Stichproben. Wiener Zeitschrift für kritische Afrikastudien /
Vienna Journal of African Studies 39/2020, Vol. 20, 31-53. Doi: 10.25365/phaidra.240_02

On the Relevance of Using Social Media Platforms as Archives for the Writing of African History

Birgit Englert[1] and Immanuel R. Harisch[2]

Abstract

In 2020, around 453 million people - roughly a third of the entire population on the African continent - were reported to be using the internet and about 217 million African users were active on social media. In this paper we suggest to understand social media platforms such as YouTube, Instagram, Twitter, Facebook and community forums as a kind of archives for writing African histories of everyday life. We argue that these platforms provide user-generated archives in the sense that they are built by users who document their everyday life by uploading items (photographs, videos, graphics, texts) which they either created themselves or which they accessed somewhere and made available by uploading them. By engaging with literature on archival science as well as on social media platforms, we discuss the opportunities which come along with the emergence of these new archives but also the ethical challenges that need to be faced when using sources from these online platforms. The article also engages with practical considerations on how to access, store and cite these sources. While many of the issues raised apply to African Studies more generally, we discuss the topic with a focus on African contemporary history.

[1] Birgit Englert, University of Vienna; contact: birgit.englert@univie.ac.at
[2] Immanuel R. Harisch, University of Vienna; contact: immanuel.harisch@gmail.com

© 2020 The Author(s). This is an open access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License (https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/ [3]), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited, a link to the license is provided, and it is indicated which changes were made.

Introduction

At the beginning of 2020, there were more than 4,5 billion internet users worldwide. This means that with a penetration of roughly 60 percent, more than half of the world's population is using the internet. The time spent online has also increased considerably, as has the number of users accessing the internet on mobile devices. The recent lockdowns connected to the COVID-19 pandemic have further increased the usage of social media platforms worldwide (Kemp 2020a: 8; Kemp 2020b). The spread of smartphones and affordable data packages has been a key factor in the enormous rise in internet users over the last few years. This is especially true for Africa, where around 453 million people (i.e. roughly a third of the entire population) were reported to be using the internet and about 217 million African users were active on social media by January 2019 (Kemp 2020a: 13; Willems/Mano 2017). However, the differences between individual countries are huge, for example between Kenya, where 84 per cent of the population are internet users, and Burundi, where only 6 per cent of the population is using the internet, or Eritrea where the percentage is as low as 1.5.[3] In some countries, the use of smartphones and access to social media still reflects at least a middle-class position (Becker 2017: 110), whereas in Kenya for example, the use of social media extends far beyond the "middle-classes" (see the contributions in Melber 2016). As on other continents, in Africa, an ever-increasing part of communication now occurs via social media platforms like Facebook, Twitter, YouTube and Instagram, where users not only store photographs, videos and texts, but also share and comment textual, visual and audiovisual elements.

There has been much debate about what increased access to the internet and social platforms means for processes of "development" and "democratisation" (Axford 2011; Howard/ Hussain 2013; Willems/ Mano 2017; Khamis/ Gold/ Vaughn 2018, Nyabola 2018). In the recent volume *Social Media and politics in Africa* (Dwyer/ Molony 2019), researchers give insights into the role of social media in elections and protest movements as well as how social media impacts on surveillance of citizens by the state. Authors have also increasingly focused on the changes that occur in terms of the public perception of the African continent (Becker 2017). However, there has been less debate so far on what these changes actually mean for

[3] In Kenya, in 2020, 75 per cent of the population are active users of social media compared to 3,5 per cent in Burundi.

research, and in particular for the writing of contemporary African history (cf. Englert 2016 focusing on YouTube).[4]

With this contribution we plead for taking social media platforms more seriously in research contexts and to consider them as relevant from a perspective of archival science. In this article, we will discuss the ways in which social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, YouTube and Instagram need to be considered as a searchable archival fonds that contains an enormous amount of interesting sources for the study of contemporary African history. An archival fonds may be defined "as the whole of the documents of any nature that every administrative body, every physical or corporate entity, automatically and organically accumulated by reason of its function or of its activity." (Bureau of Canadian Archivists 1985 quoted in Cook 1993: 27) The French archivist and historian Michel Duchein further emphasized the role of creation, by stating that the fonds is "a living creation of the activity of the agency which creates it." (Duchein 1983: 81 quoted in Cook 1993: 27)

In this article, we are most interested in reflecting about the practical implications of working with sources stored in such platforms and how they contribute to transformations of doing African Studies more generally. To achieve this, we make use of research literature from a variety of disciplines: African studies, Media and Cultural studies, Archival Science and Digital Anthropology. Our broader aim here is to stimulate a debate on the use of social media platforms for writing African history – fully aware that other scholars might assess their importance for the field differently and that many of the issues raised in this article undoubtedly deserve deeper-going studies Before we turn to our discussion, we will briefly introduce the platforms under examination.

Facebook, founded by Mark Zuckerberg in 2006, rapidly became the world's largest social media platform. By January 2020, it had more than 2.49 billion users and about 1.3 billion people were using Facebook Messenger. WhatsApp, which was bought by Facebook in 2014, has 1.6 billion active users in 180 countries and one third uses the application on a daily basis (Kemp 2020a: 95). The photo platform Instagram, launched in

[4] A recent edited collection, for example, examines history videos on YouTube with a focus on their role in communicating history and history teaching. See Bunnenberg/ Steffen (eds. 2019).

2010 and bought by Facebook in 2012, currently has around one billion users (Kemp 2020a: 95).
Twitter, the leading social networking service that enables users to send and receive tweets, which consist of web messages of up to 280 characters[5], had around 340 million active users at the start of 2020 (Kemp 2020a: 95). YouTube, which was launched in May 2005 and bought by Google for 1.65 billion US$ in 2006, has since become by far the most popular platform in the world for audiovisual sources and currently has about two billion active users (Kemp 2020a: 95).
It is important to note that many people are active users on several platforms and partly share the same material or related content across different platforms. For example, a photograph that is uploaded on Instagram can also be posted simultaneously on the user's Facebook or Twitter account.
Research which engaged with the political economy of YouTube, Facebook and Twitter has demonstrated how these companies process user generated content with powerful algorithms to increase their revenue gained from advertisments; authors have moreover criticized the detrimental effect these technological giants may have on access to information due to their market power (Wasko/ Erickson 2009). In this article, however, we are not interested in the political economy of the platforms as such, but rather in the electronic records they store and how these can be used for research in the field of African history.
We argue that the textual, visual and audiovisual content uploaded on these platforms by users – both from Africans living on the continent or in the diaspora as well as from non-Africans – provides an important additional source base to write contemporary African history. Given the relative newness of many issues raised here, this contribution aims to stimulate more debates on how electronic records in social media platforms can be best integrated into a historian's research corpus. While we believe that the content on these platforms may be utilized for a wide range of approaches of writing history such as national history, cultural history, public history – and we invite future research to inquire into these avenues – the following section concentrates on using social media platforms for writing histories of everyday life.

[5] Earlier it had been only 140 characters.

Social platforms and the writing of histories of everyday life

The approach to the writing of history which is termed "history of everyday life" gained momentum in the 1970s. It is primarily concerned "with the world of ordinary experience" in contrast to "society in the abstract"; the concept embodies the idea of a "meaningful construction of the worlds of living", as Andreas Eckert and Adam Jones put it (Eckert/ Jones 2002). Historical writing on everyday life has brought some hitherto neglected places into the spotlight, such as workshops, bars, kitchens and streets. Similarly, in the field of media history and culture on the African continent, scholars have recently emphasised the importance of the concept of "everyday life" in understanding how Africans operate, transform and adapt certain media (Willems/ Mano 2017). The spotlight on everyday life has encouraged the use of sources that had previously been disregarded. Besides oral histories, a backbone in academic African history since the 1960s, this includes photograph albums, diaries, letters, cookery books, jokes, and "radio trottoir" (Ellis 2002).

As technologies and media change, the sources that can be drawn upon when writing histories of the everyday life are also changing. Letters are being partly replaced by emails, short messages, postings, chat protocols or tweets, and photographs often no longer exist in print but as digital files. Videos are produced by many more people than ever before thanks to the video feature that is integrated in most smartphones. Jaques Derrida assumed that "the mutation in technology changes not simply the archiving process, but what is archivable - that is, the content of what has to be archived is changed by the technology." (Derrida 2001 quoted in Ketelaar 2001: 134f.) To take one example, the discursive techniques used when writing an email compared to writing a letter are quite different; but, as Ketelaar (2001: 135) further argues, "the content is different too, if only because the time lag between sender and receiver has been reduced to seconds, instead of the days, weeks, or even months in the past." A large part of what is produced is being stored in social media platforms, thus enabling research on the text and photo production also of non-elites to be carried out in a new way.

Furthermore, social media platforms also increasingly serve as spaces where so-called "tin-trunk archives" are being digitised. Printed and handwritten texts, as well as photographs that were previously kept in a "suitcase, plastic bags, or a glass-fronted cabinet" (Barber 2006: 2) are gradually being

uploaded on platforms such as Facebook, YouTube, Instagram, Whatsapp and other internet fora. The "archives of the self" that people kept in their homes and which were occasionally "discovered" by researchers who would then reconstruct what Karin Barber (2006) termed "hidden histories", are thus increasingly relocated to the virtual space and in many cases thereby also from the private sphere to a public sphere.
Therefore, on the one hand, social media platforms enable the presence or visibility of manifold born-digital records and on the other, already existing offline records such as handwritten letters and documents become more widely available online through digitization on these platforms. Thus, increasingly, when writing "histories of everyday life", researchers need to consult these digital "archives of everyday life" and in the following section we will reflect more on their characteristics.

Social media platforms as "archives of everyday life"
As for example Eric Ketelaar has pointed out, archives run by the state or by other institutions of power (such as the Church) were often institutions that aimed to control the population. However, he also emphasised that archival records stored therein can be both instruments of power and of empowerment and liberation (Ketelaar 2002: 224, 229). The same is true for social media platforms and online archives more generally. On the one hand, social media platforms and the giant tech companies who run them are institutions of power as well; their actual political, social or economic influence is considerable as debates over Cambridge Analytica and censorship on these platforms have made evident (cf. Carrie Wong 2019; Confessore 2018).
Yet, on the other hand, social media platforms increasingly provide a space for individuals and communities whose histories have been marginalised by mainstream media and conventional archival institutions. Communities, who collect records on their past and present and store them online, can take shape around a number of identities, such as ethnic, racial, religious, gender or sexual orientation, as well as economic status and physical locations (Caswell et al. 2018: 76).
In order to understand an archive – be it colonial or postcolonial – it is necessary to understand the institutions that it serves, as Stoler (2002) reminds us. Who are social media archives serving? There is no easy answer to this question. The records that are stored online (texts, photographs,

videos, tweets, etc.) obviously serve the companies that run the platforms to generate profits, while the platforms also serve their users who have their own agendas. Social media platforms can also provide a "home" to different communities and to individuals who, by putting texts, images, videos, etc. online, actually archive their own lives. They are thus creating micro-archives within the bigger framework of a certain platform or across several platforms.

What all social media platforms have in common is that they do not produce any content themselves, the content is instead produced by third parties of different statuses/formats, ranging from individuals to media corporations. Critical commentators have marked the contradictions of user-generated content on platforms like YouTube as "exploitation for the interactive era" (Andrejevic 2009: 406). The video hosting platform YouTube was originally created with the intention of enabling users to share original audiovisual documents that they had created themselves. However, material that had been created by third parties quickly came to be uploaded – either by the media institutions themselves or by others – often violating existing copyright regulations (Schröter 2009). Different terms have been used to describe these digital social media archives: "mobile" and "popular" (Englert 2016), "democratic" (Prelinger 2009).

Producing sources on internet platforms

The tremendous spread of smartphones in many African countries is a development that may diminish the importance of researchers in the process of documentation and archiving, as experiences from our own research in the last decade recall. In that sense, due to the prevailing dominance of researchers based in the global North, the spread of smartphones in the first place and the use of social media platforms in the second place also contribute to a decolonisation of research practices and the relations between researchers and "the researched", at least with regard to the process of data production. Obviously researchers would still have the task to systematise, structure and analyse data according to the respective research questions and methods used. The point is though that their importance in making practices visible in the first place by recording them with visual or audiovisual means is no longer the same and thus their influence on what is considered worth documenting in the first place and where the focus is laid in the second place.

In 2009, during Birgit Englert's fieldwork on popular music in the small town of Nachingwea in the south of Tanzania, young musicians made use of the opportunity provided by the video function on a small photo camera that one of the authors had brought with her, and recorded the first music video that was ever shot in the town. Less than a decade later, young artists in African urban centres—regardless of whether they are small or large—certainly do not depend any more on the presence of researchers for them to produce artistic content or to document selective moments of their everyday lives more generally. We would like to underline this point with an example from another research context: in interviews that were conducted for a project on smartphone use in Tanzania, Masai men from the Morogoro region pointed out that one of the ways in which they used their smartphones was to record songs and dances with the intention of preserving parts of their culture and "archiving the self" on social media platforms.

For the vast majority of Africans who did not own a photo camera prior to owning their first smartphone, the mobile phone means that they can also express themselves and their lives through images and videos and share them online with family, friends and – if the privacy function of their social media account is not activated – also with strangers. This appeared to be the case for almost all of the accounts that we scanned through when searching, for example, for Instagram users based in the Mvomero district in the Morogoro region, Tanzania. We were able to freely access most Instagram profiles of users who had indicated in their accounts that they were located in Mvomero. Most photographs were of a rather private nature, i.e. self-portraits or portraits of children and friends. Occasionally a user had posted images that appeared to serve as advertisements, but this was a rare exception in the mass of portrait photographs, which can be of huge value for historians in terms of providing information about the way people dressed and posed in a particular region and at a certain period in time.

Smartphones thus enable people to document their own lives by producing texts, images and videos – and to share them easily with others as they are stored online. Not everything gets uploaded, but a lot does, often with the intention of creating archives of the self or community archives.

It could be argued that users who provide their data to giant companies with hardly any ethical regulations and agenda, lose the right to have their data used by third parties according to ethical standards. However, we

firmly believe that this does not relieve researchers from reflecting on their own practices in handling the access to data which they encounter on social media platforms without any barriers – be this the result of conscious or unconscious actions by the users. Some users are certainly not aware that by uploading items they are contributing to digital archives that are/can be accessed by researchers. Others, however, see it as a conscious act and use the space provided by social platforms in order to create their personal or community archives.

In any case, what is key is the question of who can or should have access to the various forms of data stored in these social media archives. In which cases, for instance, do researchers through their presence in certain social media forums violate the "safe spaces" created by those who actively participate in these? (Englert 2016)

The issue of curating on social media platforms

We suggest to understand social media platforms as tools that help users preserve their lives in digital archives. Some researchers have argued that when we as users share photos on the internet, "we consciously select, organise, display and curate our lives." (Garde-Hansen 2011: 74)

This line of thought emphasizes individual agency with regards to this act of archivisation; yet, others like Ketelaar (2001: 131) do not uphold a rational-choice argument with regards to the archiving process: "*the conscious or unconscious choice (determined by social and cultural factors) to consider something worth archiving.*" (italics in the original)

The ability to create content and to make it available to the public on internet platforms follows different rules than in conventional archiving institutions. Many scholars have underlined the power of the archivists in shaping the archive in their role as boundary keeper (Ketelaaar 2001: 136). While archivists in state or in Church archives often exercise their gatekeeping function by considerations of relevance, we argue that the main difference being that users can determine themselves what they consider to be worth storing – without needing the approval of an archivist (Gauld 2017: 238). Concerning YouTube, Gehl (2009: 45, emphasis in the original) postulates: "Clearly, YouTube is an archive awaiting curators […] a sort of digital *Wunderkammer*", while Schröter describes YouTube as "sort of a machine for selection from an audiovisual database or archive." (Schröter 2009: 340)

On social media platforms, the *initial* decision of what is relevant is driven by the users and thus stands in contrast to classical archival institutions. All social media platforms share the same basis that as long as community guidelines are respected, content will be uploaded and no central authority rates the "relevance" of the uploaded and accessible material in this *initial* process, we would argue with Fossati (2009). However, just as the idealistic representation of the archivist as neutral has largely been dispelled (cf. Ketelaar 2001: 136; Gauld 2017: 229), algorithms are also known to not be neutral either. They should rather be seen as "an active gatekeeper" as they shape the users' access to the uploaded content *after* the initial uploading process (Gauld 2017: 236). Gauld further emphasises: "In reality, algorithms are active actors, privileging certain pieces of information over others. Embedded in every algorithm are criteria, or metrics, which are computed and used to define ranking through a sorting procedure. These criteria embed a set of choices and value propositions that determine what gets pushed to the top of the ranking and, importantly, personalise that for each individual user." (Gauld 2017: 236)
As scholars of Archival Science have pointed out, archival descriptions also shape the records, as any description "changes the meaning of records and *re-creates* them [emphasis added]" (Douglas 2018: 32). In that sense, comments on a certain online source, the frequency and nature of sharing and so on, must also be taken into account in terms of how they shape the records. What Ketelaar refers to as the "activation" of a record, is even more prevalent on social media platforms, especially social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter: "Every activation of the archive not only adds a branch to what I propose to call the semantic genealogy of the record and the archive. Every activation also changes the significance of earlier activations. […] Current use of these records affects retrospectively all earlier meanings, or to put it differently: we can no longer read the record as our predecessors have read that record." (Ketelaar 2001: 138) Another issue when working with electronic records uploaded on social media platforms is their state of constant flux, characterised by constant interaction of social media users. Social media platforms can thus be seen as mobilised archives in several ways (cf. Englert 2016: 44).[6] In fact, in the case of social media,

[6] Englert (2016: 44) argues with regard to YouTube that besides being mobile „in the sense that it is in a constant process of transformation", this social media platform can also be considered as a 'mobile archive' in another sense: „because it is increasingly consumed on

records are constantly recreated, as there is not just one archivist but the crowd of users are the archivists. A tweet or a Facebook posting can never be analysed on its own without taking into account the way it has been modified through sharing, commenting, modification of the original version by the poster and so on. This must not be seen as problematic; when researchers are able to access the timeline of such content – we will come to practical considerations of access at a later stage in this text – they are able to make visible and traceable a process that also impacts the material stored in offline archives but is less obvious due to the physical separation and different nature of the source. The process of constant modification on social media platforms provides the researcher with the possibility of tracing the use of and interaction with the source corpus itself – allowing for many new research questions, especially with regards to the analysis of reception, networks and so on.

The fact that archives are being continuously (re-)organized, curated, sorted and extended is nothing new, but considering social media platforms as archives requires us to put this awareness of the instability of archives at the very forefront. Mobility then becomes a characterising feature of the archive. In that sense, digital processes certainly lead to "refiguring the archive" (Cooke/ Wallace 2014: 15f.). Gehl (2009: 47, 56) makes the point that, for example, YouTube's "Tagsonomy", i.e. the tagging of content by creators, could act as a guiding example for digital archival work by classic archiving institutions, making archivists accept "a (literally) 'vulgar' approach to archiving" (Prelinger 2007: 115). In a similar vein, Gauld proposes that archivists from conventional archiving institutions should increasingly enable public tagging for online, digitised collections, similar to the way in which Flickr works, thus enabling users to add metadata7 (Gauld 2017: 241).

An internet platform that has already done so is Historypin, a website that was established by a non-profit company in cooperation with Google, which allows institutions and individuals to contribute additional

---

mobile devices and videos are also increasingly shot on such mobile devices, therefore much of its content is in fact created and consumed 'on the move'."

[7] Metadata is defined as data that provides information about other data. Metadata can be of different types (descriptive, structural, administrative, reference, and statistical for example). Definition taken from https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Metadata (16 October 2020)

information to existing content, as well as create new content. It is thus an open photographic archive in which, as Karin Wagner (2017: 248) puts it, "the vast official archive meets the shoebox, the one time pinner the bulk uploading institution, the amateur the professional archivist." Wagner further noted that descriptions differed significantly between the professionals and individuals, whose styles, not surprisingly, varied considerably.

On the one hand, social media platforms are characterised by a multiplicity of sources, and on the other, there is a multiplicity of approaches to tagging. Tagging also shapes how we perceive sources.

Another interesting aspect in terms of the relationship between social media platforms and conventional archival institutions with regard to curating is the recent history of the relationship between Twitter and the Library of Congress. The latter attempted to archive Twitter but eventually had to give up due to its tremendous growth and changing nature. While Twitter itself can be seen as an archive in its own right, the Library of Congress, which is the oldest federal cultural institution in the United States, archived the whole social platform after signing an agreement with Twitter in 2010 (Library of Congress 2010). Besides collecting all published material, the library also has a long history of archiving "individuals' first-hand accounts of history", as stated on its website (Library of Congress 2010). Twitter donated its entire tweet archive to the library, providing a backlog of public tweets[8] dating from the inception of Twitter in 2006. As Librarian of Congress James H. Billington emphasised: "The Twitter digital archive has extraordinary potential for research into our contemporary way of life […]" (Library of Congress 2010). An updated statement of the Library of Congress in 2013 emphasized again the importance of Twitter for research: "Archiving and preserving outlets such as Twitter will enable future researchers to access a fuller picture of today's cultural norms, dialogue, trends, and events to inform scholarship, the legislative process, new works of authorship, education and other purposes." (Library of Congress 2013 quoted in Fondren/ Menard McCune 2018). The Library of Congress archived all public tweets from 2006 to 2017. As of 1st January 2018, the library changed its policy and now archives tweets only "on a very selective basis" (Library of Congress 2017). "Tweets now are often more visual than

[8] "Public tweets" here refers to all tweets which were published on Twitter in the „public" mode, i.e. which were not tweeted in the „private" mode.

textual, limiting the value of text-only collecting", the Library of Congress said in a statement, going on to state that: "Generally, the tweets collected and archived will be thematic and event-based, including events such as elections, or themes of ongoing national interest, e.g. public policy." (Library of Congress 2017) Thus the curator is back again – and the selection means that from now on, the archive will again cater mainly to the writing of public and national history, whereas historians interested in tweets that hold no apparent value for the writing of what is commonly considered as public history will need to content themselves with Twitter's website.[9]

We therefore can distinguish between the social media platforms as archives themselves and, like in the case of Twitter and the Library of Congress, archives being created that select content from these social platforms according to certain criteria, which are determined by the organisation collecting the content.

Practical considerations when accessing sources on social media platforms

Web historian Niels Brügger (2018: 158) has argued that "[s]ince the web has been such an integral digital element around the world for over two decades, one may expect young scholars to soon start automatically including the archived web as a source in their research."

Besides the sheer mass of material that is being generated on these social media platforms, its easy accessibility is of special interest to African Studies, which is characterised by ongoing debates about who is materially in the position to conduct research on Africa. A number of "digital democratic archives" of these platforms, like YouTube, offer an unmatched accessibility to material when compared to conventional archiving institutions (Hilderbrand 2007: 48–57; see also, with a view on African Studies, Englert 2016). For example, it can be argued that younger researchers and academics whose institutions are not well funded profit in particular from the broad accessibility of historical records via YouTube,

[9] Cf. Fondren/ Menard McCune (2018: 42-43) who saw the Twitter Archive as a possibility to counter the criticism of records archived by the Library of Congress being "too high brow". However, they also note that "Twitter is far from being representative of society". To our knowledge, the archived Tweets have not yet been made available for the public and researchers, cf. Fondren/ Menard McCune (2018: 43).

social media platforms and other online repositories[10] as additional sources for writing African history. In theory, this makes researchers less dependent on funds for travelling to archives, therefore enabling younger researchers to work with primary sources that would otherwise be difficult to obtain. Electronic records on social media platforms can be accessed simply by using a computer, or more recently (mobile) phones with an internet connection—at all times of the day, seven days a week (Fossati 2009). Ketelaar, with reference to the "panoptical archive", also highlights the intimidating nature of the archive as institution in many cases (Ketelaar 2002). Accessing electronic records on social media platforms is therefore not only about more frequent and easier access, but also about access with less intimidation.

However, easier access for researchers with no or poor funding does not automatically equate into better chances to be published. As Diane Jeater (2014) argues with regards to the university environment in Zimbabwe, we should not be too optimistic that increased online access to materials in African universities will necessarily decrease the dominance of universities in the global North in terms of the academic discourse. On the one hand, for many research questions, the content accessed through social media platforms will not suffice as the sole source corpus, but will rather have a complementary role to play. On the other hand, students need to learn how to search for these electronic records and how to deal with them in meaningful ways. Therefore, what impact these accessible archives can have on creating more equal research environments will ultimately also depend on the extent to which working with social media platforms as archives is going to be integrated into the teaching curricula (Harle 2014).

How to search

The sheer mass of data that is potentially available to the researcher and the fact that new data is constantly being produced, may be daunting for

---

[10] There are a number of digital collections and digitised archives which can be used for writing African history. Examples would include *South African History Online* (https://www.sahistory.org.za/), the *Wilson Center Digital Archive* (https://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/) or the *Internet Library Sub-Saharan Africa* (https://ilissafrica.wordpress.com/) which provides a wide array of digitised primary sources for the study of German colonialism in Africa. In this article, however, we fre focusing on social media platforms with user-generated content.

historians. Featherstone considers the online environment as "a repository of material which has only been loosely classified, material whose status is as yet indeterminate and stands between rubbish, junk and significance: material that has not yet been read and researched." (Featherstone 2006 quoted in Gauld 2017: 238)

With regards to searching, all platforms enable researchers to see the number of likes and comments, with Twitter also showing the number of retweets, as well as who has retweeted what (and again: with what reaction by whom), which can be of great interest in many research contexts. By clicking on a tweet, all the comments and reactions to it appear, enabling the researcher to trace a whole chain of reactions and (to see) the dynamics that have been generated.

All platforms allow users to search for items within certain categories, such as persons, photos, news, videos, live videos, etc. Twitter also offers an advanced search function that allows users to search for certain words, phrases or hashtags, as well as to specify the range of languages in which the tweet was written. Users can search for specific accounts and also the location from where tweets have been issued, as well as specify a certain time frame.

It is important to keep in mind that the researcher is not a neutral person and as is per default the case with the internet, the browsing history of a user will be traced and used by the search algorithms to provide the results based on the user's profile (Gauld 2017: 236; Englert 2016: 31f.). In many cases, it may therefore be desirable to try to access the platforms from a more anonymous position, i.e. without being logged in on a personal account. Whether this is desirable or not certainly depends on the research question, as in certain contexts it might also be advantageous to the relevance of data produced by the research if the algorithm has been studying the researcher's research profile for a while.

In any case, whether the data is accessed from a position that is as neutral as possible or whether the researcher opts to access the data based on their search history, in our opinion, it is vital to be explicit about the position from which the social media platforms are accessed.

How to store the data

When working with social media platforms, it is important to bear in mind that digital objects are more likely to be subject to change, as social media

platforms appear to be in a constant process of transformation (Englert 2016). Whilst it is also true that offline archives grow (or shrink), or may be subjected to changes in location, the online transformation processes take place much more rapidly and on a bigger scale. Uploaded content may be "re-edited" or even deleted—either due to the violation of community guidelines of the social media platforms[11] or by the users themselves, thus unveiling a certain fluidity and fragility that is inherent to social media platforms such as YouTube or internet forums (Englert 2016: 44). In the latter, online posts with text and photos that are of interest to the researcher may also be edited and/or deleted by the author. One solution to cope with this fluidity and fragility with regards to social media platforms is to download the respective images, songs, videos, etc., and take screenshots of valuable posts, tweets, etc., on social media platforms in order to store them on the hard disk of the researcher.

How to analyse the electronic records

When analysing the electronic records, in many cases, researchers can draw on references that indicate, for example, the age, gender or base location of a certain user. While this is obviously often very useful, researchers need to be aware of and find ways to deal with issues such as incomplete or outright false information that users may choose to enter – in some cases, precisely because they want to ensure their anonymity online. In other cases, false information might also reflect the function that social media or internet platforms more generally hold for many users: to serve as spaces where identities other than those that prevail in the physical space can be imagined.

This is what may lead Facebook users such as the young nephew of a former research assistant in Tanzania, to indicate in his profile that he is based in Miami, Florida, while he is actually based in Dar es Salaam and has never been to Miami. An analysis of his profile without knowing him in person and/or at least knowing something about his identity would thus very likely lead to a misguided interpretation. In our opinion, this example makes very clear that accessing records on social platforms with the aim of analysing them within a qualitative research design must follow rigorous procedures in order to verify the information.

---

[11] Social media platforms frequently delete uploaded content that may infringe copyrights, see Jones/ Cuthrell (2011: 83) and Pietrobuno (2013: 1261).

Fake accounts that have been created by computer bots and that generate postings on the basis of an algorithm pose an additional problem, thus requiring caution and measures to minimise the danger of basing any analysis on fake accounts. However, whilst we find it crucial to point out the pitfalls of working with records from social media platforms, we are nevertheless convinced that the advantages outweigh the disadvantages. The best precaution against the emergence of such problems for a future generation of researchers is, in our view, to raise awareness in future research papers and include the discussion of such issues in the curricula of History, African Studies and related disciplines.

How to cite

Material taken from social media platforms often also poses challenges with regard to proper citation. Englert highlights some of the difficulties related to the citation of YouTube videos, especially when the uploader has not produced the content of the video (Englert 2016: 47-52). It is even trickier when the uploaded material has a title in the footage itself that differs from the title indicated on the platform. In our view, researchers therefore cannot rely on a uniform model of citing YouTube videos, but must consider what information is relevant in a given context. This obviously makes it difficult to come up with straightforward guidelines, highlighting the need to include such issues in the curricula for students. Despite these unavoidable ambiguities, journals from all disciplines – including the one in which this text appears – should include guidelines on how to cite sources from social media platforms in their style guides.

Conclusion

Due to the massive spread of mobile phones with internet connectivity, the number of social media platform users – and internet users more generally – based in African countries has increased tremendously over the last few years. Using their mobile devices, a fast growing number of users document their everyday life by producing images, videos and texts on their own. Many of these items are uploaded, commented on and shared on platforms such as Facebook, YouTube, Instagram, Twitter or community forums in the internet.

Apart from the upload of born-digital sources, so-called "tin-trunk archives" are being digitised as well, and thus increasingly move from the

private to the public sphere. Furthermore, creations by third parties are also being digitised and often recreated in different ways and to various extents. Together, these records constitute an enormous mass of sources that are of potential interest for scholars working on African history – especially for those working on "histories of everyday life". As technologies and media change, the items that can be drawn upon when writing histories of everyday life also change.

We have aimed to show that for future research questions sources stored on these platforms will provide a rich reservoir of textual, visual and audiovisual elements stored online. Therefore, for a variety of topics in African contemporary history, it may be useful to add material stored on social media and other internet platforms to the source corpus.

As we have argued in this article, social media platforms and apps that are run by companies for profit were not conceptualised as archives in the first place. Users, however, have turned them into archives. We proposed to understand these platforms and apps as mobile archives, which are – depending on the specific social media platform, app or internet forum they are to be found – subject to specific guidelines, rules and algorithms. While the platforms under inquiry here are in a constant state of flux, the content on social media platforms is at times "hidden", in the sense that they may be difficult to spot in the seemingly endless mass of stored online sources. Moreover, as "tin trunk archives" are increasingly being digitised on such platforms we proposed to extend Barber's concept of "hidden histories" to also encompass electronic records. Obviously, when storing their records online, not all users bear in mind that they may be of potential interest to researchers. It therefore remains the responsibility of the researcher to evaluate in each specific context whether records available on the various platforms should be used for research and how they must be treated. With respect to anonymization and so forth, they should be treated following the same ethical rules that apply to data generated by qualitative research methods in the social sciences more generally." Due to the rapid growth of smartphones with internet connection it is evident that more Africans than ever before are in a position to create their own records (images, videos and texts) and to determine where they are then stored. They can also define the hashtags under which they can be found, i.e. how the items they created or recreated are categorised.

The practice of tagging, which is at the core of categorising items on all social platforms, actually turns all record creators (including the recreators of third-party material) into curators as well, thereby broadening the concept considerably. However, whilst almost everything – as long as it is not in breach of the community guidelines - can be uploaded on Facebook, Instagram, Twitter and YouTube, not every item has the same chance of being found and of making an impact, because as we have pointed out, the algorithms that guide the search process are far from neutral and act themselves as gatekeepers. The discussion of this topic goes far beyond the scope of this contribution and here, we have simply underlined the fact that algorithms of social platforms must be perceived as active agents privileging certain pieces of information over others (Gauld 2017: 236).

Nevertheless, selection processes on social platforms are certainly less rigid for the uploaders than in conventional archives, thus turning them into repositories of material whose significance is undetermined (Featherstone 2006: 591-596). It is thus impossible to try and press the content of social platforms into existing archival structures, as the Library of Congress had to acknowledge when it stopped the archivalisation of all public tweets.

The fact that the Library of Congress had to stop its attempt to archive all tweets that had ever been written on Twitter can also be seen as a turning point in the relationship between conventional archival institutions and social media platforms. The latter can no longer be seen as providing content to conventional archives, but must rather be seen as archives in their own right, with their own regulations that are less uniform and much messier. In our view, social media platforms thus mobilise the concept of archives - bringing with them a number of challenges for researchers working with them when it comes to searching for, storing and validating electronic records, as outlined in the second part of this article.

By considering social media and internet platforms as archives of relevance to the writing of African history, we aimed to stimulate discussion and encourage researchers to actually make use of these additional sources. It is not just that we can begin to ask and answer new research questions if we use sources from social media platforms, but more researchers can also access these archives than is the case with conventional archives. Especially archival institutions housed in the Global North may for many people be impossible to access, especially for students and researchers from institutions in the Global South, due to financial and/or visa restrictions. All

of this means that new histories could be written – by more people and based on a broader source base. Current assessments suggest, however, that African students' easier access to sources does not automatically lead to a better chance to participate in the global academic discourse, which is dominated by Anglo-American universities.

It goes without saying that a more detailed discussion on many of these aspects which were raised in this article is needed. Here, we simply wanted to raise awareness of the wealth of records that are contained in social platforms and to highlight some of the practical issues that must be considered when working with them. We hope that our contribution leads to more reflections on the potential of the content stored in social media and internet platforms for the writing of African history and that it will generate more debate on how this is actually shaping the writing of future histories more generally. Although it is still the case that many research questions can be approached without referring to sources stored on such platforms, this is certainly not going to remain that way for a number of historical processes and events of the 21st century. In line with the truism that "the present now will later be past" that Bob Dylan (The Times They Are A-Changin', 1964) reminded us half a century ago, we argue that future generations of historians of Africa should be encouraged, sooner rather than later, to consider integrating electronic records stored on social media and internet platforms into their corpus and that discussions on how to deal with them should find their way into the curricula of history classes.

Bibliography

Andrejevic, Mark (2009): Exploiting YouTube: Contradictions of User-Generated Labor. In: Snickars, Pelle/ Vonderau, Patrick (eds.): *The YouTube Reader*. Stockholm: National Library of Sweden, 406–423.

Axford, Barrie (2011): Talk about a revolution: Social media and the Mena uprisings. In: *Globalizations* 8/5, 681–686.

Barber, Karin (ed.) (2006): *Africa's hidden histories: Everyday literacy and making the self*. Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press.

Becker, Danielle (2017): Instagram as a potential platform for alternative visual culture in South Africa. In: Bunce, Mel / Franks, Suzanne / Paterson, Chris (eds), *Africa's media image in the 21st century.* Oxon/ New York: Routledge, 102–112.

Bunnenberg, Christian/Steffen, Nils (ed. 2019): Geschichte auf YouTube: Neue Herausforderungen für Geschichtsvermittlung und historische Bildung. Berlin: de Gruyter.

Brügger, Niels (2018): *The Archived Web: Doing History in the Digital Age*. Cambridge (Mass.): MIT Press.

Carrie Wong, Julia (2019): The Cambridge Analytica scandal changed the world – but it didn't change Facebook. In: *The Guardian*, 18 March 2019: https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2019/mar/17/the-cambridge-analytica-scandal-changed-the-world-but-it-didnt-change-facebook (21 June 2020).

Caswell, Michelle / Gabiola, Joyce / Zavala, Jimmy / Brilmeyer, Gracen / Cifor, Marika. (2018): Imagining transformative spaces: The personal-political sites of community archives. In: *Archival Science*, 18, 73–93.

Confessore, Nicholas (2018): Cambridge Analytica and Facebook: The Scandal and the Fallout So Far. In: *New York Times*, 4 April 2018. https://www.nytimes.com/2018/04/04/us/politics/cambridge-analytica-scandal-fallout.html (21 June 2020).

Cook, Terry (1993): The Concept of the Archival Fonds in the Post-Custodial Era: Theory, Problems and Solutions. In: *Archivaria*, 35, 24–37.

Cooke, Ian / Wallace, Marion (2014): African Studies in the Digital Age: Challenges for Research and National Libraries. In: Terry Barringer and Marion Wallace (eds.), *African Studies in the Digital Age: DisConnects?* Leiden: Brill, 15–38.

Douglas, Jennifer (2018): A call to rethink archival creation: exploring types of creation in personal archives. In: *Archival Science* 18, 29–49.

Dwyer, Maggie / Molony, Thomas (eds., 2019): Social Media and Politics in Africa. Democracy, Censorship and Security. London: Zed.

Eckert, Andreas / Jones, Adams (2002): Historical writing about everyday life. In: *Journal of African Cultural Studies* 15/1, 5–16.

Ellis, Stephen (2002): Writing histories of contemporary Africa. In: *The Journal of African History* 43/1, 1–26.

Englert, Birgit (2016): Popular and mobile: Reflections on using YouTube as an archive from an African studies perspective. In: *Stichproben: Vienna Journal of African Studies* 31/16, 27–56.

Featherstone, Mike (2006): Archive. In: *Theory, Culture & Societ*y 23, 591-596.

Fondren, Elisabeth / Menard McCune, Meghan (2018): Archiving and Preserving Social Media at the Library of Congress: Institutional and Cultural Challenges to Build a Twitter Archive. In: *Preservation, Digital Technology & Culture* (PDT&C), 47/2, 33-44.

Fossati, Giovanna (2009): YouTube as a Mirror Maze'. In: Snickars, Pelle / Vonderau, Patrick (eds.): *The YouTube Reader*. Stockholm: National Library of Sweden, 458–65.

Garde-Hansen, Joanne (2011): *Media and memory.* Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.

Gauld, Craig (2017): Democratising or privileging: the democratisation of knowledge and the role of the archivist. In: *Archival Science* 17, 227–45.Gehl, Robert (2009): YouTube as Archive: Who Will Curate This Digital *Wunderkammer*? In: *International Journal of Cultural Studies* 12 (1), 43–60.

Harle, Jonathan (2014): Dazzled by Digital? Research Environments in African Universities and Their Implications for the Use of Digital Resources. In: Terry

Barringer / Wallace, Marion (eds), *African studies in the digital age: DisConnects?* Leiden: Brill.

Hilderbrand, Lucas (2007): YouTube: Where cultural memory and copyright converge. In: *Film Quarterly* 61/1, 48–57.

Howard, Philip N. / Hussain, Muzammil M. (eds., 2013): *Democracy's fourth wave? Digital media and the Arab Spring*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Jeater, Diane (2014): Data, Data Everywhere, But Not a Byte to Think: The Pitfalls of Increased Access to Digital Resources in University History Departments in Zimbabwe. In: Barringer, Terry / Wallace, Marion (eds.): *African studies in the digital age: DisConnects?* Leiden: Brill, 61–77.

Jones, Troy / Cuthrell, Kristen (2011): YouTube: Educational Potentials and Pitfalls. In: *Computers in the Schools* 28/1, 75-85.

Kemp, Simon (2020a): Digital 2020: 3.8 billion people use social media. Special Report, 30 January 2020 https://wearesocial.com/blog/2020/01/digital-2020-3-8-billion-people-use-social-media (16 June 2020)

Kemp, Simon (2020b): Digital Around the World in April 2020. Special Report, 23 April 2020 https://wearesocial.com/blog/2020/04/digital-around-the-world-in-april-2020 (16 June 2020)

Kemp, Simon (2020c): Digital 2020: Kenya. https://datareportal.com/reports/digital-2020-kenya (18 June 2020)

Kemp, Simon (2020d): Digital 2020: Burundi. https://datareportal.com/reports/digital-2020-burundi (18 June 2020)

Ketelaar, Eric (2001): Tacit narratives: The meanings of archives. In: Archival Science, 1, 131–141.

Ketelaar, Eric (2002): Archival temples, archival prisons: Modes of power and protection. In: *Archival Science*, 2, 221–238.

Khamis, Sahar / Gold, Paul/ Vaughn, Katherine (2018): Beyond Egypt's 'Facebook revolution' and Syria's 'YouTube uprising': comparing political contexts, actors and communication strategies. In: *Arab Media & Society* 15, https://www.arabmediasociety.com/beyond-egypts-facebook-revolution-and-syrias- youtube-uprising-comparing-political-contexts-actors-and-communication-strategies/ (12 November 2018).

Library of Congress (2010): Twitter Donates Entire Tweet Archive to Library of Congress https://www.loc.gov/item/prn-10-081/twitter-archive-to-library-of-congress/2010-04-15/ (18 June 2020).

Library of Congress (2013): Update on the Twitter Archive at the Library of Congress. Washington, DC: Library of Congress. January, 2013, available at https://www.loc.gov/static/managed-content/uploads/sites/6/2017/02/twitter_report_2013jan.pdf (29 February 2020).

Library of Congress (2017): Update on the Twitter Archive at the Library of Congress. https://blogs.loc.gov/loc/files/2017/12/2017dec_twitter_white-paper.pdf (18 June 2020)

Melber, Henning (ed. 2016): *The Rise of Africa's Middle Class: Myths, Realities and Critical Engagements*. Uppsala: Nordic Africa Institute / London: Zed Books.

Nyabola, Nanjala (2018): *Digital Democracy, Analogue Politics: How the Internet Era is Transforming Politics in Kenya*. London: Zed Books.
Pietrobuno, Sheenagh (2013): YouTube and the social archiving of intangible heritage. In: *New Media & Society* 15/8, 1259-1276.
Prelinger, Rick (2007): Archives and access in the 21st century. In: *Cinema Journal* 46/3, 114–18.
Prelinger, Rick (2009): The appearance of archives. In: Snickars, Pelle / Vonderau, Patrick (eds.): *The YouTube Reader*. Stockholm: National Library of Sweden, 268–274.
Schröter, Jens (2009): On the logic of the digital archive. In: Snickars, Pelle / Vonderau, Patrick (eds.): *The YouTube Reader*. Stockholm: National Library of Sweden, 330–346.
Stoler, Ann (2002): Colonial Archives and the Arts of Governance. In: *Archival Science* 2, 87-109.
Wagner, Karin (2017): The personal versus the institutional voice in an open photographic archive. In: *Archival Science* 17, 247–66.
Wasko, Janet / Erickson, Mary (2009): The political economy of Youtube. In: Snickars, Pelle / Vonderau, Patrick (eds.): *The YouTube Reader*. Stockholm: National Library of Sweden, 372–386.
Willems, Wendy / Mano, Winston (2017): Decolonizing and provincializing Audience and Internet studies: Contextual approaches from African vantage points. In: Willems, Wendy / Mano, Winston. (eds.) *Everyday media culture in Africa: Audiences and Users*. New York: Routledge, 1–26.

Websites

South African History Online (https://www.sahistory.org.za/), last accessed 21 June 2020
Wilson Center Digital Archive (https://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/), last accessed 21 June 2020
Internet Library Sub-Saharan Africa (https://ilissafrica.wordpress.com/), last accessed 21 June 2020