication typical for traditional communal life, thus counteracting the losses of communalistic social integration caused by traditional media as well as the depersonalizations of modern urban life' (Geser 2004:12).

In the case of Niger, a strong sense of belonging of youth to virtual groups associated with Facebook is observed. The best known of these groups is *15.000 Nigériens sur Facebook* (15,000 Nigeriens on Facebook). Some other groups mentioned are *Cousins et Cousines* (Cousins and cousins – not found on the Internet) (Maidoukia, policeman); *Hadith du Jour* (Hadith of the Day) (Maidoukia, policeman); *Miracle du Coran* (Miracle of the Qur'an) (Dadi, student) etc. Other groups are student clubs, such as the student club of Abdou Moumouni University cited by several students, etc. Respondents said:

I am a member of the group *15.000 Nigériens sur Facebook*. I joined this group because it is a place where we are asked our opinion on matters of national interest. However, I am less

frequent lately because I've found that people often insult each other and that it exacerbates the divisions between us.[19]

I do not belong to any group. I have my profile on Facebook and photos. That's it.[20]

e-Governance, Political Participation, Peacebuilding and Social media in Niger
e-Governance policy in Niger
Issues related to e-governance in Africa have traditionally been analysed with regard to access to ICTs or to what extent African governments are materially and technologically ready to practice e-governance (Olawale 2009: 133). This is the main reason why efforts related to ICT implementation were primarily geared towards making devices available. From this perspective, the first initiatives related to e-governance in Niger focused on implementing a project called 'Electronic governance and access to information for the modernization of public administration and local development in Niger,' in partnership with the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP). Its objective is defined, by the Nigerien government and UNDP, as follows: 'To contribute to the improvement of services provided by a number of specifically chosen public institutions as well as to increase the participatory nature of development activities at five pilot local administrations (communes)' (UNDP 2010: 2). This project was initiated in 2008. However, while the government made numerous public statements related to e-governance, so far, no formal document or strategic policy exists in this domain. A General Policy Statement made by the Government in 2000, defined the 'sectorial national electronic governance policy' as consisting in 'modernizing public and parastatal administration by improving the quality of services delivered to citizens through information and communication technologies and reducing operating costs' (UNDP

2010: 15). Some of the specific objectives of this policy are the following: to facilitate the flow of information through the interconnection of ministries and state institutions; to facilitate the provision of administrative information to citizens through ICTs, without time and space constraint, to facilitate paperless procedures and the provision of public services to citizens through ICTs; to simplify administrative procedures; to promote good governance, transparency and equality in the processing of files; to promote the participation of citizens in the process of democratic decision making; etc. (UNDP: 2010). A full national e-governance strategy is currently being prepared. Seemingly, multiple other programs and projects related to sectors as various as telemedicine and e-health, online education, and the informatization of the public administration are currently being carried out.

Also, in 2013, the government adopted a new national strategy for ICT development, developed by the Ministry of Communication and New Information Technologies. Seemingly, every year, the government organizes an annual forum on the internet governance. All these efforts are geared towards a governmental strategy centered around notions of governance and administrative modernization, to improve services for all citizens and to create jobs for young people.

From this point of view, issues related to political participation, governance and peacebuilding generally elicited vague and often very critical responses from the interviewees. This can be explained by the fact that users have a fairly limited knowledge of the possible uses of the internet and especially by the obvious weakness of the government's digital activities. This results in a virtually non-existent presence on the internet:

> What I can say is that Niger is lagging behind in the use of ICTs. I think that our policymakers have not yet understood the usefulness of ICTs and the profit to be derived from the use of

ICTs. And those who are interested do not really have the means to afford a regular connection. I mean youth. There are now in Niger, intellectuals, former administration officials who do not even know what the word 'click' means.[21]

> First, frankly, I think that we're lagging behind. For example today, anywhere in the world, a university teacher does not *dictate* their course (i.e., they do not read from their notes and ask students to transcribe directly what they are saying like in a dictation). Elsewhere in the world, there are even courses where teachers send any kind of material related to the course to students or post them on the internet. Unfortunately, here in Niger, some teachers continue to dictate their courses.[22]

The current situation is characterized by a lack of equipment, very low levels of e-literacy, even among those who went to the school, neglect and ignorance of government officials to everything related to ICTs and a society lagging behind in terms of people being connected. This sense of lagging behind is accentuated by a strong desire for modernity, which according to some of the interviewees can only be realized through ICTs. Modernity and a desire to 'catch up' seem to be a kind of 'technologizing' ideology underlying perceptions of ICTs among users.

Despite these shortcomings, there are several projects in Niger that are part of the efforts of the government or development partners to promote good governance and service delivery through ICTs. For example, government offices and services are provided with intranet and the Presidency (http://www.presidence.ne/), the National Assembly (http://www.assemblee.ne/) and many other institutions such as the Ministry of Higher Education or the National Institute of Statistics (http://www.ins.ne/institut) feature

websites. There are also multiple sites for service delivery such as the *Campus Numérique Francophone de Niamey* (Francophone Digital Campus of Niamey), which organizes courses for students in collaboration with the African Virtual University.

Social media and political participation in Niger

In its nature, political participation in Niger has both elements inherited from the traditional political systems and elements inherited from the colonial and modern system. By traditional political systems, we refer to the great kingdoms and empires (the Songhai empire; the Fulani empire of Usman Dan Fodio; the Hausa city-states; the Tuareg confederations; the Kanem-Borno empire, which all find their origins in Niger) that have existed in this part of Africa up to the nineteenth century and which had many things in common, in their organization and their world views and power relations, with the European feudal systems. These political systems still exist today because they have been maintained during colonization as well as after colonization under the form of 'chiefdoms.' This is why we cannot understand the political ways of thinking and the modes of political participation in contemporary Niger without reference to the tradition because systems of allegiance and political loyalty, as well as forms of solidarity and political communication, have been strongly influenced by traditional modes of action and traditional values. These traditional modes of political action and traditional values are summarized as follows by ARD:

> [In Niger] strategies for mobilizing support historically depended on two interrelated processes: the recognition of personal distinction and the development of loyal followers… Campaigning for office meant building networks of supporters based on promises of personal reward (ARD & MSI 1994: 17).

These networks of supporters were organized under the form of micro-level social networks, such as the *fadas*, the equivalent of which in the Western world were at one time royal courts and courtiers. The *fadas* were both places of sociability, kinds of debate communities, and places for political discussions. They were part of clusters of traditional associations based on gender or age which, under the dictatorial regime of Seyni Kountché (1974–1987), served to mediate forms of political mobilization and political participation in contemporary Niger. As described by Robinson (1991), Kountché's was 'a mode of governance that drew heavily on indigenous cultural patterns of authority, interest aggregation, and leader-follower relations as prime sources of legitimation' (1991: 1). This mode of governance consisted in seeking support from traditional forms of youth organization called *samaria* and traditional associations of chiefs (*sarauta*) to build consensus at the social level and legitimacy for the military regime at the political level. These organizations served to shape, in a top-down model of political communication, power relations centered around the personality of the dictator and a form of political participation geared towards building a 'uniformity of thought between elites and the populace' (Robinson 1991: 16). The *Samarias* were dismantled in 1991 with the advent of democracy but their existence has heavily influenced patterns of political communication and political mobilization in Niger.

Thus, virtual social networks such as Facebook pages set up by current political leaders and the government in Niger, are strangely similar to the *fadas* that existed both as loose political support networks at royal courts and sociability networks, such as one's network of friends or networks of traditional *hira* groups (debate communities) that gather groups of peers for chat purposes. Much like *fadas* and *hira* groups, Facebook is used as a kind of allegiance affirmation network built around the personality of the

political leader where what is discussed is not so much political ideas or a program but rather the deeds and the personality of the political leader.

This can be seen in the answers related to political participation from those of the interviewees who belong to friends' clubs of Facebook pages of the three main political leaders of the country. These Facebook pages are the following: *Club des Amis de Hama Amadou* (Hama Hamadou's Fan's Club); *Mahamadou Issoufou President* (Mahamdou Issoufou for president); *Club des Amis de Mahamane Ousmane* (Mahamane Ousmane's Friends' Club). It should be noted that these three political leaders are not the only ones in Niger who are on Facebook or who have clubs of friends on Facebook. A number of interviewees cited the case of the current Minister of Foreign Affairs Bazoum Mohamed who is also president of the party PNDS Tarraya and whose Facebook page is very active and visited. Some respondents belong to several groups of friends at the same time. With the exception of the PNDS Tarraya, the political parties for the above-mentioned leaders also have Facebook pages.

The 'friends' of leaders interviewed say they regularly visit these Facebook pages:

> I visit these pages several times a day. I'm doing this to make me aware of events going on in national life and also to make a contribution to the discussions. But that's mostly because I am a political party official. I am president of the youth organization of the PNDS Tarraya section of Dosso.[23]

> Yes, one can say that I visit these pages regularly; but for personal reasons, I do not make comments. I visit these pages at least three times a week. The page I visit the most is that of the President Issoufou. This is because it is livelier. We learn more about the activities of the State. But with the current political crisis, Hama Amadou

of Lumana also has many publications on his Fan Club page.[24]

When interviewees were asked about the reasons for these visits, they mention the publication of news about the party (Mamane, civil service employee), to keep abreast of political developments (Adamou, civil service employee), the national debates or discussions about the country (Boubacar, international consultant) or the need to politically educate themselves and to contribute to the deepening of democracy in the country. However, several factors contribute to relativize the importance of these Facebook pages. Interviewees mention the very small number of users (hundreds of individuals) with regard to the size of the population of the country (17 million).

Furthermore, respondents do not perceive clearly the importance of these pages in terms of mobilization of activists. In other words, they do not apprehend clearly in what ways they can be effective tools for mobilization. They tend to view political leaders' Facebook pages in a 'representational' way, not in an interactive way:

> Maybe you think that these leaders know how Facebook can be effectively and efficiently used in terms of mobilization for support. I am not sure they do. I am saying that because you see heated political debates going on radio and television, but these debates are not reflected on the Facebook pages.[25]

> They have just set up Facebook pages for people to believe that they are acting 'modern'. Actually, they are not consistent, maybe because they don't know how to be consistent using Facebook. Their Facebook pages are rarely updated and they only seek approval from those who visit them. They only use them for transmission of information; never for coordination

of actions or formation of opinion through contradictory debates.[26]

People who visit those pages are like-minded people; always the same; always followers and activists of the party. But I would not say that the Facebook pages are not effective. They are certainly effective in some way, but mostly among those who are already convinced.[27]

It appears, from these responses, that the main obstacles to an effective use of Facebook are related to skills and knowledge, notably the ignorance of all the possibilities offered by the device and also how it could be effectively used. We tend to take for granted that users, especially leaders, know. However, it is not always so because of the limited e-literacy.

Peacebuilding

The notion of peacebuilding is especially important in a country such as Niger that has experienced continuous political instability in recent decades. Since the implementation of a democratic order in the early 1990s, an 'ethnicization' of political life has taken place, where ethnic affiliations take precedence over political affiliations. This ethnicization of political life can be read between the lines in the highly 'personalized' forms of the political discourse, especially in the 'personalized' forms of the political criticism and media discourse that, in Africa, are not unique to Niger (Nyamnjoh 2005). For example, the political agendas of the various parties are rarely mentioned either by those who are supposed to defend them or by those who are supposed to oppose them. Journalists rarely say anything about them. In contrast, scandals, rumors, and 'personal' criticisms are pervasive (Nyamnjoh 2005). On the other hand, the political positions adopted by agents are never understood as different political positions – ideas, programs, analyses, and proposals on how to

best manage the city – but as positions of individuals sometimes identified as opposing and competing ethnic communities. Therefore, in Niger, public support for the democratic order and citizen understanding of political allegiances and loyalties in a democratic situation (i.e., citizen participation cleared of its subjective and 'primordialist' aspects) is quite low. In some segments of the population, such as among the Tuaregs, the ethnicization of political life took violent forms in the emergence of several armed rebellions between 1990 and 2010 (Deycard 2011). These rebellions directly challenged not only the authority of the state, but also its republican form and the democratic model opposing federalism. They also questioned Niger's territorial unity with separatist demands focused on broad autonomy (Grégoire 1999). For example, between 1990 and 2007, several Tuareg rebel movements were organized and directly confronted the army (Alzouma 2009). Because of this situation, the official ideology of the dominant political elite is that of nation-building, national cohesion, peace and development.

One, therefore, would expect the political authorities to use information and communication technologies to fulfil these goals, particularly with regard to social unrest and ethnic divisions. This is why I have centered my questions on the concrete and specific activities the government is carrying out online to curb ethnic division and ethnic violence and how the interviewees appreciate these governmental efforts. Here again, responses obtained from interviewees were very general and vague, indicating a weak governmental activity and a lack of knowledge concerning how ICTs could be used to foster peace in the country:

I believe that ICTs can serve as a means of raising awareness about peace. … But I think that this is not done in Niger. Just visit the Facebook pages of the leaders and also the websites of the Government to realize that. For

example, I recently visited the website of the Presidency but there is no update.[28]

The Government prefers talking on the radio. It is only on the 15,000 Nigeriens Facebook group page that you can read publications on peace.[29]

Respondents also cite the case of several groups on social networks, including the *Le Mouvement des Jeunes Patriotes pour le Développement du Niger* (Young Patriots' Movement for the Development of Niger). They also note that it is possible to draw on the traditions of joking relationships between ethnic groups in Niger to create virtual alliances between citizens in order to cultivate peace. However, they insist that many very important institutions, including the HALCIA (*Haute Autorité a la Lutte contre la Corruption et les Infractions assimilées* – High Authority to Fight Corruption and Similar Offenses) or the *Bureau du Médiateur de la République* (Office of the Ombudsman, Niger Republic) which is responsible for building consensus between citizens, groups and institutions, have a very weak presence on the net. Although the Office of the Ombudsman has a website, it is inactive and is almost never updated. The existence of websites such as the Ombudsman's office or other websites for the promotion of peace and good governance is unknown to most of the interviewees. However, the HALCIA seems to have the most updated website, offering videos and other audio and visual documents related to the fight against corruption. One respondent said:

I know the website created by the HALCIA. At the beginning, they used to publish messages to encourage people to denounce all cases of corruption which they are aware of. Today, they also publish videos and lectures to illustrate corruption cases. On their website they publish all laws

relating to corruption. They also publish their press releases and all the other activities they undertake.[30]

Service delivery

Respondents were also asked questions about service delivery through ICTs in Niger, notably in matters of health and social development. Many initiatives were mentioned:

Today in Niger you can pay your bills, pay for gasoline at service stations, using your ATM card. … And all of that thanks to ICTs. There is also the Haddad and Marina stores where you can purchase products and any other items with your credit card. NIGELEC (*Société Nigérienne D'électricité* – Niger Society for Electric Power Provision) also allows you to pay your bills using a credit card … etc.[31]

I can also cite the case of a Nigerien who created an irrigation system by cell phone for farmers who cannot move and who henceforth can irrigate their fields while staying at home.[32]

Another example is telemedicine that is being implemented in hospitals. The training for telemedicine is being done in Ouallam … There is also the case of the founder of Anima Sutura who, through his Facebook page, helps people know how to protect against AIDS and guide HIV positive people to health centers and help them be supported.[33]

Despite these opportunities, it is clear from the interviews that the use of ICTs and the number of users is very low in Niger. The initiatives put in place by the Government also are outdated and unreliable. 'Even government's offices do not use them' said one respondent (Moussa, founder of an NGO). According to Moussa, people lack interest. For example, the website, Facebook page

and electr o nic bulletin on governmental budget and governance of *Alternative Espace Citoyen*, a group created to raise awareness of and def e nd citizens' rights in Niger and which acti v ities are essentially carried out online, are more visited by people from foreign countries than by people from Niger for whom they w ere created. For Moussa, this can be explained by the 'extroverted' nature of the Afr i can state. The lack of interest of the state c an be shown in the fact that its officials and civil servants are not trained to use ICTs. While there is a national ICT policy, the nation a l budget barely mentions ICTs. According to Moussa, foreign donors and foreign countries are more active in this domain than the government of Niger:

> Whenever a policy is financed it is always by others. It's like when I was a young boy. The government used to bring the things it wanted people to buy. People bought them but did not use them. People were buying just because they did not want to be told that they are hostile to the government. With ICTs, it is similar. The government takes money from donors, but does nothing.[34]

So while efforts are certainly being made, the perception of users is that of an inefficient or inexistent ICT policy.

Conclusion
Everyday u s e of ICTs, in particular use of social med i a, is constantly growing in Niger Republic.

There is also some awareness of the potential of ICTs for development. However, there are many shortcomings that prevent an efficient use of social media and other devices for politi cal participation, e-governance and peacebuilding purposes. These shortcomings are first related to the low level of access to ICTs, low levels of literacy and ICT literacy, cultural i mpediments that work to prevent women from having access to ICTs, and

an ineffic ient governmental digital policy. Citizens and ordinary users are aware of most of those d ifficulties even if, owing to their lack of understanding of the true potential of ICTs, they cannot fully express their feelings. The weak governmental policy and activities are also the result of a reproduction of traditional ways of governing and the use of traditional f orms of political communication. That is pr obably the reason why, although many opportunities exist for use of ICTs for governance and peacebuilding purposes, people are not able to seize them and why social media use remains fairly low in Niger.

Notes
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[2] The interviews were conducted in French and translated into English by the author.

[3] Hamissou, student, interview with the author, August 2014.

[4] Aboubacar, independent consultant, founder of an NGO, interview with the author, August 2014.

[5] Fatiya, student, interview with the author, August 2014.

[6] Ousseini, interview with the author, July 2014.

[7] However, all the interviewees were older than 18.

[8] Constance, civil servant, interview with the author, August 2014.

[9] Namata, student, interview with the author, July 2014.

[10] Sanussi, civil servant, interview with the author, July 2014.

[11] In Niger there exists two systems of education: the traditional system of education that is religious and that is also known as Koranic education, and the modern system of education inherited from the French colonization.

[12] Abdou, student, interview with the author, August 2014.

[13] Maliki, mechanic, interview with the author, August 2014.

[14] Koffi, student, interview with the author, August 2014.

[15] Halima, student, interview with the author, August 2014.

[16] Constance, civil servant, interview with the author, August 2014.

[17] Youchaou, trader, interview with the author, August 2014.

[18] Maliki, mechanic, interview with the author, August 2014.

[19] Batoure, student, interview with the author, August 2014.

[20] Youchaou, trader, interview with the author, August 2014.

[21] Gani, civil servant, interview with the author, July 2014.

[22] Namata, student, interview with the author, July 2014.

[23] Aboubacar, international consultant, interview with the author, August 2014.

[24] Mamane, civil servant, interview with the author, August 2014.

[25] Sani, student, interview with the author, July 2014.

[26] Soumana, student, interview with the author, July 2014.

[27] Adamou, civil servant, interview with the author, July 2014.

[28] Aboubacar, international consultant, interview with the author, August 2014.

[29] Koyane, coordinator of NOGs federation, interview with the author, August 2014.

[30] Bagoudou, computer manager, interview with the author, August 2014.

[31] Ibrahim, communication adviser, interview with the author, August 2014.

[32] Jaloud, director of an NGO, interview with the author, August 2014.

[33] Yacouba, medical doctor, interview with the author, August 2014.

[34] Moussa, founder of an NGO, interview with the author, August 2014.

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